

ISSN : 2454-3365

THE LITERARY HERALD

AN INTERNATIONAL REFEREED ENGLISH E-JOURNAL

A Quarterly Indexed Open-access Online JOURNAL

Vol.1, Issue 2 (September 2015)

Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Siddhartha Sharma

www.TLHjournal.com

sharmasiddhartha67@gmail.com

Book Review: Social Capital**John Field (London: Routledge, 2003, 193 p.)****Reviewed by: Anurag Kumar Pandey**

M.Phil (Social Work)

MGAHV, Wardha

Coming to grips with the literature on social capital presents a distinct challenge to those new to the field. In the early 1990s, a mere handful of articles on social capital had been published, and one could reasonably expect to absorb their content in fairly short order. However, after a decade of rapidly expanding interest within academic and policy circles alike, there are now literally thousands of studies in virtually all the social science and public policy disciplines. With this, has come a great deal of divergence over how best to define and operationalize the concept. Such disagreement and confusion should not be surprising given the present exploratory nature and the extremely rapid development of the field of study. Nevertheless, the present state of the literature presents a daunting morass to social capital neophytes.

Recognizing the need today for an extended introduction to the field of social capital, John Field's recently published work on this topic deliberately sets out to fill this gap and succeeds in doing so. *Social Capital* is an extremely helpful overview of how the concept has developed across disciplines and the directions in which it is now headed. The book length treatment is a much more comprehensive survey than that provided by other article-length literature reviews. While one may quibble with the odd point here or there, Field nevertheless performs an invaluable service in providing a much needed thorough orientation to the social capital literature.

Field begins with a presentation of the work of three seminal figures in the social capital literature: Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam. He is not the first to recognize

the importance of these authors; indeed, most literature reviews begin with these scholars. However, such reviews typically only spend a paragraph or two on each, whereas Field is able to present a much more extended discussion of their contributions, including their strengths and weaknesses. This can be no substitute, of course, for reading the original works of these key scholars themselves. Nevertheless, this is probably by far the best overview of these authors presently available. Pierre Bourdieu is a European sociologist, who has written little on social capital. While Coleman and Putnam have worked on social and political thoughts in the South American tradition. Bourdieu's work is also reflected in two main concepts- 'Cultural capital' and 'Habits'. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is influenced by Marxism, which is based on the education system. Coleman's theory is especially affected by Gary Becker's human capital. He presented the concept of logical selection theory in Economics to study discrimination in education, health and family. Field's presentation of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam is fairly even handed. Somewhat odd, however, is his suggestion (p.42) that, on balance, Coleman's approach "has the greatest potential for producing new insights into social and political behavior." He is not very clear on why this should be. Indeed, if anything Field's discussion of the weaknesses of Coleman's approach is more extensive than those of Bourdieu and Putnam.

Moreover, in his conclusion (p.141) Field implies that while Putnam can be criticized for failing to be theoretically explicit, as well as for muddling cause and effect in his stretching of the concept from the level of individuals to states and nations, this approach may nevertheless be more helpful in actually capturing the multi-faceted complexities of social capital than neater, micro-level approaches. Field also provides a very helpful introduction to the literature on social networks (the core element of social capital), empirical findings on the role of social capital networks in the four areas of education, economic wellbeing, health, and crime, the debates over the dark side of social capital, and efforts to apply social capital to public policy contexts. Field makes an intriguing observation on, and evaluation of, the social capital literature in his chapter on social capital in a (post)modern world. Here he suggests that postmodern conditions, discussed in terms of changes in work, family structures, market deregulation, information technology, scientific advancement, and the rise of a risk society, may in fact be making conditions more rather than less favorable for social capital. In contrast to those who see a decline in social capital, Field posits that, in those countries increasingly characterized by these

new conditions, we may in fact be witnessing a basic change in social capital toward, for example, more small-scale and informal forms of civic engagement, reflecting a greater individualization of social relations and a broad refashioning of identity. Field's attempt to draw together the literature on social capital with the literature on postmodern conditions and the risk society is definitely worth further exploration.

In general though, the purpose of this book is not to present a new line of research, but rather to make sense of the existing research on social capital. Given the increasing confusion over the concept of social capital, at the same time that interest in applying it to various problem areas has never been greater, *Social Capital* performs an impressive and invaluable service in providing a thorough introduction to the state of the literature. For the present, new students of social capital should begin their work with this book.

The notion of a risk society has been developed most prominently in the works of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. The term was coined in the 1980s and its popularity during the 1990s was both as a consequence of its links to trends in thinking about wider modernity. Risk society is the manner in which modern society organizes in response to risk.