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Jeffrey D. Lewandowski and Gregory W. Streich (eds.), "Urban Social Capital. Civil Society and City Life". Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, 362 pp.

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Book reviews

Jeffrey D. Lewandowski and Gregory W. Streich (eds.), *Urban Social Capital. Civil Society and City Life.* **Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, 362 pp.**

The title of this collection of essays can refer either to an interdependent relation between types of social capital and cultural urban spaces or to the types of social capital we can find in the city. In this latter case the adjective "urban" plays only a deictic function with regards to the city itself. The subtitle stresses the correlation between social capital and civil society, by following the idea, related to the work of Putnam [2000], that social capital can favor or hinder the democratic development of a society, depending on whether we deal with inclusive (*bridging*) or exclusive (*bonding*) social capital. Yet, the subtitle does not help disambiguating the meaning of "Urban social capital". However, the sense attributed to the concept of "urban" emerges clearly in the introduction: the city is not consider in terms of cultural meanings and practices but, from an ecological perspective (even if the underlying theoretical frame is not explicit), as a "social laboratory", which offers inputs for a research about social capital because it includes several and interweaving social differences.

In fact, the central question for the editors and the authors is how it is possible in a society to increase generalized trust towards institutions also by fostering mutual recognition across cultural, class, and ethno-racial divisions. The underlying thesis is that generalized trust is higher when economic inequalities are lower and, as a consequence, that the strength of bridging social capital depends on how economic resources are allocated in the society. Moreover, all the authors stress a relation between social and economic capitals, whereas the cultural capital is taken in consideration only in some essays and only in its institutionalized form, that is in terms of educational qualification and access to the educational system. This is not surprising considering that the pieces of empirical research collected in the book focus on the public policies that can reduce the economic inequalities in order to increase or reinforce the "bridging social capital" and to favor a generalized trust toward institutions.

As case studies, the essays examine cities with different historical and political cultural backgrounds. However, historical and political cultural backgrounds are not really explored as factors of influence for the construction and distribution of social capital, but they serve mostly to illustrate how globalization processes produce differences in the economic structure of a society and eventually influence the structures of social capital as well. It is therefore possible to pick out three major "urban contexts": the western neo-capitalist city; the post-colonial city and the post-communist city.

For example, the article *City Seclusion and Social Exclusion: How and Why Economic Disparities Harm Social Capital* highlights how in North American cities economic inequalities not only reduce trust towards institutions, but also induce both rich and poor social groups to retreat from civil public life. In *How and Why Economic Disparities Harm Social Capital: Social Capital, Social Exclusion and Rehabilitation Policy in the Hungarian Urban Context*, beside bridging and bonding capital the author introduces

another type of social capital, which refers to the hierarchical relationships within a society. Strangely, by adding this third kind of social capital the author seems to suggest that bonding and bridging social capital do not present a hierarchical structure. However what is interesting in this essay is the application of social network analysis to investigate how different kind of social networks form different kind of social spaces also by following different social norms. The analysis shows that both bridging and bonding social capital increase when the social status of an individual becomes higher. In the essay *City Life and Film: Narratives of Urban Social Capital in Gran Torino,* the focus is on the role public spaces can play to enhance vertical and horizontal social ties among social groups who occupy unequal social and economic positions. The risk is however that of developing an idealized model of public space by exaggerating the role that planning can have in favoring cross-meeting among different social groups, without considering how existing material and symbolical hedges can endure in a civic place, in spite of the "civic" function envisaged in the original project. The article *Disruptive Social Capital in Los Angeles: (Un)healthy Socio-Spatial Interactions among Filipino Men Living with HIV/AIDS* emphasizes how promoting social capital may not result in better health and quality of life, as that depends, especially for the bonding social capital, on the symbolic capital (reputation), norms and behaviors of people who "belong" to a social network. Finally, in the article *Gender Relations, Migration, and Urban Social Capital in Hong Kong*, the author investigates the social networks of Chinese women immigrated in Hong Kong, by looking at the interdependence between the social ties they keep with their family of origin and the social ties they are able to build in the new social and cultural milieu of life.

To sum up, despite the fact that from an empirical point of view the explored case studies offer many interesting elements, most of them lack a fully articulated theoretical frame. Surprisingly, also the introduction does not provide a careful consideration of both social capital and the city. With respect to social capital, it seems that the editors took for granted Putnam's understanding of social capital and reduced it to the concept of trust, instead of comparing the different theories regarding this conceptual and analytical category (e.g. Bourdieu and Coleman). With respect to the city, there are no references to the semiotic and pragmatic understanding of the city as respectively symbolic text and dynamic social product of human interactions and cultural practices. Firstly, it follows that we do not find an overall cultural analysis of urban spaces, or more specifically of the material and symbolic construction of the urban spaces as relevant factors of influence on the construction of social capital. Secondly, the articles focus on either the institutions or the marginal collective actors rather than on their dynamic interdependence through which they define an urban social space. As a consequence, the policies and actions here analyzed often acquired a punctual character instead of being seen as grounded on the everyday practices and habitus of the actors involved in (or tied to) urban social space. Thirdly, it seems that the terms "city" and "society" are interchangeable so that, as already remarked by Saunders [1981] about thirty years ago, it is difficult to catch the specificity of city as an object of study autonomous from society itself. Finally, we do not find any theoretical frame for the globalization processes as well, as the editors seem to claim that they are assimilable to the urbanization processes. If global processes depend on neo-liberalist economy that also reshaped the economic and social basis of the city, urbanization processes have however a much older origin

and they are interwoven with other social and historical processes. As argued above, this conceptual imprecision derives from a restricted vision of the city as a "container" of different social groups, and of the space as essentially a physical and geometrical construction. Instead, a dynamic understanding of the category of "space" would have been more useful for analyzing how globalization and urbanization processes influence each other and for comparing how they produce different social networks in different historical and cultural spaces.

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