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History and evolution of social capital theory

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Overview

- Popularity and growth of interest in social capital
- Why it became popular
- Early conceptual development
- Historical foundations

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The popularity of social capital

- The term 'social capital' was virtually unknown before the 1990s
- Social capital has become one of the most popular concepts in the social sciences and has even spread to the physical sciences and beyond (Forsman, 2005)
- Social capital has made the difficult transition beyond academia, being popular in politics, business, community development, and others (Farrell, 2007)

Currently 2.3M results!

Source: Google Scholar on 3 February 2021

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Social Capital Article Topics Over Time

Source: Web of Science Categories

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Google Trends searches for "social capital"

Source: Google Trends on 30 January 2021


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Why has social capital become popular?

1. Trendy, fashionable, popular
2. Intriguing, interesting, facilitates new investigations and new discussions
3. Needed to counteract the under-socialised views of modernity and the dominance of neoliberalism

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Why has social capital become popular?

“Since the dawn of time, the survival of human beings has depended on the level of their integration into one or more mutually helpful communities. Those with social support and links with others live better than those who remain isolated” (Satorius, 2003, p. S105)

“Social capital has such widespread resonance because it provides a name for an intuitive, transcultural recognition that we are inherently social beings, and that this has significant consequences for a host of other substantive issues we care about.” (Woolcock, 2010)

“The concept of social capital draws attention to the effects and consequences of human sociability and connectedness and their relations to the individual and social structure.” (Tzanakis, 2013)


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Rapid growth in popularity

- From obscurity in 1990 to widespread application in virtually every area of academic inquiry and even in popular vocabulary
- Forsman (2005) used the analogy of social capital as a conceptual Sleeping Beauty - the late-twentieth-century kiss awakened the princess
- The need for the concept of social capital is apparent from the rapid rise in popularity
- It clearly has value, utility, and purpose
- Especially considering its numerous problems (see the various critiques of the concept)
- Social capital communicates, addresses, prioritises, or solves something that was not possible before


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Why did it emerge in the 1990s?




- Corrective to the idea that “there is no such thing as society” and Thatcherism (Arneil, 2012)
- A direct response to the predominant economic theories and policies of the 1980s (Gearin, 2017)
- The rise of neoliberalism greatly contributed to social capital’s popularity (Navarro 2004; Ferragina and Arrigoni 2016)
- A critique of the narrow analytic perspective on economic activities that is immanent in the neoclassical school of macro- economic thinking (Huysman & Wulf, 2004)
- A response to the rising political prominence of neoliberalism (Ferragina & Arrigoni, 2017)
- The historical moment in the mid-1990s—in the aftermath of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the serious economic crises suffered by the post socialist countries—created a unique space for a social and institutional explanation of how key parts of society work (or not) (Woolcock, 2010)

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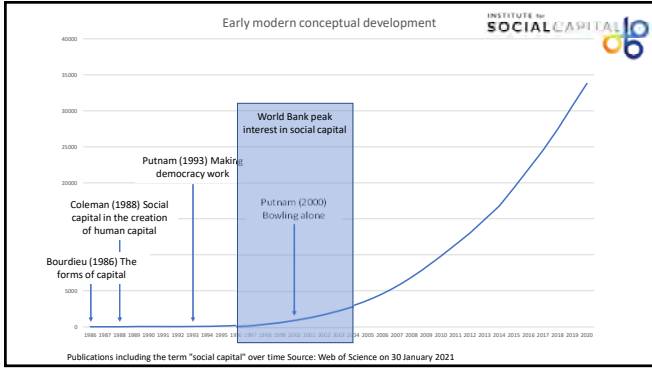
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Modern conceptual development


- Contemporary authors are generally considered to be:

<p>Pierre Bourdieu Theory of capital</p>  <p><small>Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Bourdieu</small></p>	<p>James Coleman Rational-choice sociology</p>  <p><small>Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Coleman</small></p>	<p>Robert Putnam Civic perspective</p>  <p><small>Source: https://www.thebroadway.com/robert-putnam</small></p>
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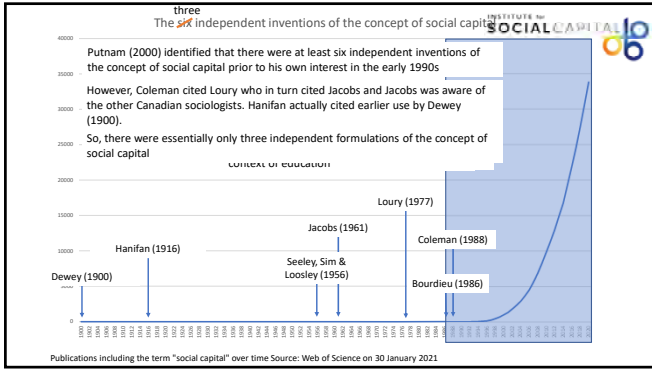
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Historical conceptual foundations

- Many authors look to early uses of the term as its conceptual history, however, these uses were “term without concept” (Farr, 2004)
- “Social capital does not have an intellectual history at all (beyond the last 20 years or so) ... the history of social capital is a fairy tale, pure invention” (Fine, 2010)
- The history the term is important from a genealogical perspective – why did authors use it and what were they attempting to communicate?

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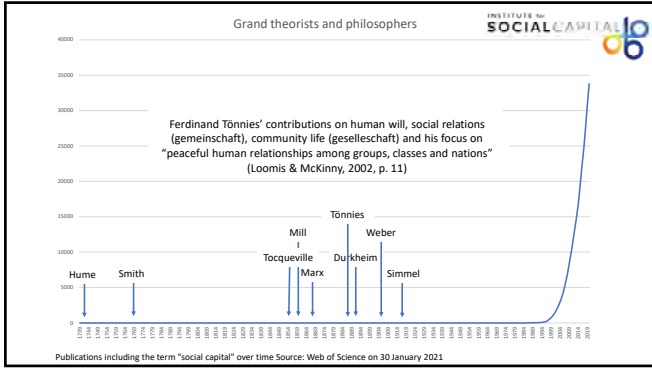


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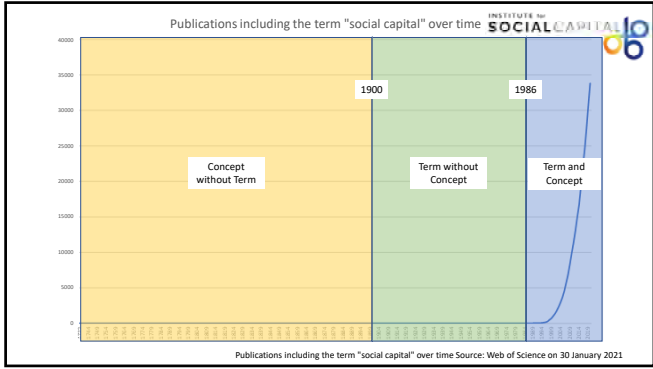
Old wine in a new bottle

- Alejandro Portes pointed out, the “term does not embody any idea really new to sociologists” but “simply recaptures an insight present since the very beginnings of the discipline” (Smith and Kulynych 2002)
- As Adam Smith well understood, economic life is deeply embedded in social life, and it cannot be understood apart from the customs, morals, and habits of the society in which it occurs. In short, it cannot be divorced from culture. (Fukuyama, 1996: 13)

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Summary - History

- Social capital is a new term but not new ideas
- The term was used as early as 1900 but only started to become popular in the 1990s
- Early conceptual development was by Bourdieu and Coleman and followers

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