

From the Third Way to the Big Society: the rise and fall of social capital

The policies pursued by the coalition and the Conservative government are at odds with calls to civic engagement, argue [Emanuele Ferragina](#) and [Alessandro Arrigoni](#). By tracing social capital in British political discourse, they explain why calls for social engagement are not only mere rhetoric, but actually incompatible with the ideas of competition and individualism which form the current neoliberal agenda.

Remember the Big Society? The idea emerged as the Conservative buzzword of the 2010 general election, when David Cameron [proposed](#) to redistribute power to communities and to promote volunteering, in order to reduce the role of the state within them. Suddenly, even the Tories believed in society. But the idea quickly vanished from the public radar. [Survey data](#) collected by YouGov showed that in 2011 and 2012, between 11 per cent and 9 per cent of respondents declared that the 'Big Society will probably work', while an overwhelming majority – between 68 per cent and 73 per cent of respondents – argued the opposite.



Social capital theory and neoliberalism

More worryingly, the public's involvement with voluntary associations [declined consistently](#) from the start of the economic crisis. The Office for National Statistics, for instance, [found](#) that the fraction of people involved in 'any volunteering' at least once a month sank from 48 per cent in 2007-08 to 41 per cent in 2010-11. In this context, [we argue](#) that the demise of the Big Society marked not just a communication failure on the part of the Conservative Party, but also signalled the declining prominence of social capital after 15 years of great popularity.

It can also be argued that this decline shows that the connection between social capital and neoliberalism is a double-edged sword: in a period marked by the economic crisis and rising inequalities, the aim to foster social capital seemed at odds with the neoliberal political agenda proposed by the Conservative Party.

The rapid rise of social capital as an analytical framework can be traced to Robert Putnam, who, beginning in the early 1990s. Putnam suggested that American democracy was at risk because civil engagement was fading. Yet, in contrast to his famous sociological ancestor, Alexis de Tocqueville, Putnam ignored the fact that social capital does not appear to flourish when structural inequalities rise in society. Putnam's conception of social ties as something similar to financial capital implicitly assumed that community involvement and social participation are economic activities. Yet the word 'capital' is linked to the development of an economic system based on individualism and competition, which seems to clash with the model of civicness forwarded by social capital theorists and policymakers.

The decline of social capital in political discourse

Despite this contradiction, Putnam's suggestion to renew democracy quickly travelled from America to Europe. In Britain, Tony Blair's Third Way of doing politics and the Big Society demanded a more active engagement of civil society to strengthen democracy. In British political discourse, social capital went through three distinct phases: its rising prominence during the 1990s; the height of its importance was reached during the first New Labour government; and the demise of the discourse with the failure of the Big Society idea during the coalition government.

During the 1990s, New Labour de-emphasised the need to tackle inequality of conditions and aimed instead to promote modernisation by fostering social capital in local communities. This shift marked the moment in which social capital in the political discourse began its ascending phase. New Labour argued that the creation of social capital could balance growing individualism with the need for interdependence, serving as a glue to prevent modernisation from driving societal disintegration. In this way, Blair's Third Way represents the apex of the social capital.

In 2010, the Big Society seemed to be an outgrowth of Third Way politics. The Conservative Party supported the view – previously championed by New Labour – that a nation is at its best only if social bonds and a sense of cooperation among the people are strong. Despite the significant increase in economic inequality, the political rhetoric based on social capital theory seemed to be a good way to accommodate the contradiction between civic engagement and rough austerity measures. In the context of the economic crisis, however, it has become difficult to reconcile a political discourse based on promoting social capital with the broad implementation of neoliberal policies.

Just as the generous use of the social capital idea in policymaking during Tony Blair's first mandate signaled its conceptual apex, the drop in enthusiasm for the Big Society agenda over the past few years seems to reflect a corresponding dip in the social capital parabola. In this phase, social capital discourse can no longer hide the fact that the neoliberal political agenda has actually contributed to a reduction in civic participation.

As the drawbacks of neoliberal governance become clearer, it seems that in order to strengthen secondary groups and social engagement, equality and greater solidarity are needed (as classically argued by Tocqueville). Yet redistribution and solidarity conflict with the ideas of competition, individualism, and market efficiency, which form the basis of the neoliberal agenda. There is a tension between the individualisation of social risks pursued by British political parties over the last two decades and the call to create social capital: it is becoming harder to blame the individual for collective problems. Calls for individual social engagement to mend a broken society appear to be mere rhetoric.

Note: the above is based on the authors' [published paper](#) in the *Political Studies Review*.

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