SOCIAL CAPITAL AND LOCAL IDENTITY IN THE SOCIETY OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract – The analysis of the concept of *social capital,* theorized by Robert D. Putnam, emphasizes the crisis of the associative mutuality, that has been characterizing our society for forty years. The study of the associative mutuality shows that the social capital developed very fast during the first part of the 20th century, thanks to the social solidarity. Unfortunately the role of the social capital has reduced his importance in the last decades and at the same time society has got into a period of crisis, involving not only economy, but also (and above all) behaviors. Through the study of the structure and the organization of the civil associations we can see that the origin of the local autonomy is basic for the creation of the *urban democracy*; in this regard, I would mention the association *Monumenta* (founded in Parma in 2004), and its care in protecting the artistic heritage of the city. In the last few years some scholars have focused on the relationship between the central state and the local institutions, because it concerns important fields such as economy, health, public administration, school and university; the social capital is basic for the development of this relationship, since it connects business, university and local administration. We can instance the University of Umeå, which has shown the fact that the *local governance* can improve the development of a region, and at the same time the vocational education of students and teachers.
Key Words – Social Capital, Free Association, Urban Democracy, Local Governance

Introduction

With the expression *social capital* we mean the social networks (to be understood in a sociological sense) among citizens, founded on confidence and mutual solidarity: starting from the Anglo-Saxon world this concept has spread in other parts of Europe since the '70th, a period characterized by slow decadence (not only in economy) and social uncertainty. The importance of the *social capital* increased in the last decades, because the defence of local identities is considered basic in the globalized society, and it is carried out thanks to the collaboration among the individuals, who organize in free associations, in which every member takes part voluntarily to a project originating from the necessities of a community. The field of action of these associations is various and goes from the preservation of the local culture to the interests of groups of persons, in order to make universities, schools and the economic world interact each others: this fact leads the state institutions to reduce the bureaucratic aspects and to pay more attention to the concrete citizens' necessities.

Research Methods

This contribution is based upon a selected bibliography referring to various topics: place, identity, globalization, social capital, urban democracy and free association. The books and the articles considered were published above all in Anglo-Saxon reviews (where the local deliberative

democracy is the hub of civil society); but there are also articles published by the University of Umeå, and in relation to the association *Monumenta* the sources have been taken from official documents of the Italian public administration and from the association itself.

Results and Discussion

The topic of the *social capital* was first theorized by Robert D. Putnam[16], who dwelt upon analyzing the crisis that has been affecting society since the '70, a period when evident proofs of a worrying process of social disaggregation revealed themselves. Putnam considers the social capital «the basis of the social structures of a community, founded on mutual solidarity and confidence» (Putnam, 2000, pp. 20-21), and asserts that social capital originated, above all in Northern Italy, during the Middle Ages, when people freed from the imperial power by reuniting in free association to protect their affairs and to make a network of solidarity: the *communes*. In particular «he found that the same north-central Italian regions that sustained cooperatives and choral societies also provided the most support for mutual aid societies and mass parties and that citizens in those same regions were the most eager to make use of their newly granted electoral rights. In the South, in contrast, apathy and ancient vertical bonds of favouritism restrained civic involvement and inhibited voluntary, horizontally organized manifestations of social solidarity» (Tarrow, 1996, p. 393). In this context the origin of social cohesion becomes an aggregation instrument of the members of a community, that establishes the foundations for the institution of a solid politic culture to whom the social actors refer in order to make stable relations with other citizens. The concept of politic culture assumes the characteristic of a civil virtue, of devotion to moral principles, shared by all the people, that determines the evolution of social capital inside a community. In addition, it underlines the degree of development of the society in the economic, institutional end ethic fields. Through the social aggregation the members of a community keep entire the social capital, composed of specific characteristics, such as networks, rules and confidence, that facilitate the collaboration among all the parts involved. Precisely the social capital makes reference to the bonds between persons, characterizes by a strong feeling of confidence, that afterwards generates the civil engagement of citizens.[17] An important role in the constitution and

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[16] Robert D. Putnam (09/01/1941, Rochester, NY) is a sociologist and Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, he is also Visiting Professor at University of Manchester.

[17] S. Szreter, (2002), p. 574: «Generalized reciprocity is defined as widespread and transitive trust and trustworthiness among the members of a large social group, comprising many overlapping networks involving large numbers of individuals most of whom will be strangers, in the sense they have no prior personal acquaintance with each other when

preservation of a solid social capital is held by women, who, thanks to their constant engagement, contribute to projects of voluntary service through free duty. At the same way people see that the free association and the networks of neighbourhood protect those groups of persons that are marginalized from the society (Sabetti, 2006, p. 195). The social capital is both a reason and a consequence of confidence in comparison with the institution, and the development of these associations show the degree of evolution of a state. Unfortunately the loss of centrality of the single person and the society of consumers' goods have produced a sort of disaggregation inside the society, and the individualism has taken precedence over the good of the community; a great attention is given to the importance of preserving firm social conventions, especially «they involve mutual obligations and sustain rules of conduct, fostering norms of reciprocity, because connections are typically part of a network in everyday life» (Szreter, 2002, p. 574). It means that the interpersonal bonds are strong if the community preserves the social capital, and if the local autonomy is set apart from political administration. The concept of social capital characterizes the difference between the independent association and the state or the political corporation (Woolcock, 1998, pp. 161-182), in other words it's equivalent to the distinction between the state and the civil society. In this way the culture of a local community is preserved: this feature emerges in the fact that induce a group of persons to acknowledge themselves in a determinate social context and to institute a firm bond between individual culture and collective organization: this binomial is able to guarantee a constant preservation of the historical and cultural heritage (Bernini, 2009, p. 17). Putnam thinks that *trust* is basic for establishing the civic culture (Sabetti, 2006, p. 188), and particularly it has been underlined that during the centuries the social actors have made subtle fiduciary networks for the creation of bonds, aiming at realizing forms of economic and social organizations, fundamental for the urban democracy.

The first example I would mention is the association *Monumenta* of Parma, that since its foundation (2004) operates for the defence of the artistic and monumental patrimony of Parma (Bernini, 2009, p. 16). Up to now it has committed itself in opposing to the construction of a building connected to the Parma underground, in protecting "Piazza della Ghiaia"[18], and in

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they interact. Putnam tellingly conveys the virtues of generalized reciprocity by comparing it to the advantages that the money has over barter».

[18] "Piazza della Ghiaia" is a square of Parma placed near the river Parma, whose name derives from a gravelly shoal caused by a flood. In the 13th century it became an area devoted to public executions and fairs, and in 1509 the public shambles was built, that favored the birth of an important market till today.

preserving "Ospedale Vecchio"[19]. In these situations its action has been supported by all the members[20], led by the president, a real *civic leader* and a moral guide, who has coordinated the action of the association. The most important result is the recognition received by the "Tribunale Amministrativo Regionale dell'Emilia-Romagna"[21], that decreed (sentence law n. 618 dating to 04/12/2007) that the associations like *Monumenta* are entitled to act when these requirements are satisfied:

- a continuative and no occasional action,
- an adequate degree of representation and stability,
- a defined area of territorial presence,
- an objective,
- an activity developed in conventions and cultural initiatives.

So we can infer that the free association are basic to develop the *urban democracy*, or rather the opportunity to preserve the social tissue of a city. The associations like *Monumenta* guarantee the possibility to keep civic organizations independent from the politic power, and they develop a strong civic sense, characterized by the confidence of its members among them and institutions. This confidencial relationship is basic to institute a valid and lasting model of civilization, in which the role of *civic leader* emerges; this figure is fundamental to understand the importance of the civic culture of a country, since it represents a model of reference for the whole community. The politic doctrine sees in the will of the citizens of taking part to the civic life the origin of the politic community, that encourages the self-realization and develops bonds of mutual solidarity (Pocock, 1971, p. 85). The *civic leader* assumes the features of moral leadership for the community as example of rectitude and correctness, whose teachings are an incentive for improving the action of the public administration, these teachings act as instruments of networks between the state and the citizens. The functions of the *civic leader* can be summarized in this way: he encourages the civic independence, governs with persuasion, avoids the corruption of the power, and is a good civic example for the people (Hart and Grant, 1989, p. 103).

The development of free associations implies also the possibility to create social capital through a network between local institutions (regions and communes) and institutes put at the head

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[19] The old building named "Ospedale Vecchio" (Old Hospital) rises on a tenement house used since 1202 by Rodolfo Tanzi for the shelter of needy persons. During the centuries it has enlarged and has become a sort of hospital: it gave up the hospital functions in 1926.

[20] The members belong to different social classes, for example there are lawyers, professors, housewives, architects, students, pensioners and workers. They are all independent from politic parties.

[21] The Regional Administrative Court of Emilia-Romagna.

of citizens' professional formation (schools and universities). An example is the University of Umeå, that since 1965 has been collaborating with the local corporations (Westlund, 2004); in 2003 it elaborated the plain of joint working with other Swedish universities and with the local communities, focusing on the possibility of economic, social and cultural development in a territory, through the training of a highly qualified staff (Umeå Universitet, 2004). The University of Umeå since 2003 has undertaken an active cooperation with local corporation that has contributed to the fusion between *Univex* (set of independent organizations) and *Uminova Centre* (centre of economic development), to institute in 2004 the *Samverkanshus* (group of cooperation). Afterwards the new direction has decided to emerge all the business activities into a single company, named *Uminova Innovation AB,* in order to achieve these objectives (Hudson, 2006, p. 387):

-   economic development,

-   scientific progress,

-   formation of specialized staff.

More precisely, one can consider the network between Umeå University and the other politic and business subjects as a free association, voluntary and independent, but always respectful of the state's rules. This collaboration has generated a situation in which people see on one hand the birth of voluntary associations, on the other their constitution is the signal of a healthy democracy (Fox, 1996). The freedom to decide the teachers' competence on the ground of the necessities of the university means found the network on the confidence, so that the independent research is facilitated and the researches are more free (Leighley, 1995). This project was thought to achieve a double aim by 2010: a greater link between the universities and the local administration and the constant presence of the academies on the international stage (Umeå Universitet, 2003). The region of Västerbotten (in the north of Sweden) approved a series of rules in order to create a profitable interaction between the universities and the local administration (Avtalsåret, 2002) and to favour the public and private investments; it succeeded in establishing a network able to support the development of the region not only in the fields of infrastructures and the business, but also in the fields of expertise, agriculture and nature. In this way it's established a series of bonds that generate a case of *local governance,* a free and independent network founded on the decentralization of the powers and on the partnership between local administration, firms and universities, in which the hierarchical vision of the centralized state fails. The importance of this new approach to the academies by both the public administration and other private firms favours a strong network of the social actors to support the development of social capital. This is the basis of any democracy

(Paxton, 2002, p. 255) and any free society in which the man is considered as a person and not as a simple maker of goods.

Conclusions

To conclude: what's the origin of social capital?

The study on the *social capital* underlines the importance of the networks of mutual solidarity, that favour the preservation of civic web. In particular, the analysis of free associations has shown a special point of view of the society, in fact the origin of the local deliberative democracy goes back to the medieval period, when, above all in Northern Italy, the *communes* originated. They had inherent in their identity the peculiarity of free associations, that is on the basis of the links of mutual solidarity and reciprocal assistance. It's noticeable that these relationships make collaborations also with schools, universities, and firms, to develop the social capital of a community, regardless of the centralistic power of the state. In a period when the homologation has gained the upper hand in society it's important to recognize to the local communities the possibility to protect the cultural, social, economic and historical heritage, that characterizes the local identity and makes them unique and special.

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