'Staying in the Nationalist Bubble'

Social Capital, Culture Wars, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Vol. 24 No. 1 (2021): bubbles
Articles

Introduction

The highly contagious COVID-19 virus has presented particularly difficult public policy challenges. The relatively late emergence of an effective treatments and vaccines, the structural stresses on health care systems, the lockdowns and the economic dislocations, the evident structural inequalities in effected societies, as well as the difficulty of prevention have tested social and political cohesion. Moreover, the intrusive nature of many prophylactic measures have led to individual liberty and human rights concerns. As noted by the Victorian (Australia) Ombudsman Report on the COVID-19 lockdown in Melbourne,

we may be tempted, during a crisis, to view human rights as expendable in the pursuit of saving human lives. This thinking can lead to dangerous territory. It is not unlawful to curtail fundamental rights and freedoms when there are compelling reasons for doing so; human rights are inherently and inseparably a consideration of human lives. (5)

These difficulties have raised issues about the importance of social or community capital in fighting the pandemic. This article discusses the impacts of social and community capital and other factors on the governmental efforts to combat the spread of infectious disease through the maintenance of social distancing and household 'bubbles'. It argues that the beneficial effects of social and community capital towards fighting the pandemic, such as mutual respect and empathy, which underpins such public health measures as social distancing, the use of personal protective equipment, and lockdowns in the USA, have been undermined as preventive measures because they have been transmogrified to become a salient aspect of the "culture wars" (Peters). In contrast, states that have relatively lower social capital such a China have been able to more effectively arrest transmission of the disease because the government was been able to generate and personify a nationalist response to the virus and thus generate a more robust social consensus regarding the efforts to combat the disease.

Social Capital and Culture Wars

The response to COVID-19 required individuals, families, communities, and other types of groups to refrain from extensive interaction – to stay in their bubble. In these situations, especially given the asymptomatic nature of many COVID-19 infections and the serious imposition lockdowns and social distancing and isolation, the temptation for individuals to breach public health rules in high. From the perspective of policymakers, the response to fighting COVID-19 is a collective action problem. In studying collective action problems, scholars have paid much attention on the role of social and community capital (Ostrom and Ahn 17-35). Ostrom and Ahn comment that social capital "provides a synthesizing approach to how cultural, social, and institutional aspects of communities of various sizes jointly affect their capacity of dealing with collective-action problems" (24). Social capital is regarded as an evolving social type of cultural trait (Fukuyama; Guiso *et al*.). Adger argues that social capital "captures the nature of social relations" and "provides an explanation for how individuals use their relationships to other actors in societies for their own and for the collective good" (387). The most frequently used definition of social capital is the one proffered by Putnam who regards it as "features of social organization, such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, "Bowling Alone" 65). All these studies suggest that social and community capital has at least two elements: "objective associations" and subjective ties among individuals. Objective associations, or social networks, refer to both formal and informal associations that are formed and engaged in on a voluntary basis by individuals and social groups. Subjective ties or norms, on the other hand, primarily stand for trust and reciprocity (Paxton).

High levels of social capital have generally been associated with democratic politics and civil societies whose institutional performance benefits from the coordinated actions and civic culture that has been facilitated by high levels of social capital (Putnam, *Democracy* 167-9). Alternatively, a "good and fair" state and impartial institutions are important factors in generating and preserving high levels of social capital (Offe 42-87). Yet social capital is not limited to democratic civil societies and research is mixed on whether rising social capital manifests itself in a more vigorous civil society that in turn leads to democratising impulses.

Castillo argues that various trust levels for institutions that reinforce submission, hierarchy, and cultural conservatism can be high in authoritarian governments, indicating that high levels of social capital do not necessarily lead to democratic civic societies (Castillo *et al.*). Roßteutscher concludes after a survey of social capita indicators in authoritarian states that social capital has little effect of democratisation and may in fact reinforce authoritarian rule:

> in nondemocratic contexts, however, it appears to throw a spanner in the works of democratization. Trust increases the stability of nondemocratic leaderships by generating popular support, by suppressing regime threatening forms of protest activity, and by nourishing undemocratic ideals concerning governance (752).

In China, there has been ongoing debate concerning the presence of civil society and the level of social capital found across Chinese society. If one defines civil society as an intermediate associational realm between the state and the family, populated by autonomous organisations which are separate from the state that are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values, it is arguable that the PRC had a significant civil society or social capital in the first few decades after its establishment (White). However, most scholars agree that nascent civil society as well as a more salient social and community capital has emerged in China's reform era. This was evident after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, where the government welcomed community organising and community-driven donation campaigns for a limited period of time, giving the NGO sector and bottom-up social activism a boost, as evidenced in various policy areas such as disaster relief and rural community development (F. Wu 126; Xu 9).

Nevertheless, the CCP and the Chinese state have been effective in maintaining significant control over civil society and autonomous groups without attempting to completely eliminate their autonomy or existence. The dramatic economic and social changes that have occurred since the 1978 Opening have unsurprisingly engendered numerous conflicts across the society. In response, the CCP and State have adjusted political economic policies to meet the changing demands of workers, migrants, the unemployed, minorities, farmers, local artisans, entrepreneurs, and the growing middle class. Often the demands arising from these groups have resulted in policy changes, including compensation. In other circumstances, where these groups remain dissatisfied, the government will tolerate them (ignore them but allow them to continue in the advocacy), or, when the need arises, supress the disaffected groups (F. Wu 2). At the same time, social organisations and other groups in civil society have often "refrained from open and broad contestation against the regime", thereby gaining the space and autonomy to achieve the objectives (F. Wu 2).

Studies of Chinese social or community capital suggest that a form of modern social capital has gradually emerged as Chinese society has become increasingly modernised and liberalised (despite being non-democratic), and that this social capital has begun to play an important role in shaping social and economic lives at the local level. However, this more modern form of social capital, arising from developmental and social changes, competes with traditional social values and social capital, which stresses parochial and particularistic feelings among known individuals while modern social capital emphasises general trust and reciprocal feelings among both known and unknown individuals. The objective element of these traditional values are those government-sanctioned, formal mass organisations such as Communist Youth and the All-China Federation of Women's Associations, where members are obliged to obey the organisation

leadership. The predominant subjective values are parochial and particularistic feelings among individuals who know one another, such as *guanxi* and *zongzu* (Chen and Lu, 426).

The concept of social capital emphasises that the underlying cooperative values found in individuals and groups within a culture are an important factor in solving collective problems. In contrast, the notion of "culture war" focusses on those values and differences that divide social and cultural groups. Barry defines culture wars as increases in volatility, expansion of polarisation, and conflict between

> those who are passionate about religiously motivated politics, traditional morality, and anti-intellectualism, and…those who embrace progressive politics, cultural openness, and scientific and modernist orientations. (90)

The contemporary culture wars across the world manifest opposition by various groups in society who hold divergent worldviews and ideological positions. Proponents of culture war understand various issues as part of a broader set of religious, political, and moral/normative positions invoked in opposition to "elite", "liberal", or "left" ideologies. Within this Manichean universe opposition to such issues as climate change, Black Lives Matter, same sex rights, prison reform, gun control, and immigration becomes framed in binary terms, and infused with a moral sensibility (Chapman 8-10). In many disputes, the culture war often devolves into an epistemological dispute about the efficacy of scientific knowledge and authority, or a dispute between "practical" and theoretical knowledge. In this environment, even facts can become partisan narratives. For these "cultural" disputes are often how electoral prospects (generally right-wing) are advanced; "not through policies or promises of a better life, but by fostering a sense of threat, a fantasy that something profoundly pure … is constantly at risk of extinction" (Malik). This "zero-sum" social and policy environment that makes it difficult to compromise and has serious consequences for social stability or government policy, especially in a liberal democratic society.

Of course, from the perspective of cultural materialism such a reductionist approach to culture and political and social values is not unexpected. "Culture" is one of the many arenas in which dominant social groups seek to express and reproduce their interests and preferences. "Culture" from this sense is "material" and is ultimately connected to the distribution of power, wealth, and resources in society. As such, the various policy areas that are understood as part of the "culture wars" are another domain where various dominant and subordinate groups and interests engaged in conflict express their values and goals. Yet it is unexpected that despite the pervasiveness of information available to individuals the pool of information consumed by individuals who view the "culture wars" as a touchstone for political behaviour and a narrative to categorise events and facts is relatively closed. This lack of balance has been magnified by social media algorithms, conspiracy-laced talk radio, and a media ecosystem that frames and discusses issues in a manner that elides into an easily understood "culture war" narrative. From this perspective, the groups (generally right-wing or traditionalist) exist within an information bubble that reinforces political, social, and cultural predilections.

American and Chinese Reponses to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic first broke out in Wuhan in December 2019. Initially unprepared and unwilling to accept the seriousness of the infection, the Chinese government regrouped from early mistakes and essentially controlled transmission in about three months. This positive

outcome has been messaged as an exposition of the superiority of the Chinese governmental system and society both domestically and internationally; a positive, even heroic performance that evidences the populist credentials of the Chinese political leadership and demonstrates national excellence. The recently published White Paper entitled "Fighting COVID-19: China in Action" also summarises China's "strategic achievement" in the simple language of numbers: in a month, the rising spread was contained; in two months, the daily case increase fell to single digits; and in three months, a "decisive victory" was secured in Wuhan City and Hubei Province (Xinhua). This clear articulation of the positive results has rallied political support. Indeed, a recent survey shows that 89 percent of citizens are satisfied with the government's information dissemination during the pandemic (C Wu).

As part of the effort, the government extensively promoted the provision of "political goods", such as law and order, national unity and pride, and shared values. For example, severe publishments were introduced for violence against medical professionals and police, producing and selling counterfeit medications, raising commodity prices, spreading 'rumours', and being uncooperative with quarantine measures (Xu). Additionally, as an extension the popular anti-corruption campaign, many local political leaders were disciplined or received criminal charges for inappropriate behaviour, abuse of power, and corruption during the pandemic (*People.cn*, 2 Feb. 2020). Chinese state media also described fighting the virus as a global "competition". In this competition a nation's "material power" as well as "mental strength", that calls for the highest level of nation unity and patriotism, is put to the test. This discourse recalled the global competition in light of the national mythology related to the formation of Chinese nation, the historical "hardship", and the "heroic Chinese people" (*People.cn*, 7 Apr. 2020). Moreover, as the threat of infection receded, it was emphasised that China "won this competition" and the Chinese people have demonstrated the "great spirit of China" to the world: a result built upon the "heroism of the whole Party, Army, and Chinese people from all ethnic groups" (*People.cn*, 7 Apr. 2020).

In contrast to the Chinese approach of emphasising national public goods as a justification for fighting the virus, the U.S. Trump Administration used nationalism, deflection, and "culture war" discourse to undermine health responses — an unprecedented response in American public health policy. The seriousness of the disease as well as the statistical evidence of its course through the American population was disputed. The President and various supporters raged against the COVID-19 "hoax", social distancing, and lockdowns, disparaged public health institutions and advice, and encouraged protesters to "liberate" locked-down states (Russonello). "Our federal overlords say 'no singing' and 'no shouting' on Thanksgiving", Representative Paul Gosar, a Republican of Arizona, wrote as he retweeted a Centers for Disease Control list of Thanksgiving safety tips (Weiner). People were encouraged, by way of the White House and Republican leadership, to ignore health regulations and not to comply with social distancing measures and the wearing of masks (Tracy). This encouragement led to threats against proponents of face masks such as Dr Anthony Fauci, one of the nation's foremost experts on infectious diseases, who required bodyguards because of the many threats on his life. Fauci's critics — including President Trump — countered Fauci's promotion of mask wearing by stating accusingly that he once said mask-wearing was not necessary for ordinary people (Kelly). Conspiracy theories as to the safety of vaccinations also grew across the course of the year.

As the 2020 election approached, the Administration ramped up efforts to downplay the serious of the virus by identifying it with "the media" and illegitimate "partisan" efforts to undermine the Trump presidency. It also ramped up its criticism of China as the source of the infection. This

political self-centeredness undermined state and federal efforts to slow transmission (Shear *et al.*). At the same time, Trump chided health officials for moving too slowly on vaccine approvals, repeated charges that high infection rates were due to increased testing, and argued that COVID-19 deaths were exaggerated by medical providers for political and financial reasons. These claims were amplified by various conservative media personalities such as Rush Limbaugh, and Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham of *Fox News*.

The result of this "COVID-19 Denialism" and the alternative narrative of COVID-19 policy told through the lens of culture war has resulted in the United States having the highest number of COVID-19 cases, and the highest number of COVID-19 deaths. At the same time, the underlying social consensus and social capital that have historically assisted in generating positive public health outcomes has been significantly eroded. According to the Pew Research Center, the share of U.S. adults who say public health officials such as those at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are doing an excellent or good job responding to the outbreak decreased from 79% in March to 63% in August, with an especially sharp decrease among Republicans (Pew Research Center 2020).

Social Capital and COVID-19

From the perspective of social or community capital, it could be expected that the American response to the Pandemic would be more effective than the Chinese response. Historically, the United States has had high levels of social capital, a highly developed public health system, and strong governmental capacity. In contrast, China has a relatively high level of governmental and public health capacity, but the level of social capital has been lower and there is a significant presence of traditional values which emphasise parochial and particularistic values. Moreover, the antecedent institutions of social capital, such as weak and inefficient formal institutions (Batjargal *et al.*), environmental turbulence and resource scarcity along with the transactional nature of *guanxi* (gift-giving and information exchange and relationship dependence) militate against finding a more effective social and community response to the public health emergency. Yet China's response has been significantly more successful than the Unites States'.

Paradoxically, the American response under the Trump Administration and the Chinese response both relied on an externalisation of the both the threat and the justifications for their particular response. In the American case, President Trump, while downplaying the seriousness of the virus, consistently called it the "China virus" in an effort to deflect responsibly as well as a means to avert attention away from the public health impacts. As recently as 3 January 2021, Trump tweeted that the number of "China Virus" cases and deaths in the U.S. were "far exaggerated", while critically citing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's methodology: "When in doubt, call it COVID-19. Fake News!" (Bacon). The Chinese Government, meanwhile, has pursued a more aggressive foreign policy across the South China Sea, on the frontier in the Indian sub-continent, and against states such as Australia who have criticised the initial Chinese response to COVID-19. To this international criticism, the government reiterated its sovereign rights and emphasised its "victimhood" in the face of "anti-China" foreign forces. Chinese state media also highlighted China as "victim" of the coronavirus, but also as a target of Western "political manoeuvres" when investigating the beginning stages of the pandemic.

The major difference, however, is that public health policy in the United States was superimposed on other more fundamental political and cultural cleavages, and part of this externalisation process included the assignation of "otherness" and demonisation of internal

political opponents or characterising political opponents as bent on destroying the United States. This assignation of "otherness" to various internal groups is a crucial element in the culture wars. While this may have been inevitable given the increasingly frayed nature of American society post-2008, such a characterisation has been activity pushed by local, state, and national leadership in the Republican Party and the Trump Administration (Vogel *et al*.). In such circumstances, minimising health risks and highlighting civil rights concerns due to public health measures, along with assigning blame to the democratic opposition and foreign states such as China, can have a major impact of public health responses. The result has been that social trust beyond the bubble of one's immediate circle or those who share similar beliefs is seriously compromised — and the collective action problem presented by COVID-19 remains unsolved.

Daniel Aldrich's study of disasters in Japan, India, and US demonstrates that pre-existing high levels of social capital would lead to stronger resilience and better recovery (Aldrich). Social capital helps coordinate resources and facilitate the reconstruction collectively and therefore would lead to better recovery (Alesch *et al*.). Yet there has not been much research on how the pool of social capital first came about and how a disaster may affect the creation and store of social capital. Rebecca Solnit has examined five major disasters and describes that after these events, survivors would reach out and work together to confront the challenges they face, therefore increasing the social capital in the community (Solnit). However, there are studies that have concluded that major disasters can damage the social fabric in local communities (Peacock *et al*.).

The COVID-19 epidemic does not have the intensity and suddenness of other disasters but has had significant knock-on effects in increasing or decreasing social capital, depending on the institutional and social responses to the pandemic. In China, it appears that the positive social capital effects have been partially subsumed into a more generalised patriotic or nationalist affirmation of the government's policy response. Unlike civil society responses to earlier crises, such as the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, there is less evidence of widespread community organisation and response to combat the epidemic at its initial stages. This suggests better institutional responses to the crisis by the government, but also a high degree of porosity between civil society and a national "imagined community" represented by the national state. The result has been an increased legitimacy for the Chinese government. Alternatively, in the United States the transformation of COVID-19 public health policy into a culture war issue has seriously impeded efforts to combat the epidemic in the short term by undermining the social consensus and social capital necessary to fight such a pandemic. Trust in American institutions is historically low, and President Trump's untrue contention that President Biden's election was due to "fraud" has further undermined the legitimacy of the American government, as evidenced by the attacks directed at Congress in the U.S. capital on 6 January 2021. As such, the lingering effects the pandemic will have on social, economic, and political institutions will likely reinforce the deep cultural and political cleavages and weaken interpersonal networks in American society.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated global public health and impacted deeply on the world economy. Unsurprisingly, given the serious economic, social, and political consequences, different government responses have been highly politicised. Various quarantine and infection case tracking methods have caused concern over state power intruding into private spheres. The usage of face masks, social distancing rules, and intra-state travel restrictions have aroused passionate debate over public health restrictions, individual liberty, and human rights. Yet

underlying public health responses grounded in higher levels of social capital enhance the effectiveness of public health measures. In China, a country that has generally been associated with lower social capital, it is likely that the relatively strong policy response to COVID-19 will both enhance feelings of nationalism and Chinese exceptionalism and help create and increase the store of social capital. In the United States, the attribution of COVID-19 public health policy as part of the culture wars will continue to impede efforts to control the pandemic while further damaging the store of American community social capital that has assisted public health efforts over the past decades.

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