



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Mapping Social Capital Thirty Years After Making Democracy Work

Paola Bordandini

Abstract This introduction outlines the research framework of the volume, clarifying its aims, theoretical background and empirical references. Social capital is interpreted as civic culture—a collective, value-related resource grounded in a shared sense of moral obligation towards others and institutional government, essential for spontaneous and organised cooperation. This civic disposition is expressed through behaviours such as voting, interest in public affairs, voluntary work, commitment to the common good and responsibility towards others. Published more than thirty years after *Making Democracy Work* by Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti (1993), the volume revisits the Italian case to assess how civic culture and participation have evolved in a changing social, economic and political context. Building on that legacy, the book updates and expands the territorial indicators of civic engagement. The chapter closes by outlining the structure and objectives of the book.

P. Bordandini (✉)
University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
e-mail: paola.bordandini@unibo.it

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This volume draws attention to the weight of civic culture in conditioning economic development and good government, as well as to its capacity to improve the quality of social life. As taught by Braudel (1958), culture endures and resists change, but this cage in which humans are enclosed can be opened only if we are aware of it and of its possibilities of change. Better public policy must not only aim to rebuild material capital but also to promote rules of civic engagement that protect sustainability, the common good and well-being. Here, we seek to delve into these topics, starting from a detailed diachronic mapping of social capital in Italy. The maps are designed to suggest the availability or scarcity of this resource, as well as areas where it is increasing or declining, mirroring the transformation of social capital over time.

By social capital we mean the shared sense of moral obligation that people nurture towards others and towards institutional government (Cartocci, 2007), the attitude of citizens to be actively involved in public life in order to sustain democratic values and social participation. This disposition manifests in behaviour such as voting, interest in public affairs, voluntary work, commitment to the common good, and a sense of responsibility towards others. For many sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists, civic culture springs from a widespread conviction that we share a common future, from the need for collective action to tackle challenges and to feel part of the same destiny. Earlier on, Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, spoke of self-interest rightly understood as civic virtue—that is, as a shared attachment to one’s country and fellow citizens—and of the awareness that individual interest ultimately coincides with, and is inseparable from, the general interest.

In their famous essay “Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy” (1993), Robert Putnam, Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti, inspired by the reflections of de Tocqueville, delved into the links between civic culture and institutional performance in the regions of Italy, defining social capital as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (1993, p. 167). Social capital is then conceivable as an ingredient of spontaneous cooperation that drives collective action and oils the wheels of democratic, economic and social systems.

At the time of publication, the book by Putnam and colleagues sparked extensive criticism and a lively national and international debate.¹ Its great merit, however, was that it brought to light the economic and political consequences of Italy's weak civic culture—a theme that was not new to academic reflection.²

In empirical terms, the index of social capital proposed by Putnam et al. in “*Making Democracy Work*” had two dimensions—political participation and social participation—and five indicators specific to the Italian context: the preference voting, referendum turnout, newspaper readership and the density of sporting and cultural associations. These were so-called objective territorial indicators that measured behaviours closely linked to civic action, at least at the time of the First Republic.³ The social, political and economic changes that occurred in Italy in the 1990s and 2000s led to a loss of validity of these indicators, making a revision necessary. This task was undertaken by Roberto Cartocci in his essay “*Mappe del tesoro—Atlante del capitale sociale in Italia*” (2007).⁴ He updated and integrated

¹ See Bagnasco, 1994; Boix and Posner, 1996; Cohn, 1994; Goldberg, 1996; Levi, 1996; Pasquino, 1994; Stern, 1993; Tarrow, 1996; Trigilia, 1999.

² The Italian case had already been the focus of attention among international scholars and major comparative studies even before the work of Putnam *et al.* in (1993). The weaknesses of Italy's civic culture had in fact been pointed out as early as the 1950s, when Edward C. Banfield (1958), in his famous study *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, conducted in a small rural town in southern Italy (today Basilicata), introduced the concept of “amoral familism.” A few years later, in 1963, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, in their comparative study *The Civic Culture*, highlighted Italy's shortcomings in terms of civic spirit, interpersonal trust, and confidence in institutions. Over time, these findings have been confirmed by numerous European surveys, such as the Eurobarometer, the European Values Study (EVS), and the European Social Survey (ESS). To mention just a few examples: according to Eurobarometer data, between the 1970s and the 2000s the level of satisfaction with democracy in Italy rarely exceeded 30%, showing a persistent gap of 15–20 percentage points compared with Spain and France, 20–30 points compared with the United Kingdom, and over 30–40 points compared with West Germany (Cartocci, 2002, pp. 76–78). Similar trends can also be observed in more recent times: between 1997 and 2019, trust in the government in Italy was on average 17 percentage points lower than the mean of the other countries of the “Europe of the Fifteen,” that is, the 15 member states of the European Union before its enlargement in 2004 (Bordandini et al., 2020, p. 37).

³ The expression “First Italian Republic” refers to the political period from 1948 to 1992–94, which ended with the collapse of the traditional party system following major anti-corruption investigations (*Mani Pulite*, also known as *Tangentopoli*).

⁴ The book has unfortunately not been translated into English, despite being widely recognized as a milestone in the Italian debate on social capital.

the indicators proposed by Putnam et al., and investigated their analytical-theoretical basis.

Cartocci proposed a more detailed geography of social capital at sub-regional level. His maps confirm the historical difference between north and south, also showing increasing differentiation within the northern areas of Italy.

As shown in Fig. 1.1—which compares the maps by Putnam et al., Cartocci, and the most recent one presented in this volume⁵—these transformations appear even more pronounced today, pointing to a new reconfiguration of the geography of social capital in Italy, marked by the predominance of the provinces in the country's North-East.

Unlike *Mappe del tesoro*, we have used the density of non-profit associations as an indicator of social capital and we took a diachronic approach, gathering data at four time points: 2008, 2013, 2018 and 2022. These were four crucial moments, occurring before and after two major crises—the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. These crises, combined with the profound instability of the Italian political party system, upset the traditional link between social capital and electoral participation, revealing a growing form of civic (protest-driven) abstentionism in the years under examination.

Another key aspect of this work is the attention we have devoted—first and foremost on the theoretical level—to the connections that can be identified between social capital, sustainability and social cohesion, with a view toward a future empirical exploration of these issues. This volume offers an opportunity for reflection aimed at updating the concept of social capital, while also providing the scientific (and political) community with a valuable dataset that is unique in the field of comparative research. Indeed, even at the international level, there are no existing territorial indicators of social capital that are systematized diachronically in the way those presented here are. Unlike survey data, territorial data, although not without collection problems, makes it possible to detect effective behaviours rather than attitudes or opinions and to exclude operational errors and survey sampling biases.

⁵ The maps show the provinces coloured according to quintiles of social capital. Quintiles divide a data set into five groups of equal numerosity, from the lowest to the highest values, in the present case, values of social capital. Thus provinces coloured white are in the first quintile and have the lowest social capital, and so forth up to the fifth quintile, coloured black.

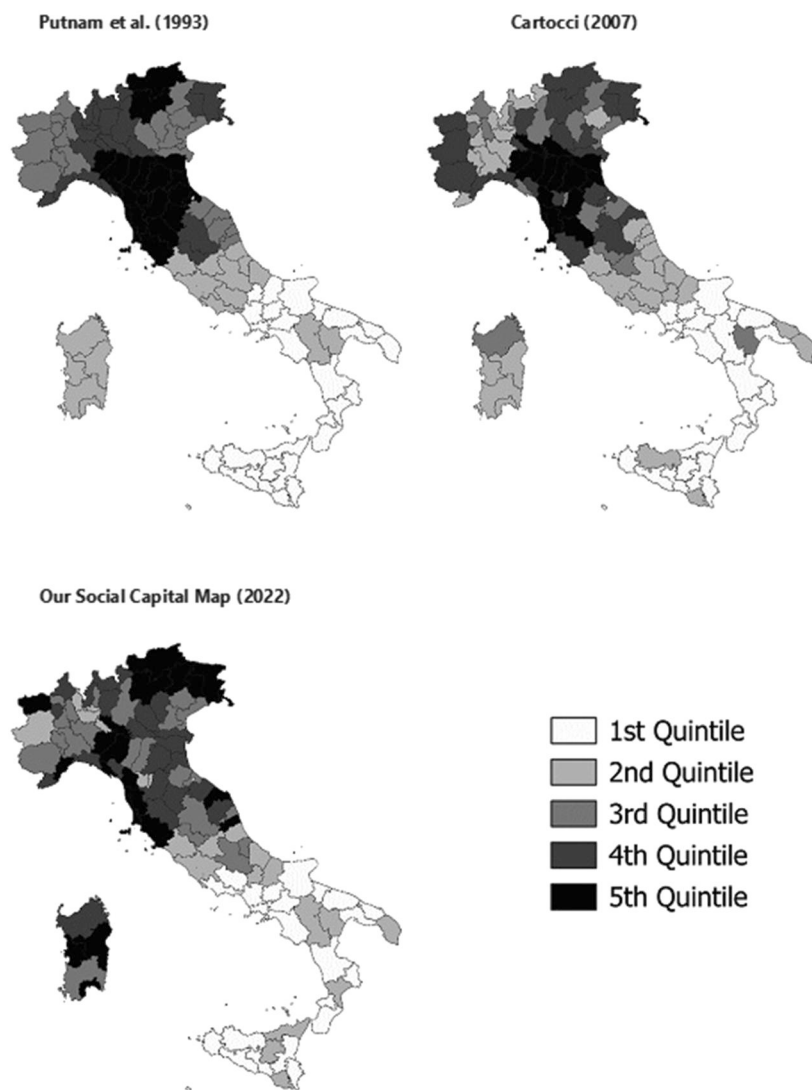


Fig. 1.1 Evolution of the geography of social capital in Italy: from Putnam et al. (1993) to today, by quintiles (1 = lowest, 5 = highest). Map of provinces and regions with names: see Appendix, Sect. A

The book has eleven chapters. The second defines social capital, describing the paths of civic culture research in Italy. Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 present and analyse the five indicators composing our index of social capital: social participation in terms of the territorial density of non-profit associations (Chap. 3), recreational-cultural participation (Chap. 4), political participation (Chap. 5) and blood donations (Chap. 6). Chapter 7 is dedicated to construction of a synthetic index of social capital. Chapter 8 tests the index with regard to economic growth and quality of public services. Chapters 9 and 10 focus on the concepts of social sustainability and social cohesion in terms of their links with social capital. Finally, the Conclusions discuss emerging issues related to the dynamics of social capital in Italy, as well as the theoretical and empirical relationships between social capital, social cohesion and sustainability. They also outline future research directions and discuss the operational implications for policymaking and the quality of democracy. The Appendix offers: (a) a legend of the maps and tables based on the regional and provincial geography of Italy; (b) the tables of indices of social capital at the province level.

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