Joonmo Son, **Social Capital**, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020, pp. 200.

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Social capital is one of the most used and misused concepts in social science. Against this backdrop, a collection of books and articles have aimed bring order to chaos by explicating the concept of social capital and the surrounding literature. Joonmo Son’s recent book, *Social Capital,* is the latest addition to this literature.

In *Social Capital*, Son promises to provide “… a general introduction to the concept, theory, and practical applications and limitations of social capital” (p.4). The book is part of a series of concise and accessible textbooks published by Polity Press that explore core concepts in social science. In light of the mammoth social capital literature, it is quite an accomplishment that Son has managed squeeze the literature into this format. The book comprises two hundred pages divided into seven chapters.

In the first chapter, Son summarizes key conceptualizations of social capital as found primarily in the works of Marx, Coleman, Bourdieu, Putnam, Fukuyama, and Lin. Given the theoretical ground covered, the chapter is exceptionally concise. Students and scholars new to the social capital literature who want to get a quick overview of its theoretical origins will undoubtedly appreciate the chapter’s concise nature. However, students and scholars familiar with the concept who are interested in the particularities of one or more theorist’s conception of social capital will probably have to consult more comprehensive accounts.

Like sociologists before him (e.g., Lin, 1999; Portes, 2000), Son argues that different meanings of social capital can be distinguished in the literature. Specifically, Son suggests that it is helpful to distinguish between *individual* and *collective* social capital depending on whether social capital is viewed as shared resources of a personal network or pooled assets of a collectivity such as a neighborhood, a voluntary association or a whole society.

Other sociologists, particularly Portes (2000, 2010), have criticized the conceptual stretch initiated by political scientist Putnam who – unlike how it was originally used in sociology – made it possible to talk of social capital as the pooled assets of a collectivity rather than a feature of an individual. However, Son’s aim is not ‘to develop a battlefield for a theoretical war’ (p. 4). Instead, Son is clearly more focused on how and to what extent the concept of social capital – defined as a feature either of an individual or a collectivity – can be fruitfully applied in empirical-analytical social science.

Son’s focus on empirical research is evident from the fact that measurement issues are already discussed the second chapter. In this chapter, it shines through that Son is an experienced and accomplished empirical-analytical sociologist. In particular, I enjoyed Son’s explanation of key individual social capital measurement tools, including the name, position, and resource generator as well as the discussion of key indicators for collective social capital, including trust and membership of voluntary organizations. Anyone who plans to capture social capital in a social survey and wants to avoid common pitfalls should consult this chapter.

In the third chapter, Son reviews literature connecting social capital to civil society and economic development. In particular, the chapter focuses on ideas found in the works of Putnam and Fukuyama as well as the empirical literature that builds on them. Son succeeds in bringing Putnam’s and Fukuyama’s core ideas across. However, the empirical evidence sections appear biased towards supporting evidence. For example, more could have been done to provide readers a better sense of the nature and extent of the critique that followed in the wake of Putnam’s claims about the decline of social capital in the United States (e.g., Stolle and Hooghe, 2005). Moreover, in light of the attention given to measurement issues in chapter two, I miss a more critical discussion of the measures that have been used in the literature connecting social capital to civil society and economic development.

In chapters four and five, Son reviews empirical literature examining the relationship between social capital and status attainment and health. These chapters are useful references for interested students and scholars as the chapters provide a good overview of key debates in the literature. Moreover, the review of the empirical literature in these two chapters is more critical and better balanced than in chapter three.

In the sixth chapter, Son engages with literature addressing how and to what extent technological development in recent decades, especially the internet and social media, has transformed our social connections. One of the chapter’s conclusions is that while much has been learned about the influence of technological development on social relations, more work needs to be done to reach a common understanding of what ‘online social capital’ really is and how to measure it.

In the seventh and concluding chapter, Son summarizes key differences between individual and collective social capital. However, notwithstanding these differences, Son argues that the two meanings share a common ground in the notion that ‘social capital is produced not by “I-ness” but by “we-ness”’ (p. 164). It is a bit ironic that a book whose main aim is to clarify the meaning(s) of social capital concludes by referring to an ill-defined quotation-marked-term like “we-ness” – whatever it is supposed to mean.

Overall, however, Son has written a solid introduction to the concept of social capital and the literature surrounding it. While students and scholars who are mainly interested in social theory might find the first chapter overly concise, others will appreciate that Son devotes a lot of attention to the concept’s use in empirical research. I strongly recommend Son’s book – especially chapter three – to students and scholars planning to use the concept of social capital in empirical-analytical social science.

**References**

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