Introduction and Bourdieu on Social Capital

"Anarchists of the world... unite!"

This tongue-in-cheek joke parodies the commonly-held belief that anarchists do not work well with others. Most people assume anarchists are extreme individualists, unwilling to compromise, or collaborate in groups (i.e., every person is “an island”, completely independent of others). In reality, this is far from the truth. Anarchists prefer to work on projects, in groups, or within relationships where their participation (and everyone else’s) is voluntary, not coerced, and where the power-relations are equally balanced and power is not monopolized by a

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small group of people (Ward 1996, Ehrlich 1996, Graeber 2009, Milstein 2010, Shantz 2010). This is not only possible, but is the standard mode of existence in anarchist movements. The social phenomenon at the crux of this conception of organization is social capital.

Defining social capital can be challenging, but the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) conception of social capital may be the best. Below, I consider how social capital applies to social movements, particularly anarchism. According to Bourdieu, capital of any form “takes time to accumulate” (p. 241). In doing so, it can take on a variety of forms, including economic, human, social, and symbolic. Social capital consists of social obligations or connections, which can be converted into economic capital. It is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquisition and recognition” (pp. 248-249). By being members of a group, people have a degree of access to the “collectively-owned capital” of that group.

One’s possession of social capital depends on the size and complexity of the network that people can mobilize, as well as the quality and quantity of capital that people in that network have available to them. This network is a series of relationships that is premised upon efforts to socially invest in each other (whether consciously or not), all in ways that help to grow and sustain these relationships for use in the future. Consequently, anarchist movements have greater capital to the extent that anarchist net-
works possess complex, diverse, and strong social connections. Bourdieu writes: “The reproduction of social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed” (p. 250).

Since organizations are arguably one of the most important scales of analysis for studying social movements (McCarthy and Zald 1977), it is reasonable to try applying social capital theory to social movement organizations (SMOs). Some scholars have already begun to do so, with intriguing results (Diani 1997, Mayer 2003, Paxton 2002, Smith 1998). Thus, the breadth of social capital theory offers great opportunities to assist in understanding social movements and SMOs. In addition, anarchist movements ought to seriously consider how to improve their social capital in order to improve their chances of goal-achievement, especially within the context of anarchist organizational forms (e.g., affinity groups, collectives, syndicalist unions, federations, or other projects).

**Forms of Social Capital According to Coleman**

The various forms of social capital theorized by James S. Coleman can help to clearly define the important factors that contribute to social capital. For those lacking economic and financial capital, social capital is a key means to not only individual agency, but also social change, particularly within SMOs. Social capital theory applied to social movements suggests that the common denominator
of any movement is usually its raw, collective people power—both bodies and minds.²

Sociologists and activists alike have long debated the contradictory degree to which social action is facilitated by agency and restricted by social structure.³ For Coleman (1988), social capital is one immediate means of agency and it is created by people within the relationships they share. “[S]ocial capital is productive making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible… Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure or relations between actors and among actors” (p. S98). Coleman describes (1988) three important forms social capital can take: (1) trust, (2) information channels, and (3) norms and sanctions.⁴ Seen through these varieties, it is clear that social capital is an important “thing” created within social movements. Coleman’s conception of social capital may be seen as akin to a particular operationalization of social resources, as described by resource mobilization theory (Edwards & McCarthy 2004); the very strength of move-

² Charles Tilly notes the importance of mass participation; he emphasizes the importance of WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment; Tilly 2004).

³ Anthony Giddens (1984) proposes a solution to this supposed dichotomy, through his theory of structuration.

⁴ Later, in his magisterial work The Foundations of Social Theory (1990), Coleman elaborates upon three additional elements of social capital, the first two of which are far less relevant here; these include authority relations, appropriable social organization, and intentional organization.
ments themselves may derive from the accumulation and application of social capital. In other words, movements build social capital as a resource and then mobilize when appropriate. According to Coleman (1988), individually-useful resources like human capital (e.g. knowledge, skills, credentials) necessitate the acquisition and deployment of social capital in order to make an impact. Thus, people need each other in order to pursue social goals as well as their own private ends. Taken to its logical conclusion, social capital helps people working in movement organizations, groups, and networks to acquire collective power that they would not possess as mere individuals.

The first form of Coleman’s (1988) social capital is trust, which facilitates the exchange of expectation and obligation. The ties between individuals are stronger when there is greater expectation—people know they can rely upon others to follow-through on important or necessary tasks. Stronger ties foster a more intense sense of obligation, as friends, comrades, fellow participants, and activists feel they have to support each other. This obligation may appear to be rooted in common values, shared experiences, or promises. Social capital is clearly an unspoken component of the anarchist theory and practice of “mutual aid”: the free exchange of physical, monetary, or political support with the expectation that others will in-turn feel obligation to support them if and when necessary (c.f. Kropotkin 1972). This activity feels very “natural” to most people and they seek out relationships in which they can practice mutual aid with others. Movements that en-
courage the practice of mutual aid are likely to have greater social capital and people are more likely to trust one another. Anarchists also place trust in others in ways that are contingent upon a person’s hierarchical position. Thus, it is generally assumed that most “average” people are worthy of a degree of trust, while those in positions of authority are not worthy of such trust.

Trust is particularly useful in revolutionary movements where the risk of state repression is highest. Part of this deep trust is represented in the willingness to plan possibly illegal actions—e.g., property destruction against corporate property, blockading military depots, sabotaging logging equipment, supporting wildcat strikes, or unpermitted marches—with each other and assume that sensitive information will not be conveyed to anyone else, whether loose-lipped associates or police. Sharing secrets in a safe manner is an important practice in radical movements, since anti-authoritarian direct action plans tend to be kept strictly within the immediate social circles that are part of the planning. A key example of such trust is that found within the SMO called an “affinity group,” small groupings composed exclusively of people who know, trust, and share common identities with each other. Affinity groups are similar to families, but deliberately built around political commitments that may engage in contentious politics and challenging activities—such as militant protest or other direct action—that require strong trust and support from one’s affinity group.

Coleman’s (1988) second form of social capital, in-
formation channels, can also lead to the empowerment of social movements. By personally knowing people who have valuable information, one has less need to independently gather information. Thus, there is “information potential” in our relationships with others. Social capital is fostered and accumulated when activists create and regularly exercise communication through radical information channels. As the networks of communication broaden within movements, it is easier for those movements to understand the obstacles they face. Even within geographically diffuse networks, people may remain in contact through telecommunications and Internet technologies, such as cell phones, email listserves, and groupware (software that facilitates organizational decision-making via democratic and collective methods\(^5\)). Activists rely upon each other to gather important information, such as on-the-ground observations about the layout of a city’s downtown area, which is useful for planning a protest, civil disobedience, and a variety of direct actions. If one’s comrades know whom to contact from other communities, this is valuable information when seeking allies and broader solidarity. Most importantly, anarchist networks are premised upon the free access to information, whether it is mere data, facts, analysis, ideas, or theory. Consequently, anarchists place an emphasis on lowering the cost—economic and social—to information (via free ‘zines, leaflets, Internet essay archives, or guerrilla radio

\(^5\) The Riseup Collective’s “CrabGrass” software project is a prime example.
programs), the democratic creation of movement analyses (such as with the Independent Media Center model), and mass distribution of news (for example, the A-Infos News Service and its accompanying free radio project). To the extent that these information channels permeate every sector of anarchist movements, the more likely participants will be highly engaged in important movement debates and theorizing, will have up-to-date understanding of current events and movement activity, and will feel a sense of unity with each other (even if sometimes nuanced or contingent). The quality of information people can acquire in these networks will determine the level of social capital and thus influence the potential of movement personnel’s ability to achieve their goals. Movements can aspire to accomplish their goals by wielding information as a tool to combat ignorance, confusion, censorship, and seclusion.

Coleman’s final social capital form manifests in social norms, which facilitate certain actions while constraining others. If a movement norm exists that calls on participants to help each other out, even in extreme situations, then the movement will be stronger. Norms can facilitate social capital in all manner of situations. For example, if police attempt to place a fellow demonstrator under arrest during a physically confrontational protest, a common anarchist norm encourages other demonstrators to assist the person facing arrest. The norm of “de-arresting” exists when using “black bloc” tactics, which involves demonstrators physically pulling such an arrestee away from po-
lice officers, removing that demonstrator from police “custody.” If the de-arresting is successful, the targeted person is pulled deeper into the bloc’s ranks and helped to disappear from observing or pursuing police. This anarchist norm contributes to the social capital of all participants, as they understand that others will “have their back.”

The norms—and potential sanctions—lobbied against those who deviate from these expectations within SMOs help to create and sustain a radical culture of both internal and external criticism. For instance, acting in the interest of the collective is often a SMO norm. Therefore, meetings and events are managed collectively, open-endedly, or with popular input—this fosters greater social trust. Also, as mentioned earlier, if illegal activities (civil disobedience, direct action, property destruction, etc.) are potentialities for the anarchist movement, participants tend to make broad, general statements in support of such actions, but withhold relevant details from individuals not within one’s own affinity group. This norm of “security culture” prevents law enforcement from gaining accurate or useful information about an organization or action. To violate this norm, would result in informal sanctions from other anarchists. A “loose-lipped” individual (1) will be educated and pressured by others to understand the accompanying risks of sharing private information, (2) is unlikely to be trusted as much in the future, and (3) may perhaps be asked to leave the organization. A regular violation of such a norm (especially by multiple individuals)
is apt to harm the social relations upon which social capital rests. For example, intervention by government and corporate actors (in the form of subversion, spying, and disruption) is more successful when the security culture norm is weak or non-existent. In such instances, agent provocateurs may be used to disrupt, frame, or set-up activists (see Boykoff 2007). Thus, movement sanctions are important methods for improving adherence to important movement norms. Strong social trust in an organization may seem to enable the state’s use of agent provocateurs, as people may unwisely place trust in a new member who is actually interested in spying or subversion. But, equally strong social norms against dangerous SMO behaviors could bulwark against misplaced trust, too.

Social capital benefits can also be generalizable. Arguably, a key objective of movements is to achieve changes that benefit a group of people larger than the movement’s immediate participants. Thus, the social capital acquired by a particular movement can benefit members within an entire social category. For example, feminist movements create benefits for all women in society, not just participants in that movement. Anti-racist movements benefit the members of all disadvantaged groups (such as racial, ethnic, or religious minorities), not just those who populate anti-racist organizations. Gains by anarchist move-

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6 Additionally, feminist and anti-racist movements also benefit privileged people (e.g., men and whites), as the elimination of domination facilitates egalitarian social relations, happiness, and greater social trust (Williams 2012).
ments—to expand the domains of freedom, to challenge the legitimacy of hierarchical institutions, to create alternative institutions founded on radical values—indirectly benefit others in a society who can use such accomplishments for themselves (this extension may or may not actually enhance social capital itself, for everyone, though, but maybe just extend its immediate benefits). Thus, social capital’s democratizing benefits are different from economic capital where usually only those who invest in such capital forms enjoy benefits.\(^7\)

The Dualities and Disappearance of Social Capital

The most recent famous work on social capital in American sociology has been Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000), which describes—in incredible detail—the long decline of social capital, community, and participation in American society.\(^8\) His work describes a number of dualities, whose applications are worth exploring here.

A first crucial duality concerns what social capital efforts actually attempt to accomplish. Sometimes people intend to improve the strength of their existing social relationships and in other moments the goal is to expand

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\(^7\) This, of course, introduces the problems of free-riding (see Olson 1965), which may be overcome by value-driven action as opposed to purely “rational” action, social pressures to participate, small-sized groups, and a fair and even distribution of collectives goods in society.

\(^8\) Some of Putnam’s results are generalizable to other societies, too.
those relationships outward to new groups. Both these efforts are crucial for the long-term vitality of social capital and human communities. Putnam (2000) describes these two efforts as bonding and bridging, respectively. Social capital bonding aims to improve the capital amongst those who already share relationships, enhancing their ties to each other. Bonding is an internally focused social capital effort. For anarchists, bonding helps to create intra-movement solidarity. By hooking-up and bringing closer together those who identify as anarchists, a movement enhances the connections amongst individuals and the trust within that movement. This bonding is crucial, since without internal social capital, coordination is difficult—if not impossible. Various groups within a poorly-bonded movement will not feel a sense of solidarity for each other, nor extend mutual aid when needed.

Social capital bridging attempts to create connections between otherwise unconnected people and groups. Bridging crosses divides that may exist and bring diverse groups into closer contact and affinity. It is an externally- or outwardly-focused effort to enhance social capital. For example, anarchists may seek to improve relations between anarchists with divergent ideological orientations, such as anarcho-syndicalists and anti-civilization anarchists. Additionally, anarchist movements regularly pursue bridging whenever speaking to or working with non-anarchists. Thus, any broader organizing effort involves social capital bridging. For example, the 1999 demonstrations in Seattle against the World Trade Organ-
Social Capital In Anarchist Movements

Social capital brought diverse people together, uniting them under a radical critique of corporate-led globalization and, eventually, capitalism. By connecting anarchists to non-anarchists, the connections multiply and trust grows across movements and in relation to the general population. For any movement to grow and spread its ideas, bridging is a crucial prerequisite. It thrusts movements into contact with those with different ideas or those who are not yet “converted” and hopes to gain new adherents, allies, sympathetic audiences, or at least to not make new enemies.

A second duality Putnam explores is between those who either choose to do formal or informal social organizing. He identifies “machers” as those who invest lots of time in formal organizations. These people are the heart-and-soul of community groups and the driving forces that make things happen. As such, machers are more organized and purposeful with their actions. Many anarchists engage in macher activity: doing community organizing with diverse non-anarchist populations (homeless rights organizations, immigrant populations, pro-choice clinics, militant trade unions and workers, and others). Other machers consciously form organizations—explicitly “anarchist” or not—through which further activities and campaigns can occur. Transparency, outreach, and formality are key efforts of anarchist machers. When acting openly, machers are displaying values to others, clearly declaring their intentions, and are making themselves accountable to others. The extent to which macher anarchists speak
and act reliably, they will likely incur trust from others.

Another population, called “schmoozers”, spends much of its time engaged in informal conversation and communion, eschewing efforts to wade through formal organizations. Schmoozers are more spontaneous and flexible in their schedules and efforts, and more willing to relate to people individually as opposed to groups of people in formal settings. Many anarchists, of course, pursue these activities, too. Anarchists often hangout with each other and meet people in informal scenes, socializing at parties, squats and social centers, after political rallies, or at other meeting places. The anarchist schmoozer may give intense attention to a small number of people or maybe even just one person; this creates a strong bond, although typically fewer overall connections. Schmoozers create more spaces for private trust to emerge, independent of formal decisions made in organizations and public coalitions. Schmoozers exchange political analysis, ideas, and values in intimate settings, especially when such information is of a private nature. The sharing accomplished in these informal environments enhances individual trust. Both the machers and schmoozers seem to reflect qualities of Etzioni’s (1965) categories of instrumental and expressive leaders, respectively—the first contributes in practical and clearly defined ways, while the second contributes to the overall mental well-being and motivation of groups.

A key concern to Putnam (2000) is the comprehensive decline in social capital in the US (changes elsewhere in
the world have not been investigated as thoroughly as by Putnam). He considers this decline in social capital to be detrimental for civil society and for representative democracy. For American anarchists, other severe consequences result from declining social capital, which does not bode well for revolutionary social transformation.

According to Putnam, there are various, general sources of this decline in social capital. With each source, it is worth considering how they affect anarchist movements and such movements’ capacities to pursue a revolutionary agenda. First, the pressures of time and money, have forced people to work more, work longer, and have less time for community and social activities. This is particularly true for middle-class women who have traditionally had more opportunity to pursue these activities because male-breadwinners’ salaries allowed them to stay out of the labor market. There is a seemingly endless drive to and economic imperative for work in order to pay bills, consume products, and build individual careers; all of this detracts from the ability of people to focus on others and, thus, foster transformative social capital.

If the anarchist movement still had a strong anarcho-syndicalist orientation, this increased focus on work might serve as an entry point into radical workplace and union politics. However, this ideological subvariant within anarchism (at least in the US) is about as weak as the overall labor movement’s community organizing efforts. Consequently, everyone—including many anarchists—spends more time doing things that do not directly
result in greater political awareness, class-consciousness, or radicalism. A possible counter-balance to the destructive results of this factor decreasing social capital is potentially simple: work less. Instead of spending so much time engaged in wage labor, an anarchist could—indeed, many already are—find alternative ways to have their economic needs met. Whether through house cooperatives, food-sharing networks, and other mutual aid projects, people could further extract themselves from labor markets and capitalist enterprise. To do so, would require developing economic survival mechanisms that transcend anarchist subcultures. The benefit for social capital would be twofold: people would have more non-employed time available for community and social capital building, and the necessities of alternative survival would themselves reinforce stronger social ties with people.

A second source of decreased American social capital is mobility and sprawl. For decades, urban dwellers have been up-rooted (willing and unwillingly) from their traditional, more-or-less organically-created neighborhoods. The clearest indicator of this is the dramatic growth of suburbs, which are generally more affluent, white, and inaccessible to other groups. This suburbanization—as well as the block-busting, red-lining, white-flight, and other racial dynamics that helped drive it—has created relatively homogeneous neighborhoods, in terms of both class and race. But, as a permaculturalist would argue, monocultures are not only devastating for nature and food systems, but so too for communities. Impoverished people
and people of color residing in central cities lack the economic and cultural capital that affluent individuals took with them to the suburbs. People in the wealthier suburbs lose contact with people un-alike them, develop callousness towards the problems of “others”, and simply do not understand what is going on a few miles from where they live. Since many Americans move regularly (even every year), there is little chance for people to develop long-term, stable relationships with neighbors or to feel responsibility for one’s community. The sprawling nature of suburbs makes it more difficult for residents to reach other areas they seek to go, thus requiring long periods of travel, usually solitary in cars. None of these factors bode well for maintaining social capital.

The solution to this problem is simple to state, but harder to accomplish. Anarchists argue there is no easy way to create community—it is hard work, which requires establishing long-term trust. To do this, people must be brought into closer contact together. Classic community organizing approaches do this: bring diverse people that share common interests together in a room and allow them to see each other’s human worth, figure out how to trust each other, and articulate a shared vision and course of future action. This is, unfortunately, easier said than done, of course. But, anarchists often advocate clustering together in communities. During the early-2000s, after the protests against the Republican National Convention, I heard rumors that there were entire anarchist neighborhoods in Philadelphia. And other cities have
communities like this: the Exarchia neighborhood of Athens, Greece has a strong anarchist presence, as do many areas with squatted social centers in cities like Barcelona and Rome. In my own experience, the Akron Catholic Worker (which was not necessarily anarchist) had four houses on a single city block, which allowed for residents and volunteers to share resources, do communal activities, and maintain strong face-to-face lines of communication. Living in community does not require living communally, of course, although group-houses, squats, intentional communities, and other co-living options help. Close proximity is itself a partial solution to the malaise that long distance inflicts upon social capital.

Third, Putnam observes that technology and mass media has helped to destroy social capital. A key culprit is television. There are numerous reasons why TV has had a detrimental impact upon social ties, but two bear repeating. First, even though people may watch TV in groups, it is usually viewed alone. Moreover, although TV can be viewed collectively, it does not mean that it is a collective activity, since the focus is upon the TV, not each other. It is difficult to communicate, share, and focus upon anything else except the TV program. Since TV watching has been shown (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi 2004) to induce a cognitive state comparable to sleep, TV viewing numbs our abilities to interact with others. A second reason why TV is detrimental pertains to the portrayals typical to TV. Deviance, law-breaking, extreme personalities and behaviors, violence, individualism, and other programming
themes suggest to viewers that people in the outside world cannot be trusted. The more TV people watch, the less they believe others can be trusted.

The anarchist solution to the scourge of hierarchical TV programming is not for the insertion of anarchist TV programming on mainstream channels. Instead, most anarchists have advocated a solution similar to that for overworking: turn-off the TV! It is impressive how much extra time can be liberated in people’s days when it is not wasted-away with idle TV viewing. While this is a hard sell to audiences who are seduced by highly sophisticated and well-funded programming (the purpose, of which is to deliver advertisements to audiences), it is still a much-needed prognosis. Instead of relying upon stupefying TV news to convey information, anarchists ought to pursue and expand upon the strategies already used by many anarchist newspapers (and within other media), like the UK’s *Freedom*, which engages directly with on-going events, adding a subtle anarchist-spin, analytical perspective, and aesthetic. The key is engagement: one of the benefits of Indymedia was that people could participate in the creation and propagation of media, but do so directly with each other and discuss it without proxy (something that TV has never allowed for). By communicating with people about things that matter—during days that have

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9 This is particularly true for some TV programming, but less true for other programming (Lee at al. 2003). Additionally, TV viewing done with non-strangers (e.g., family members) further reduces social trust (Patulny 2011).
far more time and less propaganda—there is a greater likelihood of growing social capital. Then, in lieu of individualized activities (like TV-watching), collective activities deserve encouragement: neighborhood sports, potluck meals, festivals, collective work projects, and participatory entertainment.

Lastly, one of the most serious sources of declining social capital, according to Putnam, was an inter-generational one. From generation to generation, ever since those who came of age during the Great Depression and World War II, people have had less and less involvement in community. Newer generations have been more severely affected by the above phenomenon and have not had the same crucial community-building opportunities that earlier generations have. Baby Boomers were considered highly individualistic by their parents, as was the so-called “me generation” of those growing-up in the 1980s. Current cohorts will likely be even more individualistic, as they rely upon personal consumption and technology to differentiate them (often remotely) from each other.¹¹

Radical socialization was one of the main ways that classical age anarchists kept inter-generational ideas and

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¹⁰ Of course, another reason for high rates of activist participation... ...with Indymedia, pertains to its organizational structure which imitates desired anarchist social relations.

¹¹ Recent American generations have become more narcissistic and less empathetic (Twenge & Foster 2010, Konrath et al. 2011).
Social Capital In Anarchist Movements

values strong (see Williams 2011). Anarchist families and communities kept anarchism alive in order to pass it along to youth. A strong, capitalist-adversarial, working-class culture enabled this. However, with the deliberate destruction of working-class culture, the buying-off of class allegiances, and the elimination of whole sectors of the economy that employed working-class people, these cultures of resistance disappeared. Combined with political repression with the Palmer Raids and the McCarthy era, new radicals often had to re-discover older traditions for themselves, independent of an older generation who would have otherwise taught them directly (see Cornell’s (2011) study of anarchism in-between the classical and contemporary periods). By focusing on inter-generational anarchist socialization, the ideas can persist and possibly strengthen overtime. But focusing on maintaining anarchism over the life-course, by continual, on-going socialization and education projects, anarchist movements can keep adherents connected to movements as they age and change their roles in society (especially become parents). Making sure that anarchism does not remain the domain of a youthful age group is key. Designing movement activities supportive of people’s familial obligations by providing childcare and having safe, family-friendly events, will further this end (Law & Martens 2012). Also, giving older people a role in anarchist movements will keep people around longer; thus, a static movement that exclusively emphasizes militant street protest is unwise, as it will exclude people with reduced physical capacities,
whether due to ability or age.

Taken together, these strategies suggest ways to rein-vigorate social capital, especially for anarchist movements. Future research could focus on a number of related issues and questions. First, how did classic age anarchists speak of and write about social trust? What do contemporary anarchists do that consciously bonds and bridges social capital? And, who are the likely recruits for anarchist movements? In other words, who has a positive orientation toward generalized social trust, but does not have political trust in authority figures? Existing survey data could be used to determine which types of people tend to be horizontalists or hierarchicalists.

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Social Capital In Anarchist Movements


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Social Capital In Anarchist Movements | 35


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