CHAPTER 10

Group Membership, Trust Networks, and Social Capital: A Critical Analysis

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Scholarship over the past twenty years or so has significantly improved our understanding of the positive and active roles voluntary associations (collegia, koina, sunodoi, and so on) played for both their members and society at large, especially their importance in creating a space for construction of prestige among the craftsmen and tradesmen, facilitating the lower classes’ participation in civic life, socializing upward mobility, facilitating ‘Romanization’, fragmenting social hierarchy, and facilitating business.¹ There is now a growing tendency among ancient historians to emphasize associations as private-order enforcement mechanisms that institutionalized trust networks and hence had the effect of reducing transaction costs, defined as all the frictions and expenses (search and information costs, bargaining and decision costs, policing and enforcement costs) involved in facilitating an exchange.² Informed in particular by social capital theory and the New Institutional Economics, these analyses approach associations as reputation-building, risk-averting, and efficiency-enhancing mechanisms for craftsmen and tradesmen against the ancient markets, which were characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. This reputation mechanism has been afforded such significance that it was claimed recently that ‘manufacturers were able to mitigate high transaction

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¹ For instance Kloppenborg and Wilson (1996); van Nijf (1997); Harland (2013); Tran (2006); Patterson (2006); Liu (2008b); Verbven (2007a: 861–893; 2011a; 2012); Perry (2011: 499–515); the dossier by Koenraad Verbven, Matthew Gibbs, Nicolas Tran, Wim Broekaert, and Ilias Arnaoutoglou in Ancient Society 41 (2011); Dondin-Payre and Tran (2012); and Fröhlich and Hamon (2013).

costs by using voluntary associations—particularly professional *collegia*—as private-order enforcement networks, thereby forestalling the need to create integrated firms.³ While these analyses provide important new ways to understand how ancient economic life intertwined with social structures and practice, more data input and micro-level realities need to be incorporated to refine the analyses and take full advantage of theoretical tools.⁴ This chapter represents an exercise to complicate the ideal theoretical scenario by bringing into focus some operational and efficiency issues of *collegia*. The goal is not to deny altogether the positive roles of associations or the validity of applying these theories, but to guard against an overly optimistic assessment of the voluntary associations’ role in reducing transaction costs and to suggest some ways to initiate a more contextualized and nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between associative life and trust networks in antiquity.

**Introducing the Questions**

The extensive social capital literature has elaborated on the varied causes and effects of social capital, which can be defined as ‘the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures’.⁵ Among social scientists, opinions diverge on the benefits of associative life, with some seeing it as a crucial force for positive social outcomes⁶ and others emphasizing its negative social consequences, especially social exclusion and inequality.⁷ Harking back to Bourdieu,⁸ a number of recent studies have criticized Robert Putnam, the leading advocate of seeing involvement and participation in groups as a source of civility and trust, for not giving sufficient attention to the possibilities that ‘social capital can divide as well as unify’, and that ‘associativeness may contribute to producing, maintaining, or eroding the social capital of a society’.⁹ Not only has ‘the correlation on the individual level between involvement in voluntary associations and high social trust’ been called into question, but finding ‘a working distinction between the kind of

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³ Hawkins (2012: 197). But see Broekaert (2012a), who argues that vertical integration did happen in a number of economic sectors in the Roman Empire.

⁴ For preliminary discussions, see Liu (2009: 18–24); Venticinque (2013).


⁶ For instance Coleman (1988); Greif (1989); Putnam (1993; 2002); Migheli (2012).

⁷ For instance Kaufman (2002); Li, Savage, and Pickles (2003; 2005); Daly and Silver (2008).
