
Background Information

MATTHIAS MEYER-SCHWARZENBERGER is a Ph.D. student in political science at the University of St. Gallen. He holds two Master’s degrees in international affairs from the University of St. Gallen and Institut d’Etudes politiques, Paris (Sciences Po). From 2006 to 2010 Matthias was the Editorial Assistant of the Swiss Political Science Review. He was in charge with the organisation of the SPSA Annual Congress 2009 as well as the ECPR Joint Sessions 2011 hosted by the Institute of Political Science (IPW-HSG). In an honorary capacity, Matthias serves as Vice President of the Federal Association of German Economists (bdvb e.V.).

Abstract

The impact of cultural factors on social capital, including norms of trustworthiness and beliefs like trust, has increasingly been brought to the fore in social capital literature. Building on an early model of norm internalisation by Coleman (1987), this chapter intends to propose a fresh look at the trust/trustworthiness dimension of social capital under the paradigm of methodological individualism. Given that static preferences and conventional assumptions about rationality cannot account for the trustworthy behaviour of human individuals, it is argued that social capital research should adopt a psychologically-grounded perspective without which a theory of social capital would remain incomplete. In the light of these considerations, effective individualism – a modern form of discipline that fosters individual responsibility – is identified as an important source of trustworthiness. An interesting side effect of this hypothesis is that it allows for a conceptualisation of social capital perfectly in line with the general logic of capitalism, since competitive and cooperative types of behaviour can both be traced back to the very same cultural/psychological preconditions.

15.1 Introduction

Across the social sciences, theoretical or applied, the topic of trust is so much in vogue these days that a sense of suspicion can hardly be denied. Why are economists, sociologists, political scientists, as well as scholars of business administration and other academic branches so eager to examine something that never occupied a central position in literature when the fundamental concepts of the respective disciplines were developed? Could all the honorable pioneers of our disciplines, whose insights continue to form the basis of our academic activities, fail to notice the importance of something as important as trust? Otherwise, is trust just a trendy buzzword haunting the literature, a fast-selling keyword we must have on our publications list that will be replaced, the sooner the better, by the next fashionable concept? On a more positive note, have we all been seduced by the positive connotations of trust (cf.