What’s Social Capital Got to Do with It? The Ambiguous (and Overstated) Relationship between Social Capital and Ghetto Underemployment

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Abstract
This article draws on qualitative fieldwork with unemployed African-American men in St. Louis to demonstrate some of the manifold problems in attributing their marginality to ‘low social capital’. I show how Putnam’s extraordinarily popular formulation obscures the complex, double-edged effects of social capital across a segregated and highly unequal region. Extremely low levels of economic and educational capital blocked any conversion of the men’s broad web of friendship and acquaintance into prosperity. Much more effective was the high (white) social capital concentrated outside the city, which continued to reinforce the spatial and economic marginality of African-American St. Louis, leaving residents with little advancement to offer each other beyond the volatile and destructive local drug industry.

Keywords
alienation, economic capital, poverty, race and ethnicity, social capital

Introduction
Only a century ago, St. Louis was the fourth biggest city in the USA. Its location on the Mississippi near its junction with the Missouri had powered rapid industrialization during the 19th century, and by the time of its World’s Fair in 1904, it was a booming commercial center, home to hundreds of breweries and manufacturing enterprises and a major destination for immigrants from Germany, Italy, and even Mexico. One hundred years later the same city presents a devastating picture of the decline of American urbanism. With the exception of a few commercial islands anchored by giant grocery stores, the wide city streets stand empty of both pedestrians and businesses. While the cracked and crumbling sidewalks still lead past impressive ruins of cinemas, department stores, banks and libraries, all that remains open for business is the occasional church, hair salon, or fast
food franchise. The 2000 census confirmed that the city was among the poorest in the USA, with a poverty rate of 29.5 percent, an unemployment rate double that of neighboring counties, and a meager median household income of $27,132. The white population, slightly less than half of the city’s people, how shows some economic diversity, but the majority African-American population continues to be strikingly poor, with over two-thirds of the children living on welfare.

Fifty years after the legal abolition of discrimination in the labor market, why are black St. Louisans, and indeed the nearly nine million African-Americans living in high-poverty urban census tracts across the country, still so disproportionately poor?

Some social scientists have joined politicians and media pundits in blaming dysfunctional families, teen pregnancy, single motherhood, and ‘gang culture’ (Bennett et al. 1996; Eggebeen and Lichter 1991; Wilson 1975). Sociologists have generally taken a different road, excavating the macro-structural roots of individual behavior. Research on such ‘big picture’ determinants of urban decline has produced a rich body of research covering a multitude of possible causes: corporate delocalization (Heying 1997); the combination of deindustrialization with institutional racism (Wilson 1978); white flight and the erosion of the urban tax base (Davis 1990; Sugrue 1998); the general loss of jobs paying a ‘living wage’ (Freeman 1994a); the specific ‘spatial mismatch’ between suburban jobs and urban workers (Ellwood 1983; Holzer and Ilihanfeldt 1996; Kain 1968; Newman 2000); continued high levels of racial segregation (Massey and Denton 1993); and the overall rising cost of housing in relation to income (Blau 1992).

Over the last 10 years, however, many of those studying urban poverty have moved onto the increasingly popular terrain of social capital analysis. The idea that the character of group life could have strong effects on individual prosperity is a long-standing trope within sociology, voiced in different ways by Durkheim, Marx, and Max Weber (Portes 1998), and more recently interrogated by Bourdieu (1980) and Coleman (1988), who each in their way saw it as a way to explain the durability of social inequality. But the analysis of social capital (SC) only took flight into the public sphere after Robert Putnam (1995, 2000) turned it in a more voluntaristic direction, framing ‘social networks’ as a potentially manipulable ‘missing link’ in our understanding of what makes particular societies or social groupings successful.

The new formulation was enthusiastically taken up in policy circles, where it lost more of its academic nuance, congealing into the warm and fuzzy ‘glue to hold society together’ formulated by the World Bank (Fine 2001). But such analytical ‘fuzziness’ only seems to have increased its discursive appeal. Centrist political parties in the Netherlands, the USA, the UK, Belgium, and France jumped on the idea that SC might be engineered so as to mitigate the harsh social consequences of the Hobbesian struggle unleashed by the neoliberal withdrawal of the state from the provision of collective social goods.

As the concept of SC gained global currency it became one of the core justifications for a broad redefinition of both prosperity and poverty, not only in the political center but across the social-democratic left (Boggs 2001; Fine 2001). In a period dominated by cultures of fear and moral judgement, SC analysis became a non-confrontational way to bring in a version of ‘culture’ and ‘the social’ without blaming the victim. Yet at the same time it seems to have become a conduit by which social science has renewed itself for the neoliberal era, laying aside problematic conceptual baggage – not only the Marxian emphasis on exploitation but also Weberian understandings of the exclusive mechanisms of status groups.

Across government and the non-profit sector, the idea that stimulating the development of SC will increase wealth and prosperity has quickly come to be taken for granted. Despite numerous well conceived critiques by academics, journalists, and activists, an army of policy researchers have moved on to the laborious task of developing measurement tools (Brisson and Usher 2007;
Narayan and Pritchett 1997). While the World Bank and the Ford Foundation have propelled the use of the SC heuristic in development projects, the Mott and Annie E. Casey Foundations and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, among others, have transformed US applied fields such as urban planning, community development, housing policy, and social work (DeFilippis 2001; Grix 2001; O’Connell 2003). In community development, for example, funders have steered grassroots organizations to take on Putnam’s framework, shifting their definition of ‘empowerment’ from its previous emphasis on coalition-building and political mobilization towards ‘consensus organizing’ and mentoring programs (DeFilippis 2001; Silverman 2004).

In sociology, efforts to examine the effects of social networks and neighborhood-level public culture on poverty long predate the SC revolution, regaining prominence in the 1980s with studies by William Julius Wilson (1987), and James Coleman (1988) on the relationship between social isolation and poverty. Wilson, in particular, is something of a transitional figure. Years before the appearance of the Putnamian articulation of SC, Wilson turned to an examination of ‘concentration effects’: the out-migration of employed ghetto residents combining with worsening labor market opportunities to create intense spatial and social isolation (1987). Wilson himself did not adopt Putnam’s definition, and retained a strong interest in mechanisms of active exclusion, especially employer discrimination. However, much of the policy-oriented research adopting his ‘neighborhood effects’ framework took a more Putnamesque turn (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997; Elliott 1999; Tigges 1998; Vartanian 1999) hunting for causes of poverty within family life and social relations at the neighborhood level, leaving substandard jobs and public institutions outside of the analysis. From there it was a short step to adoption of the construct of ‘social capital’. (Briggs 1998; Lang and Hornburg 1998; Temkin and Rohe 1998). Although some sociologists continue with Coleman and Bourdieu’s non-normative treatment, this analytical work has not made much headway in either applied social sciences or the public sphere, where SC continues to be understood as the missing link, the crucial mediating variable between poverty and ‘neighborhood effects’ (Osterling 2007).

William Julius Wilson turned in the direction of culture because he quite rightly believed that the broad strokes of political economy could not fully explain the extremes of alienation and despair concentrated in the country’s poorest neighborhoods. If the body of work on ‘neighborhood effects’ tends to overemphasize the causal weight of local cultures, it asks important questions, which do not necessarily draw a reductive causal arrow leading from the magic bullet of SC to prosperity. If people in such neighborhoods are failing to prosper in the legitimate economy, to what extent is this due to social isolation? Do potential workers know other people who might help them to get different kinds of jobs or give them useful advice about looking? How and why do young men start working in the drug industry? Is it because they see this as their only viable option, or are they more actively drawn away from other potential activities and into the drug industry by friends or family members?

The SC trail has been most enthusiastically pursued by applied social scientists using quantitative methods. Instead, in this article, I explore the above questions with in-depth qualitative research, namely open-ended, semi-structured interviews and ethnography undertaken with 34 African-American men in St. Louis, Missouri. This data was collected in 1999 and 2000, inside ‘Straightaways’, a drug treatment facility for the medically uninsured where I did ethnographic research for several months. Years of street ethnography with homeless people had made me skeptical of the value of interviewing destitute men without previously building up some meaningful rapport, so I made sure that I had spent some time with each of these men before interviewing them. They were all currently unemployed men from 20 to 50 years old, many addicted to illegal drugs. Only seven of the informants were deeply and permanently involved in the illicit economy. The rest had extensive, if often erratic, histories of labor market involvement. Clearly this is not a
random sample – the data speaks most strongly about life on the seamiest side of black St. Louis. There are many African-American St. Louisans who strenuously avoid the ubiquitous drug industry, but their voices are not heard here. Sadly, though, the sample is probably not as skewed as a foreigner to the area might think.

The most useful way to understand the material which follows is less as a ‘representative’ account than as a theoretically-targeted ‘negative case’ (Merton 1949) well positioned to explore the relationship between social ties and long-term male poverty. I concentrate primarily on the sphere of work, looking specifically at how the men’s experience in the labor market had been affected by the various kinds of social networks to which they did or did not have access.

The first part of the article addresses the relationship between SC and underemployment by looking at informants’ accounts of their experiences in the labor market. The lack of productive social connections certainly appears to be part of this picture. Yet the continuing marginality of these men should not, I argue, be understood as a product of the absence of ‘productive’ or ‘positive’ social ties. Most of these men were not in fact fundamentally excluded from the labor market: there was less chronic unemployment than unsatisfactory wages and difficult working conditions. To the contrary, the idea of SC as ‘social glue’ obscures the ambivalent effects of social networking on ghetto experience. First, white civic organization outside the ghetto has built, and continues to maintain, a formidable barrier - both spatially and socially dividing the black residents of the city from the white suburbs where most of the region’s jobs are located. Second, local social contacts are most likely to draw men into the illicit economy, offering both income and further companionship, yet ultimately increasing the likelihood of incarceration and subsequent freefall.

**An Abundance of Ties?**

At first glance, what was most apparent was not the absence of ties, but their abundance. Indeed, the massive scope of these men’s local acquaintances might astonish many people from the more geographically mobile professional classes. The men’s fingers hungrily roam my map of the city as they described a wealth of social connections, with extended families, old friends from school and church, and hordes of other acquaintances.

These accounts of abundant social ties came alive during ethnographic observation. Our walks around the neighborhood were frequently interrupted by an acquaintance stopping his or her car to talk to one or other of the men, even though only one of them had actually lived in the immediate neighborhood. ‘Used to work with my daddy’, ‘My cousin’s friend’, ‘Ole buddy’, ‘We was in elementary together’, ‘Works down at the Post Office’, the men would explain later. African-American St. Louis, with a population of nearly 200,000 has much of the intimacy of a smaller town.

What was the impact, if any, of the social indebtedness on job hunting? African-American men do often rely on finding jobs through informal methods. This is partly because many have low levels of education – unskilled, low-wage positions are often filled through the mediation of informal job brokers. But it is also because they believe, perhaps inaccurately, that these kinds of word of mouth contacts will mitigate the effects of institutional racism. (Reingold 1999: 1927) The St. Louis men often mentioned being ‘put on’ to available positions by friends and acquaintances, and I occasionally saw this process at work myself. While out walking with 25-year-old Karim and some of the other men, we met Tim, a jovial man of about 40 who had been Karim’s oldest brother’s best buddy in high school. It was obvious that Karim was in rehab, and yet Tim gave him the number of his workplace, a metal shop near downtown, and offered to vouch for him. ‘One day at a time, my brother,’ he called as he waved goodbye. As in a recent study by Fernandez (2006), the quantity of these men’s job networks, if not the quality, seemed to be robust.
Social solidarity remained remarkably strong in the face of the devastation of large parts of the city. Loyalty to old friends remained highly valued, and many people appeared to be willing to use their resources to help each other out until the other person proved unreliable one time too many. Indeed, precisely because drug use was so ubiquitous, it did not necessarily carry the stigma that it would in many other environments.

A Putnamian analysis of this case would probably hold that the men in the sample had high SC, but of the wrong kind. Putnam’s distinction between ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ ties, adapted from Granovetter’s distinction between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ ties (Granovetter 1973), holds that ‘bridging’ capital, manifested by loose ties across different social milieus, is likely to yield more significant economic benefits, while the close reciprocal relations which create ‘bonding’ capital may help to circulate resources, but often have less than positive effects, reinforcing homogeneous groupings and identities. The Putnamians might argue that the abundance of the St. Louis men’s social ties represents a form of bonding capital, but like similarly positioned Chicagoans (Rankin and Quane 2000) and Atlantans (Tigges 1998), they suffered from a lack of ‘bridging’ capital.

The men indeed identified few contacts who could bring them information or opportunities not available within their most immediate social group. This lack was particularly notable in the accounts of men who had tried to move beyond the low-wage job ceiling into small-scale entrepreneurship. One example was that of Possum, sent to Straightaways by the drug court after being arrested in a North Side crack house. Now emaciated and HIV positive, Possum had plenty of experience in blue-collar jobs, and some training in carpentry:

I went to school for carpentry. Seven hundred and fifty-one hour course, got a job with that and started doing roofing, dry walling, home repairs and got the big head with that. Then I’m gonna try to open up my own business. Got a truck, got ladders, got tools and everything. Started working for the neighbors. Then the IRS sent a letter to my mother’s house ... They wanted me to pay taxes on all this money that was getting made and I wasn’t registered. That scared me, honestly. I didn’t know about how to go get licensed or go bonded or anything like that. I was bootlegging fixing homes. So that kinda ceased and I went back to drugs again. Back then it was PCP. I was a mess on that.

Note how Possum called his small carpentry business ‘bootlegging’, with its connotations of illegal alcohol dealing. Possum had nothing like the cultural know-how necessary to deal with the paperwork for a small business. And unlike young men from less deprived backgrounds, none of his numerous friends and acquaintances had any better knowledge with which to mentor him through the process. His uncle, who had helped a little with the cost of the tools, had assumed that Possum’s only option was to do the work illegally, and had advised him, perhaps misguided, to ‘keep it in the neighborhood’ and only advertise by word of mouth. When this strategy failed, Possum’s attempt to move beyond low-wage temporary work dissolved into a destructive drug binge.

Like Possum or Karim, most of the informants in this study had no family relationships or links of friendship with either successful tradespeople or professionals of any kind. With the mass of the African-American population either unemployed or concentrated within the lowest tiers of the region’s service economy, these black St. Louisans could do little to help each other get ahead. Friends and acquaintances could give them a ‘lead’ about job openings, but such jobs would not do much to improve their situation in the long term. Temporary work at the metal shop with Tim was unlikely to lead Karim towards prosperity, and Possum’s well-meaning uncle could do nothing to help him get legally established.

Laid-back Tyrell, raised in the infamous Pruitt-Igoe projects, recounted another incident, both poignant and ludicrous, which underlined the paucity of ‘bridging’ mentorship:
So I was down by Delmar ... 11, 12 years ago. I run over to the store ... and hey, I see Mr. McWhirter, who used to coach track in school. Had a Cadillac, nice house off of Cass, back then. He say ‘How are you doing? You got work?’ And all that. And I’m not doing so good. Been out of school maybe seven years and nothing much has come up. I’m working on cars, changing transmissions, but people down my way ain’t got much extra. So I’d say I am doing better selling bitty bags of reefer, to be straight with you. Point is, I’m looking for a change. So this Mr. McWhirter, he say, maybe I can hook you up, get you some hours running ball with the kids. And now that was interesting to me, ‘cause I always thought, yeah, coach, that something I would really like to do. He say, come over to my apartment and we can talk it over.

So next week I go over. His building doesn’t look so nice, but I go up inside and find his door. He’s there, kinda red eyes you know, but I think ‘Oh well, let’s see what he got for me.’ Whadda you know? He done turned round and pistol-whipped me, the mofo. ... I’m out cold, no jacket, no cash, in the hall ... Man, that was cold.

Putnam sees in SC a resource for economic advancement which has the potential to mitigate social inequality, while Bourdieu defines it primarily as a resource with which elites maintain privilege. In keeping with his broad project to explain social reproduction, Bourdieu (1979, 1980) emphasized the close relationship between SC and other forms of power or ‘capitals’, arguing that economic, cultural, and social capital can be (and in fact need to be) exchanged or converted into each other, and that higher levels of SC were likely to be found among those also privileged in other respects. Yes, some people living in poverty may have somewhat more ‘social’ capital than they have economic, cultural, or symbolic capital, but if they have none of these other resources they will not be able to ‘convert’ their rich social networks into gains in prosperity or status. As Rankin and Quane’s (2000) work suggests, their primary deficit is one of resources, not relationships.

**Bullshit (‘BS’) Jobs**

Their limited options in the job market did not prevent most of the men from working. Among the younger men, unsatisfactory hours, poor working conditions, and low wages were the greatest frustration, not the unavailability of jobs per se. The tight labor market of the 1990s had drawn in even young men with substantial criminal records, and all but one of the 12 men under 35 had worked, although they often only stayed in jobs for short periods. Long-term unemployment was more common among the 22 men aged 35 to 56, particularly those who had spent time in prison or on the street, yet all but five of the informants had spent at least five years in legal work, and half of them much more.

What they had not found, in general, were the decently paid manual jobs that they wanted. Only a couple of the men had ever managed to work for Chrysler, and neither had progressed beyond the summer jobs. They were still nostalgic for the ‘long’ money they had earned. Most common were what the men described as ‘BS’ jobs – temporary assembly line employment in light industry, and low-wage retail and warehouse work in the giant shopping malls and ‘big box’ wastelands spreading fast along the highways of St. Louis and St. Charles Counties. The men were used to commuting 20 or even 30 miles away from their North St. Louis neighborhoods.

As the ‘spatial mismatch’ hypothesis (Ellwood 1983; Kain 1968; Spencer 2000) would suggest, the distance between city residents and suburban jobs were certainly experienced as a logistical and economic problem. Nonetheless, it did not produce an absolute barrier. All but the very poorest of the St. Louis men had access to ‘wheels’. (Indeed, like many Americans, they considered having a car to be more vital to survival than having a stable place to live.)

The ‘spatial mismatch’ would be bearable, the interviews implied, if offset by higher wages and more appealing working conditions. The unattractiveness of the available jobs came to the foreground during a focus group with four men in their 20s. The 28-year-old Quincey brought up the
subject, making light of obstacles to ‘entry-level’ jobs. ‘It ain’t hard to find work. You know, sales clerk, warehouse,’ he said nonchalantly. ‘Well your warehouse gig may be harder. But you want a job you can get yourself hired. You got agencies, you got the jobs in the paper, you know. You got peoples telling you who’s hiring.’ The others nodded. ‘But most times, you know, they just dead-end, low-pay, BS,’ he continued.

Karim burst in angrily:

Right, those bullshit sales clerk jobs. They want you to bust your ass driving around the county for six bucks 50. Ain’t got chance in hell of a promotion, and some white chick nah-nah-nah in your face all day.

Quincey nodded. ‘Time you pay for gas, fixed your car, you plain outta cash.’

Karim, across the table, was on a roll, his eyes flashing. ‘And they hours. Give you 26 hours and call it full-time, but the motherfucking supervisor call you, you gotta be ready to come in.’

Large-scale commuting to the suburbs could potentially undermine the divide between the impoverished city and the wealthier whiter suburbs, but the lack of real opportunities in the labor market forecloses such possibilities. Instead, like the alienation of the young men studied by Edin and Nelson (2001), the mistrust of young men like Karim and Quincey was continually reinforced by the poor labor conditions within the retail sector.

Not all the young men were so angry about their experiences at work out in ‘the county’. Buddy, a soft-spoken 26-year-old, was more ambivalent about the four months he had spent working in a ‘big box’ drugstore:

You know, I didn’t mind working out there. I met some nice people. It can be nice to get out of the city, you know ... It was all right, but it was just too hard with the kids. Me and Terri both working like crazy, traveling 25, 30 miles each way and they didn’t seem to make the shifts work for us neither place, you know. So Terri’s mama, in the end she couldn’t take it and she said enough is enough. She had it watching the kids for us. She got plenty problems ... of her own. So it was me had to quit, ’cause Terri’s work, that paid more.

Buddy paused, then spoke even more quietly:

So I’m stuck at home, time on my hands, we flat broke. Next thing you know, I’m slinging dope. Enough to pay the bills, that’s my story. Three, four weeks later, whaddayaknow? Buddy’s back on the pipe, all messed up. Busted me up, quitting that job. ’Cause you know, you can’t see how things are gonna get better ... I mean, what’s out there?

Buddy was close to choking up. Shortly after the period he was describing, he and Terri had been raided by the police. Terri was caught flushing Buddy’s stash down the toilet, and both were convicted of ‘possession with intent to distribute’ crack cocaine. When I met him, they were both out of jail, but their three children were still in foster care.

Less resentful and alienated than some of his peers, Buddy felt that he could have ‘fit in’ to his job at the drugstore, but the poor pay and inflexible attitude of management made the situation impossible.

Many of the men complained that the available jobs were not only badly paid, but highly demeaning. They particularly disliked having to demonstrate subservience to white supervisors they considered disrespectful.

Mike, a 32-year-old who had only recently finished a two-year sentence for drug dealing, spoke passionately about the indignities of his experience working at the ‘Galleria’, the region’s showcase upscale shopping mall:
They always watching you, going through your locker, bullshit like that. No respect... I guess you wouldn't understand, but the whole place made me sick to my stomach. All day you gotta be all nice to a bunch of white people that don't respect you one bit, hell, they probably hate you. Then you go on break, and can't even walk around the damn mall without some mofo trailin' behind.

The security guards at the Galleria were well-known for following African-American shoppers, reminding them of the persistence of the color line within not only employment but consumption. Mike's commentary suggests that if he had been made welcome as a consumer, even with his limited means, this might have mitigated his dislike of the work experience. Instead, his experiences cemented his alienation from the new service economy of St. Louis County and reinforced his impulse to stay in the city and deal drugs.

**The ‘Right Contact’**

The men themselves were well aware that they were trapped in ‘BS’ jobs because of their lack of functional SC, for they consistently brought up the importance of ‘connections’. The longer that they had spent in the labor market, seeing ‘how things shake down’, the more likely they were to feel that they were excluded from the better jobs out there by lack of social connections, by that missing ‘right contact’.

Practically every man I interviewed spontaneously introduced the subject of how social ties between whites excluded him from good jobs and generally perpetuated racial inequality. They expressed resentment about the importance of ‘who you know’ in the labor market, arguing that white people were able to reproduce relative prosperity through family connections. The most common context in which they talked about the unfairness of such ‘connections’ was during discussions of education. Several contrasted the extreme importance of the ‘right contact’ with the ‘uselessness’ of the training certificates that they were encouraged to pursue by drug counselors, probation and parole officers.

The 34-year-old Omar responded to a query about his GED with vehemence:

College is bullshit. It who you know. I know a lot of uneducated motherfuckers that got good jobs 'cause they family been there 18, 19 years. Pull them on, you know. Like, this one time, I was up there putting an application at Anheuser-Busch, and this girl she had a diploma, the college degree and all, computers and all that type of crap. Another, the white guy, his daddy been working there 20 years. They gave him a job, brought him in the office right there in front of us. Didn't give that lady the job and she was more experienced. He don't know the damn thing, you know, so that's kinda fucked up, you gotta know somebody. They don't really give a damn on education, all you need to know's how to catch on a job, and read, and do the job. It's kinda sad.

Omar's belief that educational certification was useless in the face of exclusionary cronyism was echoed in the accounts of several of his peers. The 14 who had graduated from high school had seen little payoff. In fact they saw a direct inverse relationship between their own lack of personal connections and the more effective SC of local whites.

Putnam would have it that high levels of SC benefit the whole community. Yet in the highly divided St. Louis area, the effects of high SC resemble more closely the zero sum dynamic described by Waldinger (1995), Edwards and Foley (1997), or Fine (2001). As Omar watches the white candidate working his networks he sees his own chances evaporate, along with those of the better qualified female applicant.
A SC analysis of ghetto dwellers must take account of how others exclude them from useful job-related connections. Given severe residential and social segregation, their own deficit of beneficial ‘ties’ may be less a product of the characteristics of their own community than a problem produced outside of it in the white municipalities of St. Louis County. If so, it is well worth moving outside the ‘moral’ of African-American St. Louis and spending a moment unpacking what the radiant past of white civic association described in Putnam’s (2000) *Bowling Alone* really represented in the St. Louis context.

**The Shadow of the Past**

St. Louisans often express pride in the ‘friendly’, ‘pro-family’ character of the area, but this vaunted cohesion is rarely visible across race lines. Indeed much of the region’s civic association over the last 150 years has been galvanized by the desire to protect white space from invasion by foreigners and people of color.

19th century St. Louis, a destination for both European immigrants and African-Americans, was a dense and unhealthy ‘mongrel’ city. Anxious to avoid both the raucous river life and the repeated fever epidemics brought in by its teeming traffic, wealthy St. Louisans were early to develop geographically and ethnically exclusive forms of community. Indeed, St. Louis can with some justification be said to have pioneered the ‘gated community’ which became so popular over a century later (Troen and Holt 1977: 124–6).

It was outside the city, though, that the ideal of the tension-free, homogeneous white ‘community’ achieved greatest fruition. Here again, St. Louis was at the forefront of national segregationist trends, in 1876 becoming one of the first US cities to become ‘metropolitanized’. The city and county separated into two completely separate bodies, freezing the boundaries of the city at 61 square miles. Once autonomous, the municipalities of the county repeatedly prevented any further annexation of territory, inflamed by local newspapers defending the virtues of small town life against invasion by the wicked city (Troen and Holt 1977: 168–74).

The migration of large numbers of African-Americans to the city in the early 20th century only made the suburban whites of St. Louis County more determined to preserve segregation. By the end of the 1940s, white neighborhood associations had mobilized so successfully around this issue that housing covenants restricting property ownership to whites were practically universal in the new municipalities mushrooming to the south and west. After the civil rights movement succeeded in outlawing this mechanism, more informal social networking took over the same function. Quincey related how his parents had been prevented from moving to a lower-middle class southwestern suburb in the 1960s:

See they found this lady was willing to sell to them. They were surprised, to be honest. My mama she wasn’t so sure about the whole idea, but my daddy, he was gonna have one of those nice houses, move us all out there. Made his money, now he was going to take his choice. But this lady, she got scared. Too many visits from the neighbors telling her they’d have her for this. So she calls up and says she don’t feel safe. See, she wanted to stay in the area. So that was it. Like we should stay out of sight in the city, that’s how they think.

The efficient social networks of the county had kicked in to preserve racial homogeneity and high property values at the expense of Quincey’s family.

During the 1970s and 1980s, black pioneers managed to desegregate some of the municipalities to the north and north-west of the city line, joining the exodus from the increasingly troubled city. In every decade between 1950 and 1980, the white population plummeted by over 100,000, leaving
Table 1. Population of St. Louis City 1940–2000

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the city deprived of both skilled labor and a sustainable tax base (see Table 1). This large-scale out-migration certainly shook the whites-only social order of the post-war suburbs, but most of the migrants remained confined to what quickly became majority African-American municipalities between Wellston and Jennings (2000) – see Figure 1.16

Despite the out-migration, the vast social divide between the increasingly dilapidated and crime-ridden city and the white ‘West County’ extending south and west between Clayton and Maplewood lost little of its intensity (see Figure 1). As the 1970s progressed, the steady erosion of the economic base became a landslide. The vital organs of the old city shut down one by one: the American Car Company, Scullin Steel, National Steel, Carter Carburetor, General Motors, and scores of breweries. By the 1980s, the majority of legal business had either disappeared or moved outside the city limits, so city residents looking for work had little choice but to travel to the suburbs. The nearest black suburbs, especially Wellston and Pine Lawn, suffered as badly as the city. The Wellston house that Quincey’s parents eventually bought held its value for less than 10 years, before the effects of deindustrialization turned the town into an extension of the North Side ghetto.

As in scores of other American cities, the employment vacuum caused by deindustrialization drove up crime rates and created fertile soil for the drug industry. By the time that the labor market tightened up again in the 1990s, drug dealing was firmly established as an easy way for young black men all over the city to make fast money, and new job openings for African-Americans in the county’s service sector were seen in this context.

The Lure of the Game

‘I ain’t addicted to drugs, I’m addicted to money’ was a line I often heard from the younger men, who most typically kept one foot in the legal and one foot in the illicit economy.17 ‘Slanging’ crack or heroin was just too easy and too lucrative for them to abandon it for the low-wage jobs available to them, they agreed.

The dealers claimed that working for the drug industry was necessary, that jobs out there just did not pay enough to ‘get by’. It’s hard to test the truth of what ultimately comes down to subjective needs, but it is clear that the contrast between dead-end low-wage work and the kind of easy money that could be made within the drug industry was all too clear.

In the county, they were painfully aware of their lack of both social and cultural capital. In the city’s drug market, the opposite was true. As others have pointed out, the drug industry represents not merely an absence of mainstream opportunity, but a powerful draw in itself; an arena where young men and women can prove themselves and see the potential for success (Bourgois 1995; Finnegan 1998; Jacobs 1999; Sullivan 1991). Such dreams seem viable because of social networks – the men in the study already knew many people working in the drug industry. While their friends working in the ‘straight’ economy usually held only low status or temporary positions, almost every young person knew at least one dealer making what seemed to be massive amounts of money.

Jamal, 41 when I interviewed him, described how a low-wage worker could get involved in working for such figures. He appeared phlegmatic about his 12 years of low-paid temporary jobs,
Figure 1. Segregation in St Louis County and City

Source: Missouri Data Center (2000)
although cold warehouse conditions had continuously exacerbated the hand injury he had received in the marines. Eventually, though, Jamal’s informal social networks yielded something much more profitable.

My sister was going with this dope dealer and he had a lot of cars. She introduced him to me and told him I was a mechanic. I started fixing his cars ... he started buying these cabs, you know, made a little business going, owned about four cabs, and I was his mechanic, keeping his cabs up, while they out here on the street. And at the same time on the side, I’m making this run dropping off packages, picking up the money and taking it back to him ... His boys, they used to go back and forth to California every week, you know, bring back about four or five keys [kilos]. They having about $50,000 a week ... My lifestyle took a whole new turn. I could take a lady out, go to a show. Bought myself some better wheels, threads. The works.

Jamal was paid twice as much by the cocaine dealer than he was paid by the temp agency. He was also given crack, to sell or use himself. Prior to this job, said Jamal, he only used crack socially on weekends. Now he had easy access, he started using more himself, as well as using it to bargain for sex. His habit and consequently his need for money steadily increased, propelling him deeper into illegal activities. Three years after he started with the cocaine dealer, he landed six months of time in the federal penitentiary for stealing checks from the mail. Now an addict with a criminal record, Jamal was in a considerably worse position than before he started working for the dealer.

The lure of the drug industry affected everybody, including the minority who managed to land decent jobs in the legal economy. Scott, for example, had dealt drugs while working for good money as a company spy for McDonald’s. His older brother, who was the success story of the block with a ‘suit-and-tie’ airline job, went considerably further, using his work to bring in suitcase-loads of drugs from the West Coast.

Does the extensive networking characteristic of the highly integrated St. Louis drug industry constitute a form of SC? Unlike connections within the legitimate economy, those within the drug industry clearly yielded considerable economic payoff, at least for a while. But again we see a kind of SC which hardly fits with Putnam’s rosy notion of networks enhancing equality. Not only does high SC often involve the exclusion of those outside of a social network (as in the case of the ‘friendly’ well organized West County suburbs) but even those within the ‘high SC’ circle may not really benefit for various reasons. Portes and Landolt (2000) draw on Latin American case studies to argue that the circulation of favors may well have negative effects on economic development, to the extent that communities with high levels of mutual obligation tend to place heavy burdens of responsibility on those who are doing better economically (Portes 1998). The case of the drug dealers of St. Louis is somewhat different. Obviously those who suffer most directly from the robust drug industry are addicts and their immediate families, but the prosperity of the dealers themselves is frequently ephemeral. Despite the aspirations of the street corner drug sellers, there is very little room at the top, and the punitive sanctions of the War on Drugs make the costs far outweigh the benefit for most who participate (Irwin and Austin 1994; Tonry 1995). A few may garner considerable wealth, but in general dealing leads young men into the jaws of the criminal justice system, after which their legal work opportunities get substantially slimmer.

**Under Siege**

The pull exerted by friends in the drug industry went far beyond the purely economic. Despite the refrain of ‘I’m addicted to money’, the interviews confirmed over and over that the sociability of the drug industry was a compelling end in itself. Street corner drug dealers were willing to put in long hours in search of their cash, in part because they were entranced with the social side of the
process, with the fun of ‘whipping it up’ (preparing crack cocaine), going to clubs and taverns, and drinking and smoking weed on the street corner while waiting for customers.

The hectic enjoyment of ‘the game’ was not only entertaining, it was just about the only lively social space in a town where social life was very restricted. Many African-American St. Louisans are devout evangelical Christians, and the ‘square life’ tends to be limited to home and church. Many of the men talked about the difficulty of entertainment and socializing for people trying to stay clean and hold down a regular job. Elijah expressed some amazement about the limitations of life outside the drug industry:

It’s not like I want to go crazy [party], you know, but sitting on my owns in the house, it ain’t exactly fun. Work, watch TV, work, watch TV. It’s depressing as hell. You think, is this my life? Whoa, that ain’t what I thought back in high school.

Scott, who had also been making strenuous efforts to keep away from his ‘old buddies’, confessed to the same feelings, and said that he inevitably found himself mourning his ‘fast life’ as a dealer:

When I’m not using it makes me think better on what I need to do in life for myself, but by the same token I miss that limelight, the fast life, that’s what always pulls me back. You know, this boring lifestyle ... When the night falls I be wanting going to a club or something ... Seems like every tavern that I go, the dealer’s in there, or somebody I done sold some drugs to.

Clubs and taverns, the only potential meeting place outside of the churches, seemed off-limits in general to people trying to pursue the ‘square life’. ‘Yeah, you don’t wanna be going down the taverns now. You gotta see – you don’t get your family man, your schoolteacher, your business-owner type down no tavern,’ said Elijah.

Not only were all public spaces apart from church ‘out of bounds’ to those trying to avoid drugs or crime, but they were constantly approached by people they knew, trying to pull them back into the ‘fast life’. Jerome was desperately trying to stay off drugs while living in a dilapidated building with active crack houses on either side. Scott’s cousin was living above him and dealing at all times of the day and night. Like the less impoverished African-Americans described by Mary Pattillo-McCoy in *Black Picket Fences*, those pursuing the straight life were prevented by their strong social ties into the criminal economy from appealing to the police for help.

Buddy described living under siege from all the relatives and friends who wanted him back ‘out there’ on the streets.

You sitting in your house, trying to play with your kids, read the bedtime story, what they need, you know, and every twenty minutes you got some fool hammering on your door. And you want to go to the store, you make damn sure it’s early in the morning, that be the only time you got some chance of getting to the store and back in peace. It’s like, ‘Whassup cuz,’ trying to hook you in. And I understand, don’t get me wrong. These my friends, my cousins, my little brother.

Buddy sighed.

They want Buddy back out there ... But it ain’t cool, you know. Terri and me and the kids, we need a life, a stable situation, not this bullshit. But it seems like, in the city, it’s hard to hook up with other folks that feel the same way. Most of them left the neighborhood, the rest’s working too damn hard, I guess. We all stuck in our houses, keeping the shorties [kids] inside.
Buddy and Terri had come to see their wealth of social ties as their downfall, and social isolation as the only route to stability.

What's Social Capital Got to Do with It?

Let us return to the question of what SC has got to do with ghetto poverty. Does this study suggest that a lack of productive social networks contributes to the high level of unemployment among African-American men in St. Louis?

The impoverished informants in this study had very few of the kind of ‘bridging’ connections which might have helped them move beyond the lowest tiers of the labor market. They did on the other hand have access to considerable local ‘bonding’ capital, in terms of a strong network of friends and kin who helped each other with basic survival needs – shelter, food, cash, illicit work opportunities, and information about low-wage, insecure jobs. Yet the drug industry which had employed many of them at one time or another was a key element in the destruction of broader neighborhood health, trust and security. One might say that the SC represented by their personal networks was mobilized to erode the broader SC of the neighborhood, demonstrating the analytical soup which this sprawling concept can create for researchers trying to pursue a holistic, or ecological analysis (Osterling 2007).

Yet a focus on the differentiation between ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ seems specious in the context of the vast inequality between St. Louis City and the surrounding suburbs. If it were not for the intense segregation according to race and class across the city-county divide, and if it were not for the persistent racial job ceiling within the local labor market, the broad web of acquaintance within which most of these men live would indeed constitute ‘bridging’ capital. If most of the city’s public schools were not segregated and failing (Caldas and Bankston 2007), some of the men’s former teachers might indeed be able to help them find work, instead of bludgeoning them with pistols. It seems neither accurate nor useful to define ties as ‘bonding’ merely because they occur between people trapped into economic and social homogeneity, and then to treat such ‘bonding’ as a cause of poverty. If we are going to simplify a complex situation into a bold causal model, then surely the prevalence of ‘bonding’ over ‘bridging’ among African-American St. Louisians is better understood as not cause but result of economic marginalization and intense segregation by both race and class.

The strongest claims we can make for the Putnamian version of SC here is to reiterate the arguments of researchers such as Baum (1999) and Sampson (2001) that without other forms of advantage SC may turn positively harmful. Yet this interpretation still places too much weight on how the men’s own networks affect their poverty, bracketing off the context of exploitation, criminalization, and active exclusion where much of the causal weight has to lie.

Emphasis on the men’s negative SC also leads us to over-emphasize the effect of disconnection from the formal economy, while under-emphasizing the independent negative effects of the jobs themselves. Putnam’s focus on the importance of building cohesion and consensus (1996) reiterates the conceptual vacuity of that vaguely benevolent construct known in the contemporary USA as ‘the mainstream’. Like ubiquitous mentoring programs for poor youth, policy analysts keen to build SC seem most concerned with making sure that the poor agree to go to work, rather than addressing the inequities of the economy.

To reiterate, most of the men had done plenty of time in the legal economy. The more pressing problem was the unsatisfactory nature of the jobs, and their sense of the unlikeliness of advancement. Their marginality consisted not only in not ‘knowing the right people’, but also in not being considered the ‘right people’ for a better class of job, arguably an even more daunting obstacle.
The substantial difference between social connections and actually getting ahead surfaced in a story told by Joe, now in his mid-30s. In his teens and early 20s Joe had worked with his uncle as a gardener for a wealthy contractor and his wife in suburban Clayton. His uncle had known the couple since the 1960s, and Joe found them congenial employers. They regularly called him in out of the cold for a cup of coffee, and the woman took a helpful interest in his band, printing him various flyers and a batch of CD covers. What Joe appreciated less was the contractor’s steady evasion of his attempts to talk about an entry-level position in the business. Over a three-year period Joe hinted about looking for regular work several times, and asked openly about possibilities in the company at least three times. ‘I thought they were cool, for a while, but it’s hard not to take it as a racial thing,’ he mused. ‘I mean, look at me, I was young, strong, clean, good with my hands, high-school diploma. I worked hard for those people.’

Joe’s relationship with the Clayton builder ultimately reiterated his marginality. This was not a problem of an absent relationship, a la Putnam, but of the weakness of existing social ties across class and race divisions. Despite the shift to somewhat more egalitarian social forms, the persistent limitation of poor African-Americans to low-waged and often informal economic roles remains over-determined by both past and present, both culture and economy.

If we return to Bourdieu’s formulation, we can get a much clearer view of both the limits and the power of SC in this case. Endlessly converted back and forth with other kinds of ‘capital’ – economic, cultural, symbolic – Bourdieu’s construct does far more to explain the durability and flexibility of white hegemony in St. Louis. Indeed in his schema, the dense social networks across black St. Louis would not count as SC at all, given that most of the residents have insufficient cultural or economic capital to convert friendship into licit or ‘long’ money. For Bourdieu, economic capital remains ‘at the root of all the other types of capital’ (Bourdieu 1992: 106). SC may multiply individual economic and cultural capital, but if there is barely any economic and cultural capital to start off with, zero multiplied still leaves us at zero. Thus the men’s contacts in the legal economy yielded practically no multiplication effect – they remained still trapped in precarious part-time positions in an economy which was geographically remote, oriented towards white and middle class cultural styles, and lubricated by a completely different set of social networks which remained foreign and inaccessible.

Back in the drug economy, their own local industry, the men’s social networks were equally unlikely to yield any solid upward mobility. As we saw with Buddy, Scott, and Jamal, the illicit and dangerous nature of the trade meant that the process of ‘hooking up’ with relatives and friends was more likely to foster danger or self-destruction. Born of shared marginalization, such relationships only brought them benefits within the bounds of that marginality, and often in fact accentuated it.

Over the last half century, a Bourdieuan conversion process has reproduced the power of St. Louis’s white elites despite and even by means of radical changes in the geographical distribution of black and white, rich and poor, industry and commerce. As the racial order within the city has been challenged both by demands for parity and by rising crime from its disenfranchised African-American population, St. Louis’s white middle and upper classes have responded like their counterparts in Detroit, Newark, and other blighted US cities and collectively abandoned the city they had shared, gradually exporting their private, business, and civic lives to a new ‘St. Louis’ outside the city limits. Despite settling into a typically dispersed and privatized suburban way of life they have continued to mobilize SC for their collective interests, converting their social networks into economic capital (especially through tight municipal controls over zoning and property values) and cultural capital (primarily through the educational system). Formal mechanisms of racial separation and supremacy may have disappeared since the years of segregation, yet these new forms of
white sociality have successfully re-inscribed the economic, social, and cultural marginalization of the North Side, East St. Louis, the near North suburbs, and the region’s other ghetto areas. For the residents of these ‘neighborhoods of relegation’ (Wacquant 2008), that powerful alchemy which turns social connection into lasting wealth remains as rare as North Side scholarships to Harvard.

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Notes
1. The proportion of people of each race in the city is in fact open to debate, as the last two Census counts have come up with surprisingly low numbers of young African-American men. It is highly improbable that these ‘missing’ figures can be fully accounted for by the combination of homicide and the incarceration of black men outside the city limits. More likely is that the imprisonment rate is compounded by a broader disengagement from formalized domestic arrangements, leaving thousands of couch-surfing young men outside the official picture.
2. According to the 2000 census, St. Louis ranked 62nd out of the 64 largest American cities according to median income.
3. The US Census Bureau’s 2007 American Community Survey counted 8.9 million African-Americans living in high-poverty urban census tracts, about 25.5 percent of all African-Americans living under the poverty line. (Neighborhoods are classified as ‘high-poverty’ if the share of residents with incomes below the poverty level exceeds 30% and as ‘low-poverty’ if less than 10% of residents are poor.)
4. An example of the strategic use of social capital to bring back the ‘social’ is well known policy sociologist Robert Sampson’s argument that social capital helps us move away from individualistic (i.e. moralistic or rational-actor) interpretations of social problems (Sampson 2001). Clearly Sampson is addressing the broader public and policy sphere, as sociology itself is hardly known for over-individualistic models of human action.
5. Most of the informants had been sent to ‘rehab’ by ‘drug court’, a jail diversion program now common in the USA for those committing non-violent drug-related crimes. Others had been required to attend by parole or probation officers concerned about their continued addiction. Not all, however, were self-identified addicts, at least outside the courtroom. Like many funneled into the institution by the jail diversion program, four of these men were young street-corner dealers who had so far stayed away from their own product. (One often repeated claim was that they were addicted to money, not drugs.) But the rest of the men were at this point in their lives consumers more than distributors of drugs. Heavy drug or alcohol users, some alternated between abstinence and binging, others used crack on weekends or paydays, while others (mostly former dealers) maintained heroin habits demanding $300 a day.
6. Not only Putnam, but Bourdieu and even Coleman would lead one to expect that such men suffer from a lack of functional social ties, variously defined (Bourdieu 1980; Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000).
7. Although I did not undertake this research in order to investigate questions of social capital, a later reading of the interviews revealed a wealth of data concerning the relationship between social networks and labor market experience. The interview guide I used covered how the informants got jobs, where they worked and for how long, and what kinds of relationships they had with people working in both the legitimate and illegitimate economies.
8. Both these weaknesses are linked to the peculiar dematerialization of space and place in SC analysis, which leaves us deprived of the anchor of historical understanding. The stark binaries of the St. Louis case demand that space should re-enter the analytical framework, so that both the symbolic and material underpinnings of social capital formation can be seen to be profoundly embedded in place, written on a physical landscape split into impoverished inner city and defensive suburb.
9 One intention here was to get a handle on the salience of ‘neighborhood effects’. There did seem to be some correspondence between long-term unemployment and certain neighborhoods, but often people had moved to those neighborhoods because unemployment left them with no money to stay elsewhere. In other words, the research seemed to confirm Small and Newman’s (2001) skepticism about the direction of the causal relationship between ‘neighborhood’ and poverty.

10 Comparative research on labor markets indicates that the US economy tends to produce large-scale underemployment more than unemployment, in contrast to the case in other early industrialized countries. The relative ease of hiring and firing within the US context, the lack of unionization and the low minimum wage, all have contributed to a situation of quick labor market turnover and part-time work on a massive scale, especially since the late 1970s (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Freeman 1994b).

11 Ideally questions of job access, mobility and spatial mismatch should also be explored with ethnographic research. It is quite possible that young men like Karim, Omar and Quincy both overestimated the ease with which they could gain basic employment and underplayed their experiences of spatial confinement and dependence on public transportation. Acknowledging geographical paralysis, for example, would have underlined their relative emasculation and infantilization vis-a-vis wealthier men. But they had all worked suburban jobs at some point, so geography alone probably did not present an overwhelming barrier to employment.

12 The point is not that education is of no use in creating upward mobility. But the kinds of training programs open to men like these were likely to be of limited value. Most of the informants seem to have left the St. Louis school system functionally illiterate. They were not unusual in this. The school district is notoriously mediocre, and test scores strikingly low. Despite an extraordinarily expensive desegregation plan which gives city students the option of bussing out to suburban schools across the metropolitan area, most African-American students continue to be educated in low-performing schools with barely any white children, partly because St. Louisan parents with enough money opt for Catholic parochial schools in very high numbers (Caldas and Bankston 2007).

13 To be fair, Putnam does recognize that ‘haves engage in much more civic activity than the have-nots’ and that therefore ‘strengthening the social and political power of voluntary associations may well widen class differences’ (Putnam 2000: 358). However this ‘dark side’ of social capital remains undeveloped, and does not disturb his central assumption that high levels of voluntary association increase general prosperity across ‘communities’, cities, or regions.

14 Perhaps even more than the loss of transport supremacy to its rival Chicago, the small boundaries of the city limited the potential of St. Louis as gateway to the West. In both 1900 and 1910, the US Census counted St. Louis as the fourth largest American city, but the small boundaries of the city contributed to the massive loss of taxpayers to the municipalities of the county throughout the 20th century.

15 City politicians made many unsuccessful attempts to negotiate further expansion, including an ambitious 1958 plan for a Greater St. Louis City-County District which would reincorporate the inner-ring suburbs into the city.

16 The earliest suburbs to desegregate, Pine Lawn and Wellston, were in turn plagued by white flight and increasing poverty. Yet, as in most American cities, the intense degree of racial segregation persisted even where housing costs and income levels were equal across race lines (Farley 1995).

17 Most of this group claimed not to touch hard drugs themselves. They were in rehab because they had been caught in possession, and were often scathing about their ‘raggedy-ass’, ‘broke-down’ customers.

18 This kind of argument has been pursued by Sampson (2001) and Browning (2000), for example.

References


