

# Social Capital: The Science of Obfuscation

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*VILLA VICTORIA*—a great title. As with other legendary ethnographies—*Street Corner Society*, *Urban Villagers*, *Tally's Corner*, *All Our Kin*, and *Sidewalk*, *Villa Victoria* projects images of *Gemeinschaft*, of that quintessential social bond that survives even in the city that notoriously eviscerates the social bond. Although the contents of these books often contradict expectations, the romantic impulse excited by the titles is not so easily rebuffed by cold facts. Readers eagerly ply these books in search of validation that the social bond survives all the antithetical forces aligned against it—the soullessness of modernity, the atomization of mass society, the greed and decadence of capitalism, the terror of bowling alone. We look to these books for a distinctively sociological rendition of the classic morality tale where the human spirit triumphs over the forces aligned against it. Small is up front in cautioning the reader that *Villa Victoria* is *not* a traditional community study. His study is better defined by its subtitle: "The Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio." Ah, "social capital"—one of the trilogy of neologisms, along with "human capital" and "cultural capital"—that has recently entered sociology's lexicon of obfuscation. Their rhetorical function is to set the stage for another morality tale—the one where even the disfranchised and downtrodden of Marxist imagination can escape their plight, if only they have the necessary quotient of human/cultural/social capital. Small's rendition has a new twist: in the case of *Villa Victoria*, we are introduced to a community that was built on the power of social capital, only to see it wane over time. It is a declensionist narrative of the rise and decline of social capital. Let me make my point about the ideology that inheres within the social capital construct with an anecdote. In 1977 I was doing field research in Nicodemus, Kansas, which was the last surviving colony from the exoduster movement of the 1870s. The "exodusters" were blacks fleeing oppression in the South who found refuge in Kansas, which had been passed over on the westward march because of its lack of trees and water. After living in dugouts and surviving perilous winters, the exodusters succeeded in building a thriving rural community that flourished until it was decimated by the dustbowl and the Depression. Today it continues mostly as a retirement community. I interviewed Mrs. Hattie Burney, a school teacher, who taught generations of Nicodemus's children. She told me that the banker in neighboring Hays was planning an exhibit commemorating the anniversary of his bank, and wanted to include photographs of all of the octogenarians in the area. Mrs. Burney demurred, and as she told the story, she threw back her shoulders and said with a defiant laugh: "I told him, 'Your bank and my life is quite another thing.'" Mrs. Burney knew intuitively that there was something wrong with pairing *his bank* and *her life*. I have the same problem. For Marx "capital" entailed a vast system of domination and exploitation that engendered deep and enduring divisions in class, status, and power. Marx certainly allowed for the fact that capitalism permeates all spheres of life—including the human, the cultural, and the social—but he never lost sight of the underlying and abiding link between capitalist structures and these ancillary behaviors. In the hands of the exponents of human/cultural/social capital, however, these constructs are fatally reductionist — reduced to an attribute of discrete individuals, despite ecological and social correlates. I know their disclaimers: that they are probing the *interstices* between structure and agency. That they wish to account for the *process* by which poverty is reproduced from one generation to the next. That structural theories are overdetermined, and that they wish to probe the "complexity" and "variability" of how the poor cope with poverty. That they are restoring "culture" and "agency" to the sociological equation. The problem is that, contrary to Marx, they remove these factors from the larger structural and institutional matrix in which they are embedded, and treat them as independent factors and determinants in their own right. Thus, Small writes in his preface: "This book is focused exclusively on the relationship between concentrated poverty and social capital." Think about it: concentrated poverty is taken as a given. Its backward linkages to political economy

are acknowledged in principle, but the entire thrust of Small's study and the methods deployed, pertain to the frivolous question of who among the poor has social capital and who doesn't. Nor does Small attempt to determine whether having social capital has the positive consequences that are assumed. Rather, social capital is treated as the sociological equivalent of Viagra, spiraling people up the ladder of success. Conversely, *not* having social capital is seen as personal and collective deficit. Thus, the focus of analysis, and implicitly the onus of blame, is placed on the poor themselves. SMALL ANTICIPATES THIS CRITICISM and tries to head it off. Not very convincingly, I fear. He is so riveted on the narrow question of exploring differences among his subjects in social capital that one learns almost nothing about the powerful social forces that relegate them to desperate lives on the economic margins in the first place. Except for a three-page section on political economy, little is said about the transformations within Boston's postindustrial economy that have widened the income gap between the haves and the have-nots and vastly increased the cost of housing, at the same time that a relentless neoliberal agenda has dismantled programs for the poor. Notwithstanding caveats to the contrary, Villa Victoria is treated in a virtual vacuum, and all the explanatory focus is on determining the prevalence and trend of social capital. Small may counter that his is not a study of poverty or the plight of the working class in Boston's postindustrial economy, but a far more limited study of social capital. Fair enough: let us take Small's study on its own terms. At the outset of his book, Small notes that many studies have confirmed William Julius Wilson's contention that concentrated poverty is a detriment, and that poor people who have moved to middle-class neighborhoods, have done better as a result. Actually, the evidence supporting this theory is mixed at best, as Edward Goetz shows in *Clearing the Way: Deconcentrating the Poor in Urban America*. Thus, Small's study may be predicated on a false premise, in that he seeks to explain how and why concentrated poverty has negative outcomes that are themselves in doubt. According to Small, this is the "black box of neighborhood effects," and his whole purpose is "to rely on Villa Victoria to open the black box." So, let's see what lies within his black box. Villa Victoria had a glorious genesis. Boston's South End was regarded as a hopeless slum at a time when the prevailing principle in planning held that the best way to clean up the slum is to tear it down. When Herbert Gans studied the West End in the 1950s, there was barely any community resistance to the imperial policies of the Boston Redevelopment Agency. But Villa Victoria's genesis was in the late 1960s, and Puerto Ricans living in the area mounted a grassroots campaign, spearheaded by the Emergency Tenants' Council, whose motto was: "No nos mudaremos de la Parcela 19!" ("We shall not be moved from Parcel 19!") Dozens of community groups and ad hoc committees sprung up in opposition to the BRA, and in the end they extracted a concession for the construction of affordable housing for displaced residents, later bestowed with the name Villa Victoria (Victory City) by the residents. To my mind, this form of political mobilization, built as it was on the intersecting solidarities of ethnicity and class, is the ultimate form of "social capital." If Small agrees, there is no sign of it. Rather he treats the events leading up to the development of Villa Victoria merely as historical background for his chapter on "The Rise and Fall of Local Participation." Small characterizes the first years after the completion of Villa Victoria in 1971 as "the golden years" when participation in voluntary groups flourished. This included grassroots activism, like Puerto Rican Tenants in Action, a TV station and several newsletters, ESL courses, math and literacy workshops, a solar greenhouse, cultural groups' activities around music, dance, and mural painting, as well as cooking and gardening. However, by the time that Small began fieldwork in the late 1990s, "most of the associations and activities of the 1970s and 1980s had vanished. There were no cooking groups; no plays for the elderly; no volunteer-run English or math courses; no print making; no newsletters." The TV station had ceased operation, and there was little appetite for community participation. "How did it come to this?" is the burning question. What did Small turn up to explain the loss of social capital from the golden years when local groups flourished? I count four empirical nuggets in his black box:

1. Since its inception in 1971, Villa Victoria went from being a place of pride as "an urban oasis devoid of squalor" to "a shameful ghetto" in the perception of its residents. Partly this reflected

the physical deterioration of the housing, exacerbated by shrinking budgets and neglect. But it is also a case of relative deprivation: the pioneers harbored memories of much worse poverty and privation in Puerto Rico. In contrast, the next generation compared themselves to the affluent gentrifiers in the neighborhood who had the foresight and the capital to gobble up properties at depressed prices.

2. As part of the development and ultimate gentrification of the South End, the poor and marginal residents of Villa Victoria were thrown into proximity with gentrifiers who included liberal intellectuals, artists, and professionals. But contrary to social capital theory, this was inconsequential. An invisible but impenetrable wall separated the two groups. The gentrifiers did not even deign to attend the Puerto Rican festival that attracted 15,000 revelers. Commercial establishments—stores, restaurants, hair salons, et cetera—are segmented by ethnicity and class. According to Small, even the rats and mice observe the class boundary and avoid the parks that the gentrifiers cultivate, leaving them to more upscale fauna—birds and squirrels.
3. Villa Victoria was rich in resources and social bonding. However, Small contends that the tight ethnic enclave actually decreased "bridging" between social classes. He argues that high resource neighborhoods paradoxically increase social isolation with the world outside. It is hard to see how they would be better off without these ethnic and class solidarities, which produced Villa Victoria in the first place, but Small embraces Putnam's position that they have the wrong kind of social capital, in that "bonds" come at the expense of "bridges."
4. Aside from "neighborhood effects," individuals varied in the extent of their ties across lines of ethnicity, often depending on circumstances of their workplace. Generally speaking, only those residents of Villa Victoria who worked in mainstream work settings were able to develop friendships and networks outside the ethnic community.

AS IS READILY APPARENT, there are no great surprises in Small's black box. His overall conclusion states the obvious: "poor neighborhoods are not always isolated or uninvolved. And not all poor people in a given poor neighborhood are isolated or uninvolved." This conclusion puts Small in polite disagreement with the exponents of concentrated poverty and social capital. Not only does he find that the poor residents of Villa Victoria have internal solidarities, but he also finds that proximity to middle-class neighbors does not plug them into networks leading to jobs and opportunity. If he followed the logic of his argument to its logical conclusion, he would have challenged William Julius Wilson and other exponents of concentrated poverty. After all, this theory has been deployed to provide justification for the forcible eviction of the poor from Cabrini Green and the Taylor Homes in Chicago, and for contending that the tsunami in New Orleans had a silver lining, in that it broke up concentrated poverty and dispersed the poor to other communities where, building one doubtful premise on another, they will acquire the social capital they lacked in their former neighborhoods. Thus, we can take comfort in the fact that Small presumably would be opposed to blowing up Villa Victoria and dispersing its residents with Section 8s to other neighborhoods — all in the name of deconcentrating poverty and moving the poor to opportunity. No doubt, this is precisely what their upscale neighbors would favor, since they regard Villa Victoria as an eyesore, and the drugs and crime in neighboring O'Day Park as a menace. In his epilogue, Small returns to Villa Victoria six months later, and finds some salubrious changes: the daycare center had moved to a more accessible location, its former locale converted into a youth center with a large TV set, lounge chairs, and some video games. The technology center was thriving. The health care center had moved to a better location. And thanks to an outside grant, the residents of every house had been provided with a free computer and internet access, provided they took an introductory computer course at Villa Tech. On the other hand, several young men had been stabbed or shot in O'Day Park. Small shrugs this off and concludes "on a note of cautious optimism about the future of community participation and development of beneficial social ties in Villa Victoria." It goes without saying that garden clubs, youth centers, and ESL classes have their place, but they are at best a palliative and

no substitute for jobs and opportunities. The violence that Small reports on the penultimate page of his book is perhaps only the tip of an iceberg, given that 44 percent of the Latinos in Villa Victoria were living below the poverty line in 1990. When Jay MacLeod, author of *Ain't No Making It*, returned to the site of his study in Cambridge after five years, he found that practically all of his youthful subjects were still floundering at or near the bottom of the ladder, and this was as true for the Brothers (blacks) who had cultural capital as it was for the Hallway Hangers (whites) who lacked cultural capital. MacLeod put his finger on the crucial mediating factor between structure and agency that eludes Small in his single-minded search for social capital: the extreme wage polarization that relegates working-class youth to low-paying, dead-end jobs. As Barry Bluestone and Mary Huff Stevenson show in *The Boston Renaissance*, this is the dark side to Boston's booming economy. It was not for lack of social capital that Villa Victoria dissolved from hope to despair, from an oasis of hope to a shameless ghetto. What the troublesome youth who deal drugs in O'Day Park need is not a computer or a youth center equipped with video games, but jobs—jobs that pay a living wage, and that would allow them to escape poverty, support a family, and join a bowling league. In the final analysis, Villa Victoria was perhaps a hollow victory. Although it prevented the forcible eviction of Puerto Ricans from the South End, and it provided affordable housing for these working-class families, it did nothing to address the dire needs of their children for jobs and affordable housing, leaving them trapped in this anomalous pocket of poverty in one of Boston's most expensive neighborhoods. What the struggling residents of Villa Victoria need is not an infusion of social capital, but the resurrection of a politics and a policy agenda that gave them Villa Victoria in the first place. For their part, armchair scholars can begin by relegating the twin concepts of "concentrated poverty" and "social capital" to the trash bin of obfuscating, victim-blaming terminology that serves only to shift attention away from structures of class and racial oppression.