

The popularity of social capital

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The concept of 'social capital' has met with huge success among governmental agencies (including governments themselves at all levels – local, regional and national – and transnational entities such as the OECD and the World Bank), as well as among NGOs, community groups, policy-makers and -analysts, and academics. But the reasons for this popularity are not immediately obvious, especially given that the literature contains a fairly devastating critique, which has not been adequately addressed in what has been referred to as 'the rush to measurement'. This paper will be looking at the extent of the influence of the notion of social capital, mainly in the Australian context, together with some of the reasons for its popularity being given in the literature. Both its proponents and its critics acknowledge that popularity, and they even agree on some of the reasons for it. However, their approaches are widely at variance, and this paper is a preliminary look at some of the issues involved in the case both for and against social capital.

Denise Thompson has been a Research Officer at the SPRC since 2001. She has also been an independent scholar for many years, writing and publishing feminist theory. She has a PhD in Sociology from the University of NSW, for a thesis called 'Against the Dismantling of Feminism' which was later published by Sage under the title of 'Radical Feminism Today' (2001). Her interest in social policy arises out of work she has been doing at the SPRC.



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