REVISITING HISTORY: SOCIAL CAPITAL FORMATION IN AHI UNIONS

Burak Herguner
NCPAG,
University of the Philippines, Quezon City,
PHILIPPINES.
burakherguner@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The objective of this historical review paper is twofold: (a) To reduce the scarcity of literature about social capital formation in history. (b) To underscore the role of social capital in building efficient administrations. That's why; it analyzes Ahi Unions in the Seljuk and Ottoman periods between the 13th and the 20th century. The paper concludes they have strong parallels with some of today's social networks.

Keywords: Ahi Unions, Networks, Social Capital, Institutionalism

INTRODUCTION

In our day, democratic administrative systems are overwhelmingly admitted as the most effective structure for the service provision as they let a blend of checks and balances, meritocracy along with the political control of bureaucracy. Many scholars being aware of its importance such as Huntington (1991) argue that the future of democracy depends on the future of economic development. However, traditional production factors cannot elucidate the differences in wealth of nations. The quality of formal institutions, as well as non-visible and non-material dimension of institutions, is vital to economic wealth (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2003; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Institutionalisation generates shared suppositions, beliefs and values (UNDP, 1997b, p.14). And, as Putnam (1993) put it, "civic community is essential in developing successful institutions."

Within last decades, political sociology has experienced a noteworthy shift from behavioral studies of parties, political participation, political attitudes toward an increased interest in social institutions with a more intensive historical perspective (Swartz, 2006, p.92). In one of the interesting studies regarding the formation of social capital, Majee & Hoyt (2010) argue that cooperatives may be a good solution to improve the social and economic well-being of people living in resource limited communities as the development of cooperatively structured businesses can add to both the financial and social capital of low-income communities. Nevertheless, they further maintain that there are not enough studies on how they create a socio-economic context valuable to both members and the community. [*] In another relevant study, Potvin & McCallum (2010) maintain that intergenerational practice has flourished as a practical solution to build social capital across Europe, the UK and the US as a result of increasing exclusion of younger and older generations in communities characterized by decreasing levels of cohesion.

Social Capital may be relatively a new concept, but the formation of social capital is nothing new. For example, Sandén (2008) studies the social capital formation in a Swedish town–Linköping–between 1600 and 1620. Her study reveals that main objective of the town's

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[*] In their article, they explored worker-owned cooperatives in the US and they deemed trust crucial for social capital formation. Their study revealed that confidence was built through the teaching of values, democratic business ownership, which they regarded as a pillar for participation and networking, networking through open communication, and working together.

leadership was to build up a closely tied society around the common norms of honour and belonging. So, there existed what present-day social scientists and social economists call social capital, albeit said institutions were not democratic. Likewise, Ahi Unions, which will be analyzed in this paper, may be classified as one of the longest and most efficient Social capital formation project in history. Naturally, today's societies are, by far, more complex than societies of the past; however, if the context issue is successfully addressed, past applications may still offer some valuable lessons.

In this study, I argue that we can find some basic and successful form of social networks in history, and even though we cannot emulate the past administrative system for today's complex societies, they still deserve to be examined. Therefore, I will, first, discuss the concepts of the study. Then, I will analyze Ahi Unions, which were quite common and efficient in the Anatolia region from the 13th century until the beginning of the 20th century, and I will come to a conclusion.

Social Capital and Social Networks

Social capital is characteristics of social organization like networks and values, including tolerance, reciprocity, inclusion, participation and trust as a catalyst for coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (UNDP, 1997a, p.35). The simple rationale of social capital formation is investing in social relations to get the desired output.

In the past, many Social scientists tried to explain the general connection between culture and economy. The one of Durkheim was the most path-breaking as it led to a critique of under-socialization within classical economy theory decreasing human actions to simple profit maximization without any cultural impact. Thanks to him, the search for new forms of capital began. After being used by Lyda J. Hanifan, for the first time, in 1916, the term "social capital" reappeared in the works of Jane Jacobs and Glenn Loury in the 1960s and 70s. Nevertheless, it was conceptualized with Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam's seminal works (Diola, 2009). Among these scholars, Bourdieu argues that we operate with four forms of capital: economic, cultural, symbolic and social. He further claims that these forms of capital may be changed into economic capital (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2003). However, Social capital has become a buzzword like globalism or postmodernism in social sciences mainly after the study of Putnam (1993) on the developmental differences in Northern and Southern Italy.

Unlike Bourdieu, whose concept of social capital puts the emphasis on conflicts and social relations to increase the capacity of an actor in pursuing his or her interests, Putnam's concept of social capital consists of three main elements: moral obligations, social values (primarily trust and altruism) and social networks (especially voluntary associations). So, his work endorses the ideas of the sociology of integration. His concepts of social capital and trust are focused on problems regarding methods to strengthen the integration of the values of society, solidarity and togetherness (Siisiäinen, 2000). Nevertheless, the question of whether social capital is dependent, independent or intermediary variable is still unsettled, and it causes problems for operationalization. Therefore, academics focus on networks (the structural dimension) shared beliefs (the cognitive dimension) or norms (the relational dimension) according to their proper background and to the context–as social capital is vastly context specific–(Adam & Rončević, 2003, p.160; Adam et al., 2005, p.40).

Lin (1999, p.31) explains how social capital paves the way for intended results. He argues that social capital, first, makes the flow of information easier. Therefore, social ties in certain locations or hierarchical positions may offer an individual with choices otherwise not available. Second, social ties may affect the agents in a critical role for decisions (e.g., promotion) concerning the actor. Third, social bond resources may be considered by the

organization as certifications of the individual's social credentials, some of which reflect the individual's accessibility to resources through social networks and relations. And finally, social relations are expected to strengthen identity. Hence, for him, four elements–*information, influence, social credential, and reinforcement*–are reasons for social capital formation.

As a final point, the critique of social capital is twofold: First, the usage of the concept of social capital has undergone enormous expansion in the last years. Thus, this development paves the way for the use of the concept for political-ideological reasons. Second, the heuristic value of the concept is exposed to become synonymous with each and all things that are positive or desirable in social life. Therefore, it is shown as the panacea for all kind of problems—no matter if they are social or economic (Portes, 1998; Portes & Landolt, 2000; Coradini, 2010).

Social Networks are open structures having the capacity to broaden without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they share, the same communication codes, such as values and performance (Bautista, 2009). Networks can also be defined as a particular form of governance, defined as institutionalized modes of coordination through which collectively binding decisions are adopted and applied. They involve non-hierarchical modes of coordination constituted by mutual resource dependencies and/or informal norms of equality among the actors involved. The involvement of many relevant stakeholders in the policy process also increases the acceptance of the decisions taken and their likely effectiveness (Borzel & Laureote, 2009). In recent decades, Networks have become one of the most popular sub-fields in the public administration discipline. Nonetheless, historical background in Network studies is lacking, even if some scholars are interested in historical research about Networks.[†]

Ahi Unions and Their Contributions to the Society

Ahi Unions were associations of craftsmen in Anatolia region between the 13th and 20th centuries. They were founded in the Seljuk Empire period and they became widespread in the subsequent Ottoman era. Even though they were principally an organization of craftsmen based on Ahi philosophy, which is a successful mixture of Islamic values and pre-Islamic Turkish traditions, their effect on society went far beyond this.

The origin of the word *Ahi* is ambiguous, but it is largely believed that it is a derivation of *akhi* (generous) in ancient Turkish. The main objective of Ahi Unions was setting up a society firmly bounded through spiritual and ethical values, and their six cores moral principles were *comertlik* (generosity)*, tevazu* (humility), *merhamet* (compassion), *âlicenaplik* (modesty), *bencil olmama* (altruism), and *hayalci olmama* (pragmatism) (Gullulu, 1977, p.94).

About *Zaviyes*–Special gathering places for Ahi members and also a guest house–and their generosity, renowned Moroccan explorer Ibn Batuta writes in his travel book that Ahi Unions were quite common everywhere from towns to big cities, and their members were keen on foreigners. He identifies Ahi members as openhanded people, and as the safeguard against the injustice. He uses some excerpts from his travels across Anatolia to justify his opinions (Turan, 2007; Ibn Batuta, 1829).

In every city, there were different craft branches headed by an Ahi member and they were responsible to *Kethuda*–the provincial administrative head of the Union. *Yigitbasi*–the assistant of Kethuda–was responsible principally from the discipline of the craftsmen. In Ahi

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[†] For example, Kaiser (2009) claims that historically aware research on networks in EU governance has a big potential in contributing to enlarge our knowledge about dynamics and formation of networks.

unions, there were two kinds of members, the first group–apprentice, semi-skilled and master craftsmen–were the governed group, and the second one was called the governing group–Kethuda, Ahi and Yigitbasi. There were two main boards similar to Executive board and Grand Assembly of today's organizations. Each craft branch was electing and sending five representatives to the Executive board. One of the duties of the Executive board was to check the account books handed over by the previous administration and informing the Grand Assembly. Solving the problems of the members, checking the accounts of *orta sandigi* (common fund), renovation of the union's buildings and the payment of the union's employees were among the duties of the Executive board (Durak & Yucel, 2010).[‡] On the other hand, Ahi unions had also important roles in the administration of the Ottoman cities. Mainly Kethuda and Yigitbasi, who were also called *ehl-i hirfet,* were responsible from determining the price of commodities sold in the market, organizing the production factors, application and control of production standards in the city (Kaygalak, 2005).

In Ahi tradition, a big importance was attributed to leaders, and they had special duties. For example, Yigitbasi was the person responsible for the solution of the craftsmen's problems. In addition, he was the one to choose the semi-skilled people, who were expected to be a master craftsman in coming years, and he was also assisting Kethuda in organizing the ceremonies. Some of the duties of Kethuda were to solve the disagreements among craftsmen or to give minor penalties for eschewing the trial process, to inform the craftsmen with the help of Yigitbasi about the rules and orders of the *Padisah*–Ottoman Emperor–and to issue the craftsmanship license to the successful semi-skilled people. However, there was also a supreme spiritual leader of the unions called *Sheikh*. He had a representative in each Ahi Union called *Nakip*, who was principally responsible from praying in the ceremonies and dealing with the issues regarding *Zaviye*–the special gathering place. Ahi Sheikh was the highest moral authority of all Ahi unions, and he was living in Nevsehir city, which was accepted as the center of Ahi philosophy. Sheikh position was handed down from father to son and some sheiks trying to have more influence, directly interfered in administrative issues. Thus, they harmed Ahi Unions (Turan, 2007).

Ahi Unions also provided a kind of social security to their members from a common fund called *Orta Sandigi*. Organizations were helping their members in the case of disability, death and natural disasters. They were assisting in business setting up by providing necessary material as well. Unions had a big impact on social and economic areas in addition to politics. They also affected, even though limited, the formation of working ethics and institutions like social security organizations, trade organizations, labor unions in modern day Turkey (Ozturk, 2002).

Education of the youth was one of the priorities of Ahi Unions. Even in our age, keeping the young generation from bad habits through education and orienting their energy in to the common goal of the society as well as their own well-being is regarded as a major preoccupation of administrations. Obviously, having a profession in Ahi unions was helping in the maturing of personality. Besides, in Ahi Organizations, youngsters were motivated for the common objective of the society and they were educated not only professionally, but also ethically. Another contribution of Ahi Unions to the social life was the urbanization by educating nomad tribes. Moreover, Ahi Unions were the pillar of social order. When the army was mobilized for the war, they were the ones keeping the order in society. Their authority for keeping the order was given consent by the people thanks to their devotion to solidarity and altruism (Demirpolat & Akca, 2004).

[‡] The main ceremony in the Union was for the promotion of semi-skilled craftsmen to the master craftsman status. This ceremony was called *kusak baglama* (ribbon binding) ceremony as ribbons were the symbol of the mastership.

Even if Ahi Unions were deeply affected from Islamic values they did not prioritize a clerical elite or class. Instead, they were based on a kind of producer group (i.e., craftsmen–the mixture of labor and petty bourgeoisie). This social balance brought the people together on common values, and prevented the members of the society to have enmity or distrust with each other. As a result, communities based on common values and norms emerged. Table 1 demonstrates the social capital formation phases in Ahi Unions.

According to historian Inalcik, Ahi Unions may be defined as a Civil Society Organisation (CSO) with today's terminology. They were so efficient that, for example, aftermath of Seljuk Empire's collapse in the 13th century, Ahi Unions kept the social order, and they even undertook the administration of some cities for decades (e.g. for the Ahi administration in Ankara city see Ciftcioglu, 2001; Cagatay, 1989 Nigde city see Aksit, 2009). Even today, traces of Ahi Unions may be seen in historical manuscripts as well as in some current traditions all over the Anatolia region (Metin, 2008). Ahi Unions were abolished in 1912 as they became dysfunctional and fell apart from their foundational principles (Turan, 2007). *Zaviyes* were also banned in 1925 after the foundation of Turkey. So, until their abolition, Ahi Unions shaped the Turkish social, cultural, economic and administrative life.[§]

Table 1. Social Capital Formation in Ahi Unions

Phases of Social Capital	Application in Ahi Unions
1-Value Formation	Ahi philosophy, which was mainly based on generosity, honesty and bravery, spread through special gathering places called *zaviye* and became quite popular in Anatolia. In later periods, Ahi Unions were founded based on these principles.
2-Execution	In Ahi tradition, along with the strong cooperation and solidarity, leaders were important and they had special duties. (e.g., *Yigitbasi*–assistant of provincial head–was the person responsible from dealing with problems of the craftsmen.)
3-Expansion of Networks	Even though Ahi Unions were deeply affected from Islamic values they did not prioritize a clerical elite or class like bourgeoisie, or aristocracy. They were open to the people.
4-Sustainability	Value Renewal in *Zaviye*–special gathering places–and in ceremonies.

As illustrated in table 2, there is a deep relation between social capital and administrative systems. In history, moral values like in Ahi Unions were profoundly used as the major element in social capital formation to facilitate the material requirements of the society and keeping the harmony. There are similar applications in today's societies, in which moral values still play a constructive role for building social capital to answer both material and social requirements of the people. These networks such as Gawad Kalinga (GK)[**] help societies to satisfy their spiritual and material needs to live in harmony without falling into extremism as they prevent the manipulation of the religious beliefs, and they are also helpful to the governments in the provision of social services. Anyway, deviation from the foundational principles along with keeping out of industrialization due to the absence of capital accumulation were the main reasons for the collapse of Ahi Unions, but a functioning democratic administrative system, which provides a "checks and balances" was lacking in that period of time.

[§] Their teachings and organizations were quite efficient during five centuries but they became less effective in the latest periods of the Ottoman Empire.
[**] *Gawad Kalinga* (GK), which means "to give care", is a program initiated by the Couples for Christ (CFC) in 1995. "Less for self, more for others, enough for all" is the tenet of the program. GK was first founded for rehabilitating gang members and out-of school youth in slum areas of Caloocan City in the Philippines, and for solving the housing problem of the poor. The initiative undertook numerous social projects (Brillantes&Fernandes, 2008, p. 283).

Table 2. Interaction between Administrative Systems and Social Capital

	Anti-democratic Administrative Systems	Democratic Administrative Systems
Lack of Social Capital	- Resilience is unfeasible - Disorder and repression	- Cynicism - Inequality
Social Capital	- Resilience merely depends on the quality of the leader - Social Order	- A Functioning Checks and Balances system - Social Justice

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In Ahi Unions, the main objective was to create a harmonious society, and to fill the administrative gaps by providing the public service in many different fields from education to security. Therefore, members of the unions were educated not merely on technical issues concerning their profession but also on moral and social issues. Ahi unions may still be a source of inspiration, albeit they may not be fully emulated for today's institutions.

For years, public administration scholars have built their new theories on the previous one. Even though they all claim that they are the representative of a new view in the field, the shadow of the modernity on their approaches is evident (Adams, 1992). However, as is seen in this paper, cross-cultural or deeper historical researches may offer new perspectives in the field.

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