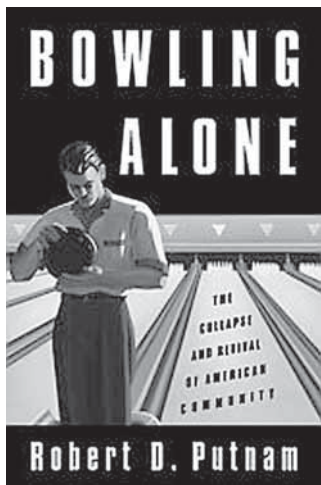


Book Report: A Sociologist Examines “Social Capital” & Fraternal Organizations



NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: the Collapse & Revival of American Communities* was a bestseller. In it, Putnam describes a general withdrawal from civic engagement, and a resulting loss in “social capital.” One way of describing social capital is how many interconnections people have with one another (see the glossary at right).

Putnam's research indicates that dense interconnections are good for communities, good for democracy, even good for your health. Fraternal lodges are one of his primary examples of organizations that build social capital in a community, resulting in higher levels of trust, security, and democratic participation.

Below are excerpts from Putnam's book and one of his articles:

Whatever Happened to Civic Engagement?



Robert Putnam

From a relative high point in the early 1960s, voter turnout had by 1990 declined by nearly a quarter; tens of millions of Americans had forsaken their parents' habitual readiness to engage in the simplest act of citizenship. Broadly similar trends also characterize participation in state and local elections.... [Putnam found similar drops in participation for churches, synagogues, labor unions, and organizations like the PTA, the League of Women Voters, and the Boy Scouts.] Fraternal organizations have also witnessed a substantial drop in membership during the 1980s and 1990s. Membership is down significantly in such groups as the Lions (off 12 percent since 1983), the Elks (off 18 percent since 1979), the Shriners (off 27 percent since 1979), the Jaycees (off 44 percent since 1979), and the Masons (down 39 percent since 1959). In sum, after expanding steadily throughout most of this century, many major civic organizations have experienced a sudden, substantial, and nearly simultaneous decline in membership over the last decade or two.

Broken down by type of group, the downward trend is most marked for church-related groups, for labor unions, for fraternal and veterans' organizations, and for school-service groups... In short, the available survey evidence confirms our earlier conclusion: American social capital in the form of civic associations has significantly eroded over the last generation.

Good Neighborliness and Social Trust

I noted earlier that most readily available quantitative evidence on trends in social connectedness involves formal settings, such as the voting booth, the union hall, or the PTA. One glaring exception is so widely discussed as to require little comment here: the most fundamental form of social capital is the family, and the massive evidence of the loosening of bonds within the family (both extended and nuclear) is well known. This trend, of course, is quite consistent with—and may help to explain—our theme of social decapitalization.

Americans are also less trusting. The proportion of Americans saying that most people can be trusted fell by more than a third between 1960, when 58 percent chose that alternative, and 1993, when only 37 percent did.

Members of associations are much more likely than nonmembers to participate in politics, to spend time with neighbors, and to express social trust.

The concept of “civil society” has played a central role in the recent global debate about the preconditions for democracy and democratization. In the newer democracies this phrase has properly focused attention on the need to foster a vibrant civic life in soils traditionally inhospitable to self-government. In the established democracies, ironically, growing numbers of citizens are questioning the effectiveness of their public institutions at the very moment when liberal democracy has swept the battlefield, both ideologically and geopolitically. In America, at least, there is reason to suspect that this democratic disarray may be linked to a broad and continuing erosion of civic engagement that began a quarter-century ago. High on America's agenda should be the question of how to reverse these adverse trends in social connectedness, thus restoring civic engagement and civic trust.

Fraternal Organizations & the Gilded Age

Almost exactly a century ago America had also just experienced a period of dramatic technological, economic, and social change...Millions of Americans left family and friends behind on the farm when they moved to Chicago or Milwaukee or Pittsburgh, and millions more left community institutions behind in a Polish shtetl or an Italian village when they moved to the Lower East Side or the North End. America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century suffered from classic symptoms of a social-capital deficit—crime waves, degradation in the cities, inadequate education, a widening gap between rich and poor, what one contemporary called a “Saturnalia” of political corruption.

But even as these problems were erupting, Americans were beginning to fix them. Within a few decades around the turn of the century, a quickening sense of crisis,

Glossary

Social Capital

The central premise of social capital is that social networks have value. Social capital refers to the collective value of all “social networks” (who people know) and the inclinations these people have to look out for one another (reciprocity). Social capital is not warm and cuddly feelings, but specific benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks

Examples of Social Capital

When a group of neighbors informally keep an eye on one another's homes, that's social capital in action. Barn-raising on the frontier was social capital in action, and so too are e-mail exchanges among members of a cancer support group. The motto in Cheers “where everybody knows your name” captures one important aspect of social capital.

Bonding Social Capital

Social ties that link people together with others who are primarily like them along some key dimension. Bonding social capital is generally easier to build than bridging social capital.

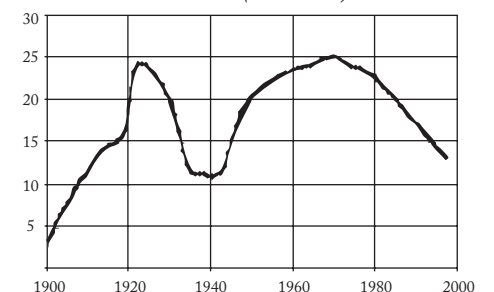
Bridging Social Capital

Social ties that link you with others who are different in some way, say across generations, religions, or social class.

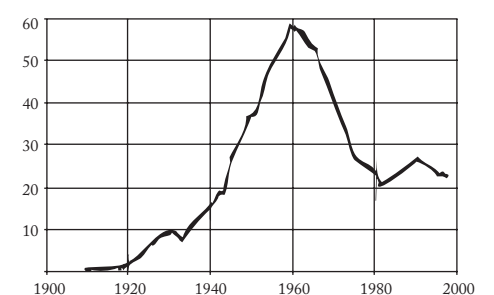
Generalized Reciprocity

When there is generalized trust within a community, individuals often start displaying reciprocity: doing something for another, not with any immediate expectation of return, but trusting that the favors will be passed on to others in the community. You believe people will “pay it forward.”

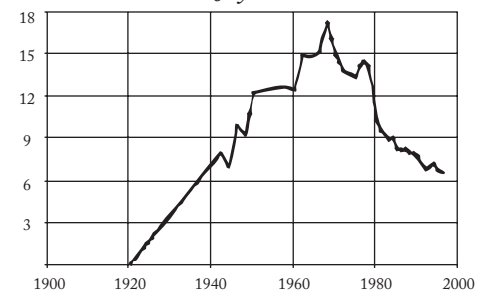
The Elks (B.P.O.E.)



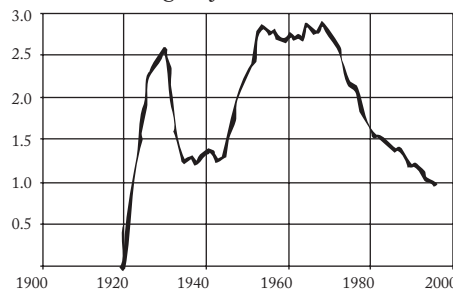
Parent Teacher Association



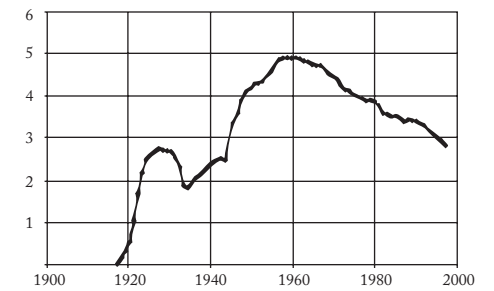
Jaycees



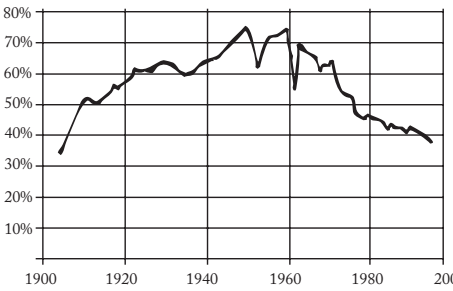
League of Women Voters



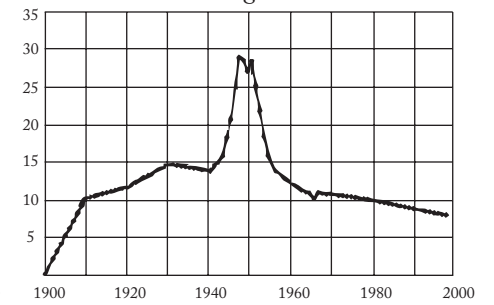
Kiwanis



American Medical Assoc.



Eagles



coupled with inspired grassroots and national leadership, produced an extraordinary burst of social inventiveness... [among other reforms] the Gilded Age ushered in a period of massive expansion of fraternal groups... In part, fraternalism represented a reaction against the individualism and anomie of this era of rapid social change, asylum from a disordered and uncertain world.

Mutual aid, resting on the principle of reciprocity—today's recipient, tomorrow's donor—was a core feature of fraternal groups. Historian [David] Beito observes, “They successfully created vast social and mutual aid networks among the poor.” The nation's largest fraternal organizations... reported hundreds of thousands of members in local chapters across the land. Notes Beito, this “geographically extended structure... facilitated a kind of coinsurance to mitigate local crises such as natural disasters or epidemics.” Finally, Beito adds,

By joining a lodge, an initiate adopted a set of values. Societies dedicated themselves to the advancement of mutualism, self-reliance, business training, thrift, leadership skills, self-government, and good moral character. These values reflected a fraternal consensus that cut across such seemingly intractable divisions as race, gender, and income.

In a future issue I will report Putnam's research on organizations that are growing.
—Warren Hedges, Bulletin Editor