THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

Unsolved Mysteries: The Tocqueville Files II

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Bowling Alone" was published in January 1995.
Seldom has a thesis moved so quickly from scholarly obscurity to conventional wisdom. By January 1996 the *Washington Post* was featuring a six-part series of front-page articles on the decline of trust, and Beltway pundits had learned the vocabulary of social capital.

While the debate over the accuracy and adequacy of Putnam's measures of civic engagement rages on in academia, it seems all but concluded elsewhere. Putnam's argument has touched a nerve. Most Americans believe that during the past 40 years, important aspects of their society have changed for the worse. That belief is itself one of the dominant political facts of our time. Under stand ing and responding to it is one of the key tasks facing those who wish to build a new progressive coalition.

Of course this new em phasis on civil society can be hi jacked: on the right, as a battering ram against government; on the left, as a vehicle for reopening the battles of the 1960s against liberalism in the name of participatory democracy. But the fact that Putnam's argument can be abused is no reason to downplay it.

Americans care about the decline of civic engagement for a range of reasons. They see disengagement as linked to the decline of trust among fellow citizens; to the loss of a sense of control over one's own fate and that of one's community; to the thinning of direct, practical knowledge of one's society and the rise of media images as powerful as they are mistrusted; and to the erosion of stability and security in our daily lives.

While concern about the weakening of civil society is pervasive, the appropriate response to this concern is far from obvious. Not only are the causes of decline obscure; the problem itself is multidimensional. One dimension is the link between voluntary associations and the functioning of official political institutions; another is the role of voluntary associations in performing valuable social tasks without the involvement of government; a third is the importance of a dense network of social relations (not necessarily groups) in overcoming isolation and making daily life more satisfying. While Putnam emphasizes, and seeks to measure, group membership and activity, the quality of informal social relations is harder to quantify, even through

time-budget surveys. But I suspect that for most citizens, this aspect of civil society is at least as important as the first two.

So let's begin where the people are, with a deep concern about our overall civic and civil health. How can we best respond to this concern? My argument is this: The decline in social capital is the outgrowth of long-standing commitments across the spectrum of our politics and culture and cannot be arrested unless we revisit these commitments. Here are some examples of what would have to change:

1. Free-market conservatives would have to acknowledge that the operation of the contemporary economy isn't always compatible with a strong civil society. While social capital is largely place-specific, our corporations give less and less weight to historic community ties. The owner of Malden Mills became an instant national hero when he decided to rebuild his plant after a devastating fire; most Americans believe that most owners wouldn't have cared enough about their workers and neighbors to make that choice.

2. New Deal-style economic liberals would have to acknowledge that the growth of government isn't always compatible with a strong civil society either. Alan Wolfe made this case powerfully a few years ago in *Whose Keeper?* A recent *New York Times* story suggested that as New York City's government retrenches, newly revitalized neighborhood organizations are springing up, in part to form new partnerships with the public sector, but also to fill the gap through their own voluntary efforts.

A story from this winter's blizzard: After our block had gone unplowed by the D.C. government for five days, our next-door neighbor, who owns a small construction company, paid his workers to come clear away the snow . . . whereupon the neighborhood got together, threw a block party, offered speeches praising our local hero, crowned him the "King of Jenifer Street," and spent the rest of the evening affirming communal solidarity with food, drink, music, and conversation. Maybe Marion Barry did us a favor.

3. Post-New Deal social liberals would have to acknowledge that while the cultural changes of the past generation have liberated individuals from various restraints, they have eroded social capital as well. Dan Yankelovich has traced a profound cultural shift over the past 30 years, with expressive individualism in the ascendant and older norms of responsibility, fidelity, and sacrifice in retreat. In his magnificent recent book *The Lost City*, Alan Ehrenhalt has documented the social consequences of this shift. Briefly: no social capital without community; no community without authority; no authority without higher

levels of respect, obedience, and restraint on individual choice than have been fashionable during the past generation.

4. As a society, we would have to get much more serious about crime. Here's why: to the extent that social capital depends upon place-specific, face-to-face interactions, the perceived decline in the safety of public spaces within which such exchanges occur must be taking a considerable toll. Many older Americans, traditionally the backbones of neighborhoods, are afraid to venture outside their homes.

The problem isn't confined to a single generational cohort. Again, a personal reflection: My wife and I live four blocks away from a wonderful public park. Our son, now 11 years old, has never gone to that park alone. We haven't explicitly forbidden him to do so; he has never asked. No doubt part of the explanation is our nonverbally communicated subliminal worry. Another part is the general social fear, which he has absorbed through conversations with friends and, even more important, through televisionnot just from *New York Undercover*, but from the local news as well.

5. We would have to intensify our response to problems created by the media. Putnam now seems to be regrettingif not actually retractinghis emphasis on the corrosive effects of television. But if anything, he understates the case. The issue is not only the content of what we watch, or the time spent watching; it's also the consequences of the watching for patterns of social interaction.

According to Ehrenhalt, the life of a blue-collar Chicago neighborhood in the 1950s was enacted on the front stoops of its houses. Parents gathered to talk; kids ran up and down the block and waited for the ice cream truck. Today, in this same neighborhood, "A block is not really a community . . . anymore. Only a house is a community, a tiny outpost dependent on television . . . and accessible to other such outposts, even the nearest ones, almost exclusively by automobile."

6. Finally, we would have to look honestly at the effects of changing gender roles and relations. I cannot help thinking that as a matter of history, the term "social capital" refers in significant measure to the uncompensated work of women outside the domains of both home and market. Whatever the official statistics on group membership may suggest, I find it very difficult to believe that the massive entrance of women into the paid labor force over the past 30 years has been devoid of consequences for informal social networks. Ehrenhalt notes that the streets of suburban Emory Manor, teeming with mothers and young children 40 years ago, are now empty and that there is "little time during the hours at home for the gestures of community that bound the original residents together."

We must also examine the consequences of changing family structure. Whatever the causes of the "divorce revolution" that raised the divorce rate by

about 250 percent between 1960 and 1980 and allowed many men to walk away from the emotional and financial responsibilities of fatherhood, a mounting body of evidence suggests that the children of divorce are less secure than other children and find it more difficult as young adults to trust either their peers or social and political institutions.

Soto return to the beginningwhat changes are we prepared to make to strengthen civil society? I don't know of many progressives who would want the restoration of the status quo ante for women; I know I wouldn't. I don't know of many conservatives who are prepared to accept even minimal restraints on corporate conduct. Democrats who accept in principle the end of the "era of big government" fight in practice to preserve its programs, regulations, and institutional structure. My own modest proposals to restrict divorce and give the well-being of children priority over the self-interest of adults have received a decidedly mixed response. Of all the requirements I've discussed for strengthening civil society, only cleaning up television and securing public spaces enjoy anything approaching a consensus.

In the end, the least tangible cause of civic declinecultural changemay prove to be the most important. Our dominant norms are choice at the level of individual conduct and entitlement in the construction of social policy. But civil society rests on the very different norm of reciprocity: honoring mutual obligations, doing one's fair share, discharging the responsibilities that sustain a system of rights. Are we prepared to accept restraints on choice and entitlement to create a stronger society that can endure?

This is a question for all Americans. It has particular force for my own generation of baby boomers. Our parents survived the Depression, won World War II, sacrificed to wage the Cold War, invested in the future, and deferred gratification to give us opportunity. They helped build the freest and most prosperous society the world has ever known. They were indeed, as Putnam states, the "civic generation," and we are profoundly in their debt.

What about us? We tell one another self-congratulatory storiesof revealing hidden truths, fighting ancient evils, tearing down oppressive restraints. There's something to this, of course. But there's a deeper story, embedded in Putnam's data and supported by common sense: We've spent the past 30 years squandering the social capital we inherited from our parents. To do our part to rebuild our society, we must reexamine the ideal of unlimited freedom that for so long has been our polestar.

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UNSOLVED MYSTERIES
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"**Won't You Be My Neighbor**," by William A. Galston

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