

Kicking in Groups

by Nicholas Lemann
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IN 1958 Edward Banfield published *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, a study of underdevelopment in a village at the southern tip of Italy--"the extreme poverty and backwardness of which," he wrote, "is to be explained largely (but not entirely) by the inability of the villagers to act together for their common good." Banfield called the prevailing ethos of the village "amoral familism": "Maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise." The best way to improve the village's economic condition, he said, would be for "the southern peasant to acquire the ways of the north."

Ten years later, in *The Unheavenly City*, Banfield applied a similar line of argument to American inner-city black ghettos, without benefit of the kind of firsthand research he had done in Italy. This time he identified "present-mindedness" as the quality that caused the communities' problems. Whereas *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* had been respectfully received, *The Unheavenly City* was so controversial that for years Banfield required police protection when he spoke in public. The lesson seems to be that studying the difference between northern and southern Italy is a safe way of addressing a question still very much on Americans' minds: Why is there such a wide variation in the social and economic health of our neighborhoods and ethnic groups and, for that matter, of different societies all over the world?

Robert Putnam, a professor of government at Harvard, has to decide whether to confront just this issue. In 1993 Putnam published a book called *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Though its main text is only 185 pages long, *Making Democracy Work* is the fruit of immense labor. In 1970 Italy created local governments in its twenty regions and turned over many of the functions of the central government to them. Putnam and a team of colleagues almost immediately embarked on a study of the new governments' performance, covering the entire nation and focusing particularly on a few localities, including a town quite near the one where Banfield researched his book.

The finding that leaped out at Putnam was that the governments in the prosperous north of Italy outperformed the ones in the benighted south. Through a variety of statistical exercises he tried to demonstrate that their success was not simply a case of the rich getting richer. For example, he showed that regional government officials are less well educated in the north than in the south, and that in the northern provinces economic-development levels are not especially predictive of government performance. He found the north's secret to be a quality that Machiavelli called *virtu civile* ("civic virtue")--an ingrained tendency to form small-scale associations that create a fertile ground for political and economic development, even if (especially if, Putnam would probably say) the associations are not themselves political or economic. "Good government in Italy is a by-product of singing groups and soccer clubs," he wrote. Civic virtue both expresses and builds trust and cooperation in the citizenry, and it is these qualities--which Putnam called "social capital," borrowing a phrase from Jane Jacobs--that make everything else go well.

Putnam was arguing against the conventional wisdom in the social sciences, which holds that civic virtue is an appurtenance of a traditional society--"an atavism destined to disappear" with modernization, which replaces small organizations that operate by custom with big ones that operate by rules. Instead, he said, even the biggest and most modern societies can't function well if the local civic dimension is weak. He hinted here and there that it was actually the large bureaucratic overlay that was going to wind up being obsolete.

What causes some societies to become more civic-minded than others? In Italy, Putnam said, the north-south difference dates from the 1100s, when the Normans established a centralized, autocratic regime in the south, and a series of autonomous republics arose in the north. The southern system stressed what Putnam called "vertical bonds": it was rigidly hierarchical, with those at the bottom dependent on the patronage of landowners and officials rather than on one another. In the north small organizations such as guilds and credit associations generated "horizontal bonds," fostering a sense of mutual trust that doesn't exist in the south. Putnam continually stressed the "astonishing constancy" of the north-south difference: it survived the demise of the independent northern republics in the seventeenth century and the Risorgimento in the nineteenth. "The southern territories once ruled by the Norman kings," he wrote, "constitute exactly the seven least civic regions in the 1970s." We shouldn't expect the situation to change anytime soon, because "where institution building . . . is concerned, time is measured in decades."

Social science has become a statistical art, overwhelmingly concerned with using correlation coefficients to express the effect of one thing on another--or, to use the jargon, to discover and isolate the independent variable that has the greatest influence on the dependent variable. Civic virtue can be understood as Putnam's contribution to an ongoing quest for the magic independent variable that will explain economic development; he belongs to an intellectual tradition that tries to locate it in intrinsic cultural tendencies. In this sense civic virtue is a descendant of Max Weber's Protestant ethic, and is the opposite of Oscar Lewis's culture of poverty and Banfield's amoral familism. The venerability of the tradition and its powerful commonsense appeal shouldn't obscure the fact that all such independent variables are, necessarily, artificial constructs. Civic virtue is measured (to three decimal places!) by cobbling together such indices as newspaper-readership figures, voter turnout, and the abundance of sports clubs, and is not, as Putnam admitted, all-powerful as a predictor. Even in parts of northern Italy "the actual administrative performance of most of the new governments"--the subject under study, after all--"has been problematical."

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Nonetheless, when Putnam tentatively brought his theory home to the United States, it created a sensation--of exactly the opposite kind from the one Banfield created a quarter century ago with *The Unheavenly City*. An article called "Bowling Alone," which Putnam published in the January, 1995, issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, had an impact far, far beyond the usual for academic writing. In the wake of "Bowling Alone," Putnam has been invited to Camp David to consult with President Bill Clinton. His terminology has heavily influenced the past two State of the Union addresses; *Making Democracy Work*, initially ignored by the general-interest press, was reviewed on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review*; Putnam was prominently mentioned in the musings of Senator Bill Bradley about his disillusionment with politics; and, unlikeliest of all, he was the subject of a profile in *People* magazine.

The thesis of "Bowling Alone" is that "the vibrancy of American civil society"--the magic variable--" has notably declined over the past several decades." Putnam gets his title from the finding that from 1980 to 1993 league bowling declined by 40 percent while the number of individual bowlers rose by 10 percent. The rest of his evidence is less whimsical: voter turnout, church attendance, and union membership are down. The percentage of people who trust the government and who attend community meetings has dropped. The leading indicator for Putnam--membership in voluntary associations--is down. Look at the Boy Scouts, the Lions, the Elks, the Shriners, the Jaycees, the Masons, the Red Cross, the Federation of Women's Clubs, and the League of Women Voters: "Serious volunteering declined by roughly one-sixth" from 1974 to 1989. The logic of *Making Democracy Work* would suggest that the true import of these changes is not that they are inherently unfortunate so much as that they predict a broader decline in our society's economic vitality--since, according to Putnam, that vitality rests on a cultural bedrock of local associational strength.

Putnam is scrupulously careful in "Bowling Alone" not to push his theory too hard. Earlier this year,

though, he stated the thesis more firmly, in an article in *The American Prospect* called "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America," and offered an explanation for it: Americans who were born after the Second World War are far less civic-minded than their elders, and the main reason is that they grew up after the introduction of television, which "privatizes our leisure time." Putnam is now working up a book on the subject.

"Bowling Alone" struck a nerve in part because it provided a coherent theory to explain the dominant emotion in American politics: a feeling that the quality of our society at the everyday level has deteriorated severely. An economic statistic like the "misery index" doesn't match the political mood; Putnam's theory does. It is especially appealing to liberal politicians, who see in it the possibility of a rhetoric they can use to address an issue that has been owned by conservatives. Also, if Putnam is right that as local associations go, so goes the nation, his work suggests the possibility of solving our problems through relatively low-cost association-strengthening local initiatives that don't require higher taxes. This makes a wonderful message for Democrats, who want to offer a positive program that is not vulnerable to anti-tax rhetoric. Foundation executives, who want to believe that the limited grants they make can reap large social benefits, also tend to be Putnam fans. Even people whose interests aren't directly affected have eagerly subscribed to the theory of "Bowling Alone," partly because of its apparent validity and partly for reasons I'll discuss later.

It must be said, however, that the talk about "Bowling Alone," and to a lesser extent the article itself, directly contradict the logic of *Making Democracy Work*. In Putnam's Italian model the kind of overnight deterioration of civic virtue that he proposes regarding America would be inconceivable--once civic virtue is in place it is incredibly durable over the centuries. Putnam heartily endorses a theory from economic history called "path dependence," which he has summarized this way: "Where you can get to depends on where you're coming from, and some destinations you simply cannot get to from here." In "Bowling Alone" he quotes Tocqueville's view that "nothing . . . deserves more attention" than Americans' amazing associational predilections; by the standards of *Making Democracy Work*, these ought to have held us in good stead well into the next century. Putnam plainly believes that we were in pretty good associational shape as recently as 1960. How can a tendency toward civic engagement vanish in a single generation?

Not only was Putnam in *Making Democracy Work* insistent upon the lasting good effects of civic virtue, but he was elaborately pessimistic about the possibility of establishing civic virtue where it doesn't already exist. He predicted disaster in the former Communist dictatorships of Europe, because of their weakness in the local-associational area: "Palermo may represent the future of Moscow." Putnam drew this lesson from a comprehensive survey of Third World development efforts:

Unhappily from the point of view of social engineering . . . local organizations 'implanted' from the outside have a high failure rate. The most successful local organizations represent indigenous, participatory initiatives in relatively cohesive local communities.

If Putnam was right the first time, and civic virtue is deeply rooted, then it's worth wondering whether the United States might actually still have as much of it as ever, or nearly. If that is the case, the dire statistics in "Bowling Alone" reflect merely a mutation rather than a disappearance of civic virtue, because civic virtue has found new expressions in response to economic and social changes. From bowling leagues on up, many of the declining associations Putnam mentions are like episodes of *The Honeymooners* seen today--out of date.

I spent a couple of days phoning around in search of examples of new associations that have sprung up to take their place. Putnam mentions several of these in "Bowling Alone" in order to dismiss them as real replacements for the lost bowling leagues, either because they don't involve regular face-to-face contact (the many associations in cyberspace; the 33-million-member American Association of Retired Persons) or because they don't encourage people to build lasting ties based on

mutual strength (Alcoholics Anonymous and other support groups). The most dramatic example I could find--and a nicely apposite one, too--is U.S. Youth Soccer, which has 2.4 million members, up from 1.2 million ten years ago and from 127,000 twenty years ago. As a long-standing coach in this organization, I can attest that it involves incessant meetings, phone calls, and activities of a kind that create links between people which ramify, in the manner described by Putnam, into other areas.

Another intriguing statistic is the number of restaurants in the United States, which has risen dramatically, from 203,000 in 1972 to 368,000 in 1993. True, this probably means that fewer people are eating a family dinner at home. But from Putnam's perspective, that might be good news, because it means that people who are eating out are expanding their civic associations rather than pursuing amoral familism. (If you've ever visited northern Italy, the connection between restaurants and *virtu civile* seems obvious.) The growth in restaurants is not confined to fast-food restaurants, by the way, although it is true that the number of bars and taverns--institutions singled out for praise in "Bowling Alone"--has declined over the past two decades.

The number of small businesses--what the Internal Revenue Service calls "non-farm proprietorships"--has about doubled since 1970. These can be seen as both generators and results of civic virtue, since they involve so much personal contact and mutual trust. A small subset, Community Development Corporations (organizations that are often explicitly Putnamlike schemes to promote association locally in the hope of a later economic payoff), have grown in number from 500 to 2,200 over the past twenty years. Individual contributions to charity, which are still made by more than three quarters of Americans, grew from \$16.2 billion in 1970 to \$101.8 billion in 1990. Although church attendance is, as Putnam says, down, the Pentecostal denominations are booming: their domestic membership has burgeoned over the past quarter century. Little League membership has increased every year. Membership in the PTA has risen over the past decade or so, though it's still far below its peak, which occurred in 1962--1963. Homeownership is high and steady, and, as Putnam admits in "Bowling Alone," Americans move less frequently now than they did in the 1950s and 1960s.

Weighed against all this, the statistics in "Bowling Alone" are still impressive, and no doubt Putnam will nail down his case in his book. Let's say, however, for the sake of argument, that Putnam's thesis that civic virtue is rapidly collapsing in America isn't true. What would account for its being so widely and instantly accepted as gospel?

Bowling leagues, Elks and Lions, and the League of Women Voters are indisputably not what they used to be. Large internal population shifts have taken place since the 1960s: to the Sunbelt and, within metropolitan areas, to the suburbs. Birth rates dropped substantially and then rose again. Most mothers now work. All these changes could have resulted in atrophied forms of association that are culturally connected to older cities and to old-fashioned gender roles (bowling leagues are a good example), while other forms more oriented to open space and to weekends (like youth soccer) have grown.

I have lived in five American cities: New Orleans, Cambridge, Washington, Austin, and Pelham, New York. The two that stand out in my memory as most deficient in the Putnam virtues--the places where people I know tend not to have elaborate hobbies and not to devote their evenings and weekends to neighborhood meetings and activities--are Cambridge and Washington. The reason is that these places are the big time. Work absorbs all the energy. It is what people talk about at social events. Community is defined functionally, not spatially: it's a professional peer group rather than a neighborhood. Hired hands, from nannies to headmasters to therapists, bear more of the civic-virtue load than is typical.

To people living this kind of life, many of whom grew up in a bourgeois provincial environment and migrated to one of the capitals, the "Bowling Alone" theory makes sense, because it seems to describe their own situation so well. It is natural for people to assume that if their own life trajectories

have been in the direction of reduced civic virtue, this is the result not of choices they have made but of a vast national trend. I wonder if the pre-presidential Bill Clinton--the man who spent the morning after Election Day in 1992 wandering around Little Rock engaging in front-porch visits with lifelong friends--would have found "Bowling Alone" so strongly resonant.

A second reason for the appeal of "Bowling Alone" is that it avoids the Banfield problem. A true application of the line of thinking in Making Democracy Work would require searching the United States for internal differences in civic virtue and then trying to explain those differences. One inevitable result would be the shining of a harsh spotlight on the ghettos, with their high rates of crime, welfare dependency, and family breakup. In an article that appeared in The American Prospect in 1993 Putnam made a point of saying, "It would be a dreadful mistake, of course, to overlook the repositories of social capital within America's minority communities." This doesn't mean that the spotlight wouldn't still fall on the ghettos, because Putnam was clearly referring to minority communities most of whose members are not poor. But with this caveat he demonstrates at least that he is aware of the sensitive areas into which his Italian inquiry could lead in the United States. So far he has resolutely kept his examples of the decline of civic virtue in America in the realm of middle- or even upper-middle-class culture.

In the 1993 American Prospect article Putnam wrote,

Classic liberal social policy is designed to enhance the opportunities of individuals, but if social capital is important, this emphasis is partially misplaced. Instead we must focus on community development, allowing space for religious organizations and choral societies and Little Leagues that may seem to have little to do with politics or economics.

With respect to the United States, the opposite of Putnam's theory would be this: There has been relatively little general decline in civic virtue. To the extent that the overall civic health of the nation did deteriorate, the dip was confined mainly to the decade 1965 to 1975--when, for example, crime and divorce rates rose rapidly--and things have been pretty stable since then. The overwhelming social and moral problem in American life is instead the disastrous condition of poor neighborhoods, almost all of which are in cities.

The model of a healthy country and needy ghettos would suggest a program much closer to the "liberal social policy" from which Putnam wants us to depart. Rather than assume, with Putnam, that such essential public goods as safety, decent housing, and good education can be generated only from within a community, we could assume that they might be provided from without--by government. If quite near the ghettos are working-class neighborhoods (and not insuperably distant are suburbs) of varying ethnic character and strong civic virtue, then the individual-opportunity model might be precisely the answer for ghetto residents--opportunity, that is, to move to a place that is part of the healthy American mainstream.

The difficulty with such a program is that it is politically inconvenient. It would involve, by contemporary standards, far too much action on the part of the government, with the benefits far too skewed toward blacks. The model of an entire United States severely distressed in a way that is beyond the power of government to correct is more comforting.

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