

Book Note

Bowling Together During War

Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. By Robert Putnam.* *New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. Pp. 541. \$26.00.*

The present historical moment may seem a particularly inopportune time to review *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam's latest exploration of civic decline in America. After all, the outpouring of volunteerism, solidarity, patriotism, and self-sacrifice displayed by Americans in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks appears to fly in the face of Putnam's central argument: that "social capital"—defined as "social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19)¹—has declined to dangerously low levels in America over the last three decades.

However, Putnam is not fazed in the least by the recent effusion of solidarity. Quite the contrary, he sees in it the potential to "reverse what has been a 30- to 40-year steady decline in most measures of connectedness or community."² As an example of how the current "war on terrorism" could generate a durable civic renewal, Putnam points to the burst in civic practices that occurred during and after World War II, which he says "permanently marked" the generation that lived through it and had a "terrific effect on American public life over the last half-century."³ If Americans can follow this example and channel their current civic

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1. I adopt Putnam's usage, though some feel his idea of "social capital" is overbroad. *E.g.*, John Wilson, *Dr. Putnam's Social Lubricant*, 30 CONTEMP. SOC. 225 (2001); *cf.* Bob Edwards & Michael W. Foley, *Civil Society and Social Capital: A Primer*, in BEYOND TOCQUEVILLE 1, 8-13 (Michael W. Foley et al. eds., 2001) (comparing Putnam's definitions to other theorists').

2. April Witt, *Shedding Our Shells*, WASH. POST, Oct. 14, 2001, at C1 (quoting Putnam).

3. *Id.*

sentiments into war-related civic activity, Putnam believes the “new mood” we have seen over the past few months might endure for decades to come.⁴

To those who have already read *Bowling Alone*, Putnam’s recent enthusiasm for war and its capacity to generate social capital might come as something of a surprise. The book contains only a handful of pages on the topic of war-generated solidarity and instead emphasizes the possibility of civic renewal in a peacetime context. Despite this pronounced lack of emphasis, however, a closer inspection reveals that war is really the primary reason Putnam offers to explain the much higher levels of civic engagement during the 1940s to 1960s—and the absence of war’s influence is implied to be the biggest reason for the civic decline that has occurred ever since. Putnam does not directly state this conclusion—in large part, it seems, because he wants the reader to believe that a civic renewal is possible absent war. However, Putnam does not provide any reason to think that the high levels of social capital enjoyed during the war and postwar years can be achieved in a peacetime context.

If, indeed, the much ballyhooed decline in civic engagement is simply a return from war-generated heights to what is arguably a more “normal” level, those seriously interested in spawning a major civic renewal in a peacetime context need to shift their focus.⁵ Specifically, social capital enthusiasts should seek to identify those structural aspects of the American political economy during peacetime that create norms and economic conditions that systemically tend to produce lower-than-wartime levels of civic engagement and solidarity, and propose structural solutions that might, like war, reverse these tendencies.

I

Understanding the importance of war in *Bowling Alone* first requires a review of Putnam’s findings. Putnam found only a small number of relevant, century-spanning data sets; those few that he did find, however, all tell an impressively similar story about the rise and fall of social capital, measured by membership rates in national chapter-based associations (p. 54), unions (p. 81), professional associations (p. 84) and, of course, bowling

4. Robert Putnam, Editorial, *A Better Society in a Time of War*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 19, 2001, at A19. This editorial also stresses that government must facilitate this channeling. Interestingly, President Bush’s recent call for the creation of a volunteer civil defense service to help fight the war on terrorism essentially follows Putnam’s prescription. David E. Sanger, *Bush Seeks New Volunteer Force for Civil Defense*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 9, 2001, at A1.

5. Recent collections of essays by those concerned about civic decline and interested in a civic renewal include CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY (Theda Skocpol & Morris P. Fiorina eds., 1999) and CIVIL SOCIETY, DEMOCRACY, AND CIVIC RENEWAL (Robert K. Fullinwider ed., 1999). In general, the literature has neglected structural analysis of the sort recommended here. For exceptions to this rule, see *infra* notes 28-29 and accompanying text.

leagues (p. 112).⁶ Civic engagement increased by varying degrees during the first third of the century, slumped during the Great Depression, leapt dramatically in the 1940s and 1950s, and then began a steady decline by the middle to late 1960s. The majority of Putnam's data show only declines in social capital over the last twenty-five to thirty-five years.⁷

An interesting point that Putnam makes again and again about all of these trends is that they are generational. In other words, civic engagement has not declined equally among all age cohorts. The older generations—those born from 1910 to 1940—are still highly civically engaged. It is the younger generations born after World War II—the boomers and the Xers—who are dropping out in droves. “Each generation that has reached adulthood since the 1950s has been less engaged in community affairs than its immediate predecessor,” Putnam notes (p. 254). Thus, when it comes to explaining the thirty-year decline in social capital America has been suffering, Putnam pins the vast majority of the blame on a rather vague culprit: “generational change.”⁸ Generational change is obviously not much of an explanation, however, for it begs an enormous question: What caused the generations born before 1940 to be so much more civic than those born after? Toward the end of his chapter on generational change, Putnam rather hurriedly offers his answer to this central question: World War II (p. 255).

In the few pages Putnam devotes to explaining how World War II could have helped mold the values and civic habits of what he calls “the long civic generation” (p. 255), he suggests that the “wartime Zeitgeist of national unity and patriotism that culminated in 1945 reinforced civic-mindedness” (p. 267). The war resulted in an “extraordinary burst” in civic association membership, volunteerism, community activities, and charitable donations, a “civic frenzy” that lasted for years after the war (pp. 268-70). Further, World War II was not unique, as every other major American war preceding it created similar bursts (p. 267).⁹ Putnam could have added that the Korean, Vietnam, and Cold Wars following World War II may have helped solidify and perpetuate the long civic generation's civic values and habits throughout the 1950s and much of the 1960s.

Putnam notes that the “war fostered social solidarity in yet another way—by accentuating civic and economic equality” (p. 271). For one, wars

6. In addition, Putnam presents trends in philanthropic generosity from 1929 to 1998 (p. 124). Putnam also presents century-long trends in voting (p. 32), but these do not follow the general pattern cited above, except with regard to a steady decline since 1960.

7. Such data show declines in participation in campaigns, political parties, local politics, and club meetings, as well as declines in church attendance, generalized trust, charitable giving, and informal socializing.

8. Putnam shows generational change accounting for 50% of the decline, television a distant second at 25%, and time and work pressures and suburban sprawl third at 10% each (pp. 283-84).

9. See also Theda Skocpol et al., *How Americans Became Civic*, in CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY, *supra* note 5, at 27, 38-39, 54-60 (documenting associational bursts after the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and World War I).

foster equality by creating a unique political environment that allows for extraordinarily high marginal tax rates.¹⁰ More importantly, wars have improved the bargaining position of labor by drawing millions from the labor force while simultaneously mobilizing military production and hence increasing demand for less-skilled labor.¹¹ As a result, major wars have resulted in sharp compressions in income, wage, and wealth gaps,¹² and “union membership has historically grown rapidly during and immediately after major wars” (p. 267). The unprecedented levels of equality and union density achieved during World War II were actually maintained (although not significantly improved) for a few decades during the postwar years.¹³ This historically unusual period of “rising tides lifting all boats” was arguably the result of World War II’s tremendous aftereffects¹⁴ and the military spending of the Korean and Vietnam Wars and the Cold War generally.¹⁵ Outside of such unique war-related circumstances—during the Progressive Era, the 1920s, and the last three decades—American economic history has generally been one of ever-growing inequality.¹⁶

10. MICHAEL J. GRAETZ & DEBORAH H. SCHENK, *FEDERAL INCOME TAXATION* 8-9 (4th ed. 2001) (noting that marginal rates peaked at ninety-four percent by the end of World War II).

11. E.g., JEFFREY G. WILLIAMSON & PETER H. LINDERT, *AMERICAN INEQUALITY* 81 (1980); see also RICHARD B. DU BOFF, *ACCUMULATION & POWER* 91 (1989) (noting that the withdrawal of 12.1 million people from the civilian labor force in World War II reduced unemployment to 1.2% in 1944); Claudia Goldin & Robert A. Margo, *The Wage Structure in the United States at Mid-Century*, 107 Q.J. ECON. 1, 23-28 (1992) (arguing that the labor market pressures of World War II, perhaps in combination with the policies of the National War Labor Board, had “large effects on the wage structure”).

12. Putnam reviews the compression in income and wealth gaps during World War II (p. 271). See also WILLIAMSON & LINDERT, *supra* note 11, at 49, 77, 81 (documenting the “remarkable egalitarian impact” of World War I).

13. PAUL RYSCAVAGE, *INCOME INEQUALITY IN AMERICA* 47-48 (1998) (noting the remarkable “constancy” in income inequality between 1947 and 1973); WILLIAMSON & LINDERT, *supra* note 11, at 92 (calling the stability in income inequality during the postwar years “extraordinary”). Putnam presents U.S. trends in union membership (p. 81).

14. See, e.g., DU BOFF, *supra* note 11, at 95-101 (arguing that the remarkably rapid economic growth of the postwar years arose due to high levels of Cold War military spending, stockpiled productivity-enhancing innovations, demand coming from European trading partners ravaged by war, and pent-up U.S. consumer demand for durables arising from depression and wartime taxes and rationing); FRANK LEVY, *DOLLARS AND DREAMS* 24, 48 (1987) (same); LESTER THUROW, *GENERATING INEQUALITY* 111 (1975) (noting the postwar endurance of war-generated norms regarding wage differentials); Edwin Amenta & Theda Skocpol, *Reforming the New Deal: World War II and the Development of Social Provision in the United States*, in *THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES* 81 (Margaret Weir et al. eds., 1998) (documenting the expansiveness of war-generated social welfare programs for veterans); Goldin & Margo, *supra* note 11, at 28-32 (arguing that the World War II compression in pay ratios endured after the war in part because the GI Bill of Rights greatly increased the supply of college-educated workers).

15. DU BOFF, *supra* note 11, at 95-101. In today’s dollars, the costs of the Vietnam and Korean Wars were \$572 and \$400 billion, respectively, compared with \$577 billion for World War I, \$4.7 trillion for World War II, and a mere \$80 billion for the Persian Gulf War. *Snapshots: The Cost of War*, USA TODAY, Oct. 1, 2001, at A1 (graphic). Military spending in the 1950s averaged more than ten percent of GDP, compared with about four percent in the 1990s. COUNCIL OF ECON. ADVISERS, *ECONOMIC REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT* 398 tbl.B-77 (2000).

16. For data showing growing economic inequality in the Progressive Era and the 1920s, see WILLIAMSON & LINDERT, *supra* note 11, at 49, 51, 53, 75-82. For a review of trends in wage,

Elsewhere in the book, Putnam suggests that both greater equality and higher union densities are closely related to social capital. Noting that “[s]ocial capital and economic equality moved in tandem through most of the twentieth century” and that “American states with the highest levels of social capital are precisely the states most characterized by economic . . . equality,” Putnam demonstrates convincingly that “equality and fraternity are strongly *positively* correlated” (pp. 358-59). Further, labor unions “provided one of the most common organizational affiliations among American working men (and less so, working women)” (pp. 80-81).

II

Given the important role war played in fostering the “long civic generation’s” civic norms and activity, one could easily conclude that an extraordinary system-changing cataclysm like war is necessary to foster mid-century levels of social capital and civic engagement. Perhaps, as numerous theorists have long observed from across the political spectrum, a typical free-market economy, operating under “normal” (i.e. peacetime) conditions, will simply not be likely to generate particularly high levels of civic virtue or participation.¹⁷ As William Schambra puts the point from the right, “The marketplace produces and celebrates materialistic individualism that inevitably distracts the citizen from his civic obligations and erodes the authority of family, church, and neighborhood . . .”¹⁸ Or as political economist Gar Alperovitz notes from the left, “personal self-seeking behavior, and individualistic ideas, egotism, and greed, ‘come with the territory,’ as it were,” of a capitalist system.¹⁹

Moreover, the twentieth-century U.S. peacetime political economy has tended to produce ever-increasing levels of economic inequality and declining (or very low) union densities. Indeed, only war (and possibly major economic collapses like the Great Depression²⁰) has historically been able to reverse these trends.²¹

income, and wealth inequality over the last thirty years, see LAWRENCE MISHLE ET AL., *THE STATE OF WORKING AMERICA 2000-2001*, at 50, 143-47, 258-62 (2001).

17. Putnam notes the tradition of such thinking among the left (p. 282). See also ROBERT LANE, *THE LOSS OF HAPPINESS IN MARKET DEMOCRACIES* (2000) (reviewing and analyzing arguments that market societies foster alienation and materialism). For a good review of similar concerns that have been voiced from a conservative perspective, see William A. Schambra, *Is There Civic Life Beyond the Great National Community?*, in *CIVIL SOCIETY, DEMOCRACY, AND CIVIC RENEWAL*, *supra* note 5, at 89, 91-93.

18. Schambra, *supra* note 17, at 91.

19. Gar Alperovitz, *The Coming Break in Liberal Consciousness*, *CHRISTIANITY & CRISIS*, May 3, 1986, at 59, 62.

20. The Great Depression may also have had a compressing effect on income inequality (because the top of the income ladder had so much further to fall). WILLIAMSON & LINDERT, *supra* note 11, at 82-86. But see Ian McLean, *The Distributional Impact of the Depression in the United States*, in *INCOME DISTRIBUTION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE* 189 (Y.S. Brenner et al.

Putnam insists, however, that “it is not . . . [his] argument that world war is a necessary or praiseworthy means toward the goal of civic reengagement” (p. 275). But he provides no convincing arguments to support the suggestion that 1950s levels of social capital can be achieved without war, no reason to reject the notion that the normal workings of a free-market economy in a peacetime context create norms and economic conditions that will systemically work against all attempts to revitalize or rebuild civic engagement back to its postwar levels.

Putnam does argue that the (largely) war-free decades at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, dubbed the “Gilded Age” and the “Progressive Era,” provide evidence that a major civic renewal can occur during peacetime. Despite being periods “uncannily like our own” (p. 367), and despite the absence of major war, the Gilded Age and Progressive Era were times when “civic inventiveness reached a crescendo unmatched in American history” (p. 384). Putnam then goes on to demonstrate the existence of this “inventiveness” with historical anecdotes and with data on the number of associations per capita and the number of associations founded during this period (pp. 384-397).

It is crucial, though, to notice Putnam’s shift in this chapter from civic engagement, which refers to the number of people actually participating in civic activity, to civic inventiveness, which refers to the rate at which associations are being founded. Throughout the rest of the book, Putnam insists that only civic engagement is really relevant to social capital formation, since actual civic participation is necessary for the generation of social networks and norms of generalized reciprocity and trust. “Social entrepreneurs” (p. 396) can be forming associations in abundance, but if nobody is participating in these groups, the organizations do little, if anything, to create social capital. Indeed, Putnam uses just such an argument to dismiss the doubling of nonprofit voluntary associations between 1968 and 1997; many of these newer organizations are simply “mailing list organizations,” whose so-called members participate only by mailing a check (pp. 49-51). When it comes to the Progressive Era chapter, however, Putnam suddenly appears to think data on the number of associations suffice (pp. 384-85), and presents no data on actual citizen

eds., 1991) (presenting data showing the inequality of family incomes rising substantially between 1929 and 1933). In addition, the unique economic circumstances of the crisis led to marked unionizing pressures, which, in turn, arguably allowed for the passage of the National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act of 1935. Richard B. Freeman, *Spurts in Union Growth: Defining Moments in Social Processes*, in *THE DEFINING MOMENT* 265 (Michael D. Bordo et al. eds., 1998).

21. For the trends in income inequality demonstrating this point, see *supra* notes 12-16 and accompanying text. See also LESTER THUROW, *THE ZERO-SUM SOCIETY* 199-200 (1980) (noting that “[g]reat social shocks, such as wars and economic depressions, seem necessary to change specifications of relative deprivation” and that “[n]o one knows how to engineer such changes in less extreme situations”).

participation in these associations to support his argument. As for the rest of the book, the very limited number of century-spanning trends in civic engagement Putnam presents suggest that civic participation rates—including membership rates in the national chapter-based associations—were significantly lower during the Progressive Era than they are today.²²

Regardless of whether more associations founded during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era were structured to encourage active participation among their members through local chapters (a contention that Putnam provides no hard data to support), this example demonstrates only that a supply of civic infrastructure can be built by social entrepreneurs in a peacetime context—a supply later used extensively by the more civic generations of the 1940s and 1950s. It says nothing about whether the dramatic and enduring increase in citizen demand for joining and participating in these associations would have occurred without the wars that followed. The conclusion that the civic infrastructure built before World War I was sufficient or even necessary to create the long civic generation is both unwarranted and contrary to Putnam's analysis of the forces behind that generation elsewhere in the book. Indeed, Putnam's current optimism about an impending civic renewal, despite decades of neglect in building a fresh supply of participation-facilitating organizations, suggests that all America needs is a war climate to generate the demand for civic participation.

III

It is, of course, too early to tell whether the current war on terrorism will actually be of sufficient magnitude and duration to give the current generation an enduring lesson in civic involvement.²³ It is also too early to tell whether, as before in our history,²⁴ this war-generated solidarity will have unfortunate "illiberal effects" (p. 358).²⁵ Regardless, the question of how higher levels of social capital can be generated in a peacetime economy remains important, since the nation clearly cannot rely on war to bail it out every time its stock of social capital gets too low. Further,

22. See *supra* note 6 and accompanying text for a review of the century-spanning trends. Two of these trends do show membership rates increasing in the pre-World War I years (pp. 54, 84). One cannot, however, conclude from such a small sample that social capital in general increased during the Progressive Era.

23. This war also might not have the positive economic effects of past wars. Richard W. Stevenson, *A Different Kind of Wartime Economy*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 9, 2001, at B12.

24. The Red Scare, Japanese internment, and McCarthyism are only some of this country's most egregious examples of such war-related oppression. See generally ROBERT JUSTIN GOLDSTEIN, *POLITICAL REPRESSION IN MODERN AMERICA* (1989) (documenting the history of government oppression in the twentieth century).

25. Putnam notes that such effects are "particularly likely" (p. 358) when a community is based on "strong out-group antagonism" (p. 23).

Putnam demonstrates convincingly in the last third of the book that social capital is associated with too many unequivocal social goods—education, children’s welfare, safe neighborhoods, economic prosperity, health, happiness, and democracy—just to relinquish all hopes of achieving wartime levels in peacetime. Can we, to ask a question posed by William James during the Progressive Era, find a “Moral Equivalent of War”?²⁶

At a minimum, the fact that an extraordinary, society-altering²⁷ global cataclysm like world war has previously been necessary to reach such high levels of social capital suggests that a major civic renewal in a peacetime context is going to require more than building “twenty-first-century equivalent[s] of the Boy Scouts” (p. 401) or Rotary Clubs. Instead, it will entail identifying those structural aspects of an American peacetime free-market economy that tend to create “anti-civic” norms and economic conditions, and finding structural solutions that can, like war, reverse these tendencies. Part of this project might involve analyzing the effects of increasing inequality on civic engagement and proposing new politically and economically viable egalitarian strategies that have the capacity to reverse these trends.²⁸ Part of it might also involve exploring the effects of international trade and capital mobility on community economic stability (and hence on community in general)—particularly in light of the fact that the long civic generation developed its civic tendencies during a period when international trade was an unusually small part of the U.S. economy due to global war- and depression-related conditions.²⁹ Structural examinations such as these have just begun and must continue through the current crisis if a “moral equivalent of war” is to be found.

—Preston Quesenberry

26. WILLIAM JAMES, *A Moral Equivalent of War*, in *THE WRITING OF WILLIAM JAMES* 660 (John J. McDermott ed., Random House 1967) (1910).

27. For a brief review of just how extraordinary the impact of World War II on the U.S. economy was, see Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Way We Won: America’s Economic Breakthrough During World War II*, *AM. PROSPECT*, Fall 1992, at 66.

28. Eric Uslaner has attempted to demonstrate that rising inequality over the last thirty years accounts for almost two-thirds of the decline in generalized trust in the United States. ERIC USLANER, *THE MORAL FOUNDATIONS OF TRUST* ch. 6 (forthcoming 2002), available at <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/uslaner/research.htm>.

29. Putnam himself suggests that the “accelerating nationalization and globalization of our economic structures” may be a valid explanation for the decline in social capital and cites an important study exploring this thesis (pp. 282-83). The study Putnam cites is Charles Heying, *Civic Elites and Corporate Delocalization: An Alternative Explanation for Declining Civic Engagement*, in *BEYOND TOCQUEVILLE*, *supra* note 1, at 101. For a comprehensive exploration of the effects of capital mobility on communities and policies aimed at securing community economic stability, see THAD WILLIAMSON ET AL., *MAKING A PLACE FOR COMMUNITY* (forthcoming 2002). For a brief history of international trade, see DANI RODRIK, *HAS GLOBALIZATION GONE TOO FAR?* 7-9 (1997).