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Book Reviews

Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster 2000. ISBN 0-684-83283-6, USD 26.00.

In 1995, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam caused something of a stir in American public opinion with his article 'Bowling Alone' (*Journal of Democracy* 6(1), pp. 65-78). In this article, Putnam observed that although bowling alleys do remain very popular in the United States, fewer people are joining formally organized bowling leagues. Instead, bowlers prefer to gather on an informal basis, with friends or family members. This decline of organized bowling is, according to Putnam, just one indication of an overall erosion of social and civic life in the United States. While Alexis de Tocqueville, in the first half of the 19th century, described America as a 'nation of joiners', Putnam argued that, at the end of the 20th century, American citizens are increasingly disconnecting from their communities. Later on, he acknowledged that the title 'Bowling Alone' was not really an apt metaphor: very few people go out to bowl on their own. The real change is that they increasingly prefer informal groups to formal bowling leagues.

But the title stuck, and since 1995 Putnam has become something of an academic superstar in the United States, even receiving an invitation to the White House. His message of the erosion of social cohesion and the growth of individualism was well received, given the prevailing climate of cultural pessimism. Putnam's increased status also implied access to a flood of research funds and assistants, and thanks to this huge research effort, the 1995 article has now been turned into a major new book. *Bowling Alone* (the book) is, more than anything else, an impressive collection of facts and figures, demonstrating that social cohesion in the United States is indeed diminishing. After the publication of his article, several authors had questioned the validity of Putnam's pessimistic observations, and although their names are seldom mentioned in this new volume, the facts and figures were clearly gathered as a reply to this criticism. To document the long-term trend of decline in civic engagement, Putnam not only relies on the usual data from the General Social Survey and the National Election Studies, but also on two series of commercial surveys about life style and consumption patterns. Although the inclusion of these surveys offers a lot of innovative information, the question about their reliability is treated but cursorily. For example, it is not

mentioned until page 420, in one of the appendices, that one of these commercial surveys was limited to married couples in the period 1975-1985, while it also relied on quota sampling. This clearly poses problems about the validity of the data, and the professional reader would certainly want more information about the way in which these surveys were conducted. In the present volume, we are more or less asked to simply believe the author when he states that he has controlled for all of these things. Given the very good reputation of Putnam's previous work, and the bountiful availability of research assistants, it is indeed very likely that he controlled for all of these factors, but one would expect to find all the necessary information in the book to judge for oneself. In general, methodological explanations are a bit lacking, because Putnam clearly wanted this book to be accessible to the lay reader as well (although the website *bowlingalone.com* solves a lot of these problems). But, even with the scant information we do get, Putnam convincingly makes his point: almost any indicator of civiness or social interaction has clearly declined since the 1960s. Americans are less inclined to join organizations and they have less trust both in their fellow citizens and the government. By relying on the life style surveys, Putnam is even able to complement the picture: Americans also talk to their neighbours less often; they have abandoned real restaurants in favour of fast food outlets; they write fewer letters; and they spend less time with their spouse and children. In general: they simply communicate less than in the 1960s. And, as Putnam already demonstrated in his 1993 book on Italy, these kinds of networks among citizens are crucial for maintaining a democratic political culture. If these trends continue, Putnam predicts, the United States will become an atomistic society, with all possible dire consequences: social disintegration, crime, higher suicide rates, economic decline, etc.

Despite the wealth of statistical material, from a theoretical point of view, this volume contains little new compared to the original 1995 article. The argument is now better supported by empirical data, but the original argument remains more or less the same. This volume clearly lacks the theoretical sophistication that was so characteristic of its predecessor *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton University Press 1993). In fact the reasoning of *Bowling Alone* is rather straightforward: the author argues that social life is eroding in the US, he compiles a lot of evidence to prove this hypothesis, and he concludes that this is a bad thing for American society and democracy. This lack of theoretical sophistication is also evident in the chapters where Putnam tries to explain this loss of social cohesion. He argues that it is wrong to see this decline as a simple and inevitable consequence of modernization. After all, back in the 1920s the standard of living was rising high above traditional levels, while American society also experienced processes of urbanization and a rapid growth of the educational system. And yet, it is exactly in the 1920s that participation levels rose substantially and that all kinds of new organizations were founded. The current decline in participation levels cannot be explained therefore by these structural modernization trends, but have to be explained with more cultural variables.

Putnam sees four major causes for the erosion of American community life. Firstly,

generational replacement: the older 'civic' generation, which grew up before World War II, is being replaced by a more hedonistic younger generation. Second, the increasing penetration of television in American homes and minds. Third, processes of suburbanization are disconnecting citizens from their local community. And lastly, increased work pressure leaves less time for family obligations and community involvement. However, these explanations are developed only poorly. Generation effects, in themselves, are not sufficient as an explanation: it makes more sense to treat generational replacement as a mechanism through which other more structural causes exert their influence, rather than as an explanation in itself. For the other three culprits, we can establish a sound causal mechanism: if people spend more time in work settings or before their television, of course they will have less time to spare for community life. This causal mechanism is not present in the generation effect: the fact that someone is born in 1964 does not inform us about the reasons why this person should be less involved in associational life than someone who was born in 1937. A real explanation would describe the exact characteristics of these younger generations that lead them to participate less frequently than their parents did. Putnam only gives some hints with regard to these characteristics, by referring to the shared experience of the hardship of World War II. Younger generations did not share such an experience, and therefore they will be less devoted to community life. This line of reasoning shows similarities with the underlying logic in Inglehart's description of the rise of post-materialist values. Both authors state that the post-World War II generations will adhere to different values than older citizens, because of different socialization experiences in their formative youth phase. Their normative positions, however, could not be further apart. Inglehart stresses the fact that these new post-materialist generations are strongly attached to democratic values, while Putnam emphasizes the fact that these self-expressive values seem to dampen the involvement in community affairs.

In the final part of this book, Putnam abandons the role of a political scientist to assume the role of a social activist: he proposes an agenda for the renewal of civic community in the United States. At the recent annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington DC, Putnam defended this move, arguing that political scientists should not confine themselves to a supposedly neutral position, but that they should also be concerned about the societies they live in. Scientists should not be afraid to preach, Putnam argued. However, when we first look at the causes Putnam cites for the decline of civic engagement, and then compare these with his remedial suggestions, we see that his proposals for civic renewal are not really convincing. If generational replacement is indeed the main underlying cause, it is of course impossible to bring the 'lost civic generation' back to life. The second most important cause for the decline of social life is, according to Putnam, the spread of television, whereas television is hardly mentioned in the closing chapter. Questioned about this lacuna during his recent stay at the University of Antwerp, where he received an honorary degree, Putnam replied that talks with network bosses in the United States had convinced him that there is no way that television networks will ever assume a

more socially responsible role. Therefore, his social agenda remains limited to some suggestions about schooling, reducing work pressure, creating new associational forms, etc. It is doubtful whether these suggestions, if implemented, would be able to reverse the declining trend in American civic life. Although Putnam himself explicitly denies this, some parts of this book seem inspired by fond memories of the close-knit communities of the 1950s. New forms of social and civic engagement are rather easily dismissed as having little effect, although for the moment we do not have any real research results about the social consequences of these new interaction methods. Putnam cannot produce real convincing evidence that the traditional face-to-face associations, which were prevalent in the 1950s, really strengthen social ties more effectively than contemporary, more network-like associational forms.

Despite these shortcomings, there is little doubt that this book will be widely quoted and that it will become something of a standard reference. There is no other book that offers such conclusive evidence about the decline of traditional social ties, at least in American society. This fact having been firmly established, the book can only be considered as a starting point for a whole new discussion about the question whether social cohesion can be maintained by the new, more fluid interaction styles which are rapidly replacing the traditional associations and institutions in Western societies.

Marc Hooghe

Todd Landman, *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics: An Introduction*. London: Routledge 2000. Hardback ISBN 0-415-18727-3; paperback ISBN 0-415-18728-1. £ 15. 99.

Real challenges face the scholar who seeks to write a textbook on methodology that is simultaneously of use and of interest to students on comparative politics courses. Students are typically drawn to comparative politics because of the interesting substantive questions raised in the field, not because of issues of methods. Indeed, for most students, methodological matters seem abstract and perhaps even dull in comparison with exciting empirical questions.

Todd Landman's new book succeeds admirably at avoiding a dry discussion of methodology, while at the same time offering much advice that will be helpful to advanced undergraduate students. The success of the book arises from its focus on actual examples from comparative studies of nation-states. The range of empirical studies covered is, in fact, quite remarkable, and includes a good many of the leading works in the field. These studies are vividly illustrated using many helpful figures, tables and text boxes.

The book is structured into three parts, which offer a convenient basis for organizing this discussion. In part one, Landman develops separate chapters on why we compare nations, how we compare nations, and the problems of comparing nations. Using

many empirical examples to illustrate his points, he argues that we compare nations to facilitate description and classification, and to allow for hypothesis testing and perhaps prediction. The discussion is useful, though it does downplay the role of comparison in the discovery and generation of new hypotheses. In addition, the treatment of key methodological concepts such as cases, units of analysis, variables, and levels of analysis is too brief to be of much use to beginning students.

Landman's analysis of how to compare nations focuses on the distinction between large-*N*, small-*N*, and case study research designs. He usefully reviews the received understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each tradition, drawing heavily on pioneering insights of Arend Lijphart and the more recent work of David Collier. I was somewhat less satisfied with Landman's analysis of the problems of comparison, a discussion that focuses on the small-*N* problem, conceptual validity, and selection bias. For instance, Landman fails to adequately illustrate the degrees of freedom problem that confronts much comparative work, and he mistakenly assumes that selection bias will lead scholars to overestimate the importance of certain causal factors (underestimating causal effects is actually the typical effect of selection bias). As a result, Landman characterizes certain studies, such as Skocpol's work on revolutions, as suffering from selection bias when this is not really the case.

Part II is the heart of book, offering separate chapters on five major research areas in comparative politics: economic development and democracy; political violence and social revolution; social movements; transitions to democracy; and institutional design and democratic performance. Each of these chapters is organized into sections on large-*N* studies, small-*N* studies, and single case studies. Landman's coverage of the literature for these topics is extremely impressive, so much so that he ends up offering a literature review that will be of interest to seasoned professors as well as beginning students. I was especially impressed by Landman's treatment of more recent studies from the mid- and late 1990s.

A central goal of the chapters in Part II is to introduce students to the diverse kinds of explanations that have been developed in the field. In this respect, Landman is also quite successful. For example, in the chapter on economic development and democracy, students are presented with an overview of four decades of quantitative research exploring the linkage between development and democracy, culminating with the recent work of Przeworski and collaborators. Attention then turns to small-*N* studies, ranging from the early work of de Schweinitz and Moore to the more recent study by Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens. A final section addresses case study research on development and democratization, such as Putnam's study of civic engagement in Italy. In this chapter and others, Landman uses many arrow diagrams and columns filled with listings of independent and dependent variables to summarize the various relationships proposed by the authors.

Despite its breath, however, Landman's discussion of existing studies is not without limitations. For one thing, the summaries of the different works are often inadequate representations of the authors' arguments. In many cases, the problem is simply one