



BOOK NOTES

Putnam, Robert D., and Lewis M. Feldstein, with Don Cohen. 2003. *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. ix, 318 pp. ISBN 0-7432-3546-0

Better Together is the unofficial sequel to Robert Putnam's much acclaimed *Bowling Alone* (2000). In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam painted us the picture of American social institutions 30 years in decline. Here, Putnam and his co-author state that while they "do not yet see evidence of a general resurgence of social connection or involvement in the public life of the community," over this 30-year period "new social capital was being created . . . even as overall levels of association and participation continued to fall" (pp. 4–5).

To illustrate this, readers of *Better Together* are taken on a tour spanning the United States in which they are exposed to 12 case studies demonstrating the formation of new social capital. While widely diverse in context (for example, we learn about instances of social capital creation ranging from the internal organization of United Parcel Service (UPS) to the Chicago public library system), these case studies are unified by their subjects' reliance upon highly personalized, repeated, face-to-face interaction in small groups—a formula, the authors tell us, that is integral to the effective construction of social capital.

The one case study that stands in partial contrast to this unifying theme is craigslist.org, an Internet-based community consisting of over 1.5 million individuals. Despite this difference, craigslist is similar to the other examples considered in that it operates in an "inside-out" fashion, which is another recurrent factor in successful social capital building. "Inside-out" direction means that the "acting voice," or center of community activity, comes from community members themselves, as opposed to community organizers, leaders, or administrators.

While the overall selection of case studies is good, a disproportionate number of examples rely upon government involvement to make them work. For instance, the Dudley Street Neighborhood

Initiative (Ch. 4), Experience Corps (Ch. 9), the Tupelo model (Ch. 5), the Chicago library (Ch. 2), and Valley Interfaith (Ch. 1) all rely upon state backing or involve activity directed at influencing government. Among the dozen cases considered it seems that only three—craigslist (Ch. 11), Saddleback Church (Ch. 6), and UPS (Ch. 10)—stand as notable exceptions in this regard.

There surely are just as many examples of social capital created out of purely private initiatives that do not look to state involvement to solve their problems. Nevertheless, if readers were to go purely on the presentation in *Better Together* they might not get this impression. Indeed, the notion that privately built social capital is sufficient to surmount collective problems is summarily dismissed. The authors thus tell their readers: “So the argument sometimes heard that civil society alone can solve public issues if only the state would get out of the way is simply silly” (p. 273). The work of Elinor Ostrom (1990), however, among others, suggests that there is nothing “silly” about such a claim at all.

More problematic than this, though, is the fact that while *Better Together* addresses a highly important issue in social science, the role of social capital, as with previous work addressing this issue, what precisely social capital is remains nebulous. In the Introduction we are told that “*social capital* refers to social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and trustworthiness” (p. 2). But this vague and sprawling definition seems to include too much. Perhaps this criticism is unfair. After all, when we hear the term “social capital” we typically have a good idea about what it means, and this idea more or less corresponds to the “definition” provided by Putnam and Feldstein. Nevertheless, readers of *Better Together* cannot but help at points have a strong feeling that all that is being said here is that people have personal relationships with other people, and that this is important for accomplishing ends that might be impossible to accomplish alone.

This failure may also be to blame for what is at times the book’s conspicuous absence of analysis amidst a sea of superb description. Although the final chapter explicitly raises important questions and potential mechanisms at work facilitating the growth of social capital, this discussion is brief and comes too late. To be sure, the 12 chapters preceding the Conclusion make use of fascinating ethnographic

research that is expertly employed to weave a narrative or, as the authors refer to it, “story-telling.” Unfortunately, lacking analysis too often leaves the reader thinking, “Interesting. . . . But so what?”

Despite these problems, Putnam and Feldstein’s work offers several useful insights. For instance, they highlight the use of community “nesting”—the idea of a number of small, intimate communities “nested” in a larger community connecting these small groups. Nesting can operate as a way of resolving the tension between small, personal, homogeneous networks that seem to be required for social capital to grow, and the fact that large, heterogeneous, impersonal contact is required for individuals to realize the gains of widespread interaction. Similarly, the authors point out that the multidimensional nature of our commonality with others provides a way for us to bond with individuals inside our small in-groups while bridging social groups that lie outside our close-knit networks but nonetheless share some similarity with us. This excellent point surely deserves future attention. *Better Together* is no de Tocqueville. (To be fair, what is?) Still, for these insights, it remains worthwhile reading for those interested in the importance of social capital.

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References

- Ostrom, Elinor. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Putnam, Robert D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Friedman, Lawrence J., and Mark D. McGarvie, eds. 2003. *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 480 pp. ISBN 0-521-81989-x

This collection of exceedingly valuable essays, edited by Lawrence J. Friedman and Mark D. McGarvie, comprises a comprehensive historical review of charity, philanthropy, and civility in the United States.

With contributions by these editors and 17 other well-qualified scholars, the end product's quality cannot be in doubt.

The book opens with an introduction by Friedman titled "Philanthropy in America: Historicism and Its Discontents." Part I, "Giving and Caring in Early America, 1601–1861," contains the following chapters: "Giving in America: From Charity to Philanthropy" by Robert A. Gross; "Protestant Missionaries: Pioneers of American Philanthropy" by Amanda Porterfield; "The Origins of Anglo-American Sensibility" by G. J. Barker-Benfield; "The *Dartmouth College* Case and the Legal Design of Civil Society" by Mark D. McGarvie; "Rethinking Assimilation: American Indians and the Practice of Christianity, 1800–1861" by Stephen Warren; and "Antebellum Reform: Salvation, Self-Control, and Social Transformation" by Wendy Gamber. Part II, "The Nationalization and Internationalization of American Philanthropy, 1861–1930," contains the following: "Law, Reconstruction, and African American Education in the Post-Emancipation South" by Roy E. Finkenbine; "Women and Political Culture" by Kathleen D. McCarthy; "From Gift to Foundation: The Philanthropic Lives of Mrs. Russell Sage" by Ruth Crocker; "Curing Evils at Their Source: The Arrival of Scientific Giving" by Judith Sealander; and "Missions to the World: Philanthropy Abroad" by Emily S. Rosenberg. Part III, "Philanthropic Reconstructions, 1930–2001," contains: "Failure and Resilience: Pushing the Limits in Depression and Wartime" by David C. Hammack; "Faith and Good Works: Catholic Giving and Taking" by Mary J. Oates; "In Defense of Diversity: Jewish Thought from Assimilation to Cultural Pluralism" by Stephen J. Whitfield; "Waging the Cold War in the Third World: The Foundations and the Challenges of Development" by Gary R. Hess; "Philanthropy, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Racial Reform" by Claude A. Clegg III; and "The Welfare State and the Careers of Public and Private Institutions Since 1945" by Peter D. Hall. Last there is an "Epilogue: The European Comparison" by William B. Cohen, which is excellent as far as space permits. The European experience over the past four centuries is too diverse for ready comparison with the American. A separate book, or a series, devoted to the European nations would provide the needed basis for comparison.

The book's premise is that American philanthropy has been rooted

in various benefactors' desires to instill their values in groups of our population by donating generous quantities of wealth to benefit those groups. Funding mechanisms, such as foundations, often are set up to be self-perpetuating so that the work of instilling the original values may continue into the indefinite future. Nearly every chapter is a thorough treatment of its subject.

Many philanthropists were sincerely motivated toward human betterment, and some individuals became so active on behalf of instilling values that they were known as social reformers. Some attained such prominence that their insights were widely sought, and they lectured and wrote for publication to extend their message. They were aided by academics, clergy, and other supporters who taught and preached a social gospel, which formed an active and important Social Gospel movement. The book could have focused more sharply on the Social Gospel movement.

However, not all philanthropy was for the purpose of instilling values leading to human betterment; some philanthropy was self-serving. Thorstein B. Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) describes wealthy people who displayed their benefaction for the social status it brought them. Still, regardless of the motivation, their philanthropy benefited people in need and deserves appreciation. To some extent, it even set a wholesome example. Fred Roy Yoder, who studied under Veblen and was greatly influenced by Veblen's theory of the leisure class, wrote: "The conventions of the leisure class also tend to infiltrate down through the lower classes . . . the social superior is imitated by the social inferior . . . the rich are imitated by the poor" (quoted in Vaughn 2001: 980). A well-done chapter on Veblen's theory of the leisure class would have fit nicely to round out this book.

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Reference

- Vaughn, G. (2001). "The Influence of Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class on Rural Sociologist Fred Roy Yoder." *Journal of Economic Issues* 35: 979-993.