

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

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" (p. 4-5).

To illustrate this, readers of *Better Together* are taken on a tour spanning the United States in which they are exposed to twelve case studies demonstrating the formation of new social capital. While widely diverse in context (for instance, we learn about instances of social capital creation ranging from the internal organization of United Parcel Service 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, 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—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 (chap. 4), Experience Corps (chap. 9), the Tupelo model (chap. 5), the Chicago Library (chap. 2) and Valley Interfaith (chap. 1) all rely upon state backing or involve activity directed at influencing government. Among the dozen cases considered, it seems that only three—craigslist (chap. 11), Saddleback Church (chap. 6) and UPS (chap. 10)—stand as notable exceptions in this regard.

Surely, though, there are just as many examples of social capital created out of purely private initiatives, which do not look to state involvement to solve their problems, as there are those that do. 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. Thus the authors 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—like other work addressing this issue that came before it, 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,” but this vague and sprawling definition seems to include too much (p. 2). Perhaps this criticism is an unfair one. 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 twelve chapters preceding the Conclusion make use of fascinating ethnographic research which 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.

Peter T. Leeson
Harvard University
and
George Mason University

References

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