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The
Collapse
and Revival
of American
Community

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CHAPTER I

Thinking about Social Change in America

NO ONE IS LEFT from the Glenn Valley, Pennsylvania, Bridge Club who can tell us precisely when or why the group broke up, even though its forty-odd members were still playing regularly as recently as 1990, just as they had done for more than half a century. The shock in the Little Rock, Arkansas, Sertoma club, however, is still painful: in the mid-1980s, nearly fifty people had attended the weekly luncheon to plan activities to help the hearing- and speech-impaired, but a decade later only seven regulars continued to show up.

The Roanoke, Virginia, chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been an active force for civil rights since 1918, but during the 1990s membership withered from about 2,500 to a few hundred. By November 1998 even a heated contest for president drew only fifty-seven voting members. Black city councillor Carroll Swain observed ruefully, "Some people today are a wee bit complacent until something jumps up and bites them." VFW Post 2378 in Berwyn, Illinois, a blue-collar suburb of Chicago, was long a bustling "home away from home" for local veterans and a kind of working-class country club for the neighborhood, hosting wedding receptions and class reunions. By 1999, however, membership had so dwindled that it was a struggle just to pay taxes on the yellow brick post hall. Although numerous veterans of Vietnam and the post-Vietnam military lived in the area, Tom Kissell, national membership director for the VFW, observed, "Kids today just aren't joiners."¹

The Charity League of Dallas had met every Friday morning for fifty-seven years to sew, knit, and visit, but on April 30, 1999, they held their last

meeting; the average age of the group had risen to eighty, the last new member had joined two years earlier, and president Pat Dilbeck said ruefully, "I feel like this is a sinking ship." Precisely three days later and 1,200 miles to the northeast, the Vassar alumnae of Washington, D.C., closed down their fifty-first—and last—annual book sale. Even though they aimed to sell more than one hundred thousand books to benefit college scholarships in the 1999 event, co-chair Alix Myerson explained, the volunteers who ran the program "are in their sixties, seventies, and eighties. They're dying, and they're not replaceable." Meanwhile, as Tewksbury Memorial High School (TMHS), just north of Boston, opened in the fall of 1999, forty brand-new royal blue uniforms newly purchased for the marching band remained in storage, since only four students signed up to play. Roger Whittlesey, TMHS band director, recalled that twenty years earlier the band numbered more than eighty, but participation had waned ever since.² Somehow in the last several decades of the twentieth century all these community groups and tens of thousands like them across America began to fade.

It wasn't so much that old members dropped out—at least not any more rapidly than age and the accidents of life had always meant. But community organizations were no longer continuously revitalized, as they had been in the past, by freshets of new members. Organizational leaders were flummoxed. For years they assumed that their problem must have local roots or at least that it was peculiar to their organization, so they commissioned dozens of studies to recommend reforms.³ The slowdown was puzzling because for as long as anyone could remember, membership rolls and activity lists had lengthened steadily.

In the 1960s, in fact, community groups across America had seemed to stand on the threshold of a new era of expanded involvement. Except for the civic drought induced by the Great Depression, their activity had shot up year after year, cultivated by assiduous civic gardeners and watered by increasing affluence and education. Each annual report registered rising membership. Churches and synagogues were packed, as more Americans worshiped together than only a few decades earlier, perhaps more than ever in American history.

Moreover, Americans seemed to have time on their hands. A 1958 study under the auspices of the newly inaugurated Center for the Study of Leisure at the University of Chicago fretted that "the most dangerous threat hanging over American society is the threat of leisure," a startling claim in the decade in which the Soviets got the bomb.⁴ *Life* magazine echoed the warning about the new challenge of free time: "Americans now face a glut of leisure," ran a headline in February 1964. "The task ahead: how to take life easy."

As a matter of fact, mankind now possesses for the first time the tools and knowledge to create whatever kind of world he wants. . . . Despite our Protestant ethic, there are many signs that the message is beginning to

get through to some people. . . . Not only are Americans flocking into bowling leagues and garden clubs, they are satisfying their gregarious urges in countless neighborhood committees to improve the local roads and garbage collections and to hound their public servants into doing what the name implies.⁵

The civic-minded World War II generation was, as its own John F. Kennedy proclaimed at his inauguration, picking up the torch of leadership, not only in the nation's highest office, but in cities and towns across the land. Summarizing dozens of studies, political scientist Robert E. Lane wrote in 1959 that "the ratio of political activists to the general population, and even the ratio of male activists to the male population, has generally increased over the past fifty years." As the 1960s ended, sociologists Daniel Bell and Virginia Held reported that "there is more participation than ever before in America . . . and more opportunity for the active interested person to express his personal and political concerns."⁶ Even the simplest political act, voting, was becoming ever more common. From 1920, when women got the vote, through 1960, turnout in presidential elections had risen at the rate of 1.6 percent every four years, so on a simple straight-line projection it seemed reasonable, as a leading political scientist later observed, to expect turnout to be nearly 70 percent and rising on the nation's two hundredth birthday in 1976.⁷

By 1965 disrespect for public life, so endemic in our history, seemed to be waning. Gallup pollsters discovered that the number of Americans who would like to see their children "go into politics as a life's work" had nearly doubled over little more than a decade. Although this gauge of esteem for politics stood at only 36 percent, it had never before been recorded so high, nor has it since. More strikingly, Americans felt increased confidence in their neighbors. The proportion that agreed that "most people can be trusted," for example, rose from an already high 66 percent during and after World War II to a peak of 77 percent in 1964.⁸

The fifties and sixties were hardly a "golden age," especially for those Americans who were marginalized because of their race or gender or social class or sexual orientation. Segregation, by race legally and by gender socially, was the norm, and intolerance, though declining, was still disturbingly high. Environmental degradation had only just been exposed by Rachel Carson, and Betty Friedan had not yet deconstructed the feminine mystique. Grinding rural poverty had still to be discovered by the national media. Infant mortality, a standard measure of public health, stood at twenty-six per one thousand births—forty-four per one thousand for black infants—in 1960, nearly four times worse than those indexes would be at the end of the century. America in *Life* was white, straight, Christian, comfortable, and (in the public square, at least) male.⁹ Social reformers had their work cut out for them. However, en-

agement in community affairs and the sense of shared identity and reciprocity had never been greater in modern America, so the prospects for broad-based civic mobilization to address our national failings seemed bright.

The signs of burgeoning civic vitality were also favorable among the younger generation, as the first of the baby boomers approached college. Dozens of studies confirmed that education was by far the best predictor of engagement in civic life, and universities were in the midst of the most far-reaching expansion in American history. Education seemed the key to both greater tolerance and greater social involvement. Simultaneously shamed and inspired by the quickening struggle for civil rights launched by young African Americans in the South, white colleges in the North began to awaken from the silence of the fifties. Describing the induction of this new generation into the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, sociologist Doug McAdam emphasizes their self-assurance:

We were a "can do" people, who accomplished whatever we set out to do. We had licked the Depression, turned the tide in World War II, and rebuilt Europe after the war. . . . Freedom Summer was an audacious undertaking consistent with the exaggerated sense of importance and potency shared by the privileged members of America's postwar generation.¹⁰

The baby boom meant that America's population was unusually young, whereas civic involvement generally doesn't bloom until middle age. In the short run, therefore, our youthful demography actually tended to dampen the ebullience of civil society. But that very bulge at the bottom of the nation's demographic pyramid boded well for the future of community organizations, for they could look forward to swelling membership rolls in the 1980s, when the boomers would reach the peak "joining" years of the life cycle. And in the meantime, the bull session buzz about "participatory democracy" and "all power to the people" seemed to augur ever more widespread engagement in community affairs. One of America's most acute social observers prophesied in 1968, "Participatory democracy has all along been the political style (if not the slogan) of the American middle and upper class. It will become a more widespread style as more persons enter into those classes."¹¹ Never in our history had the future of civic life looked brighter.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT to civic and social life in American communities is the subject of this book. In recent years social scientists have framed concerns about the changing character of American society in terms of the concept of "social capital." By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital—tools and training that enhance individual productivity—the core idea of

social capital theory is that social networks have value. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups.

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called "civic virtue." The difference is that "social capital" calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.

The term *social capital* itself turns out to have been independently invented at least six times over the twentieth century, each time to call attention to the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties. The first known use of the concept was not by some cloistered theoretician, but by a practical reformer of the Progressive Era—L. J. Hanifan, state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia. Writing in 1916 to urge the importance of community involvement for successful schools, Hanifan invoked the idea of "social capital" to explain why. For Hanifan, social capital referred to

those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit. . . . The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself. . . . If he comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the coöperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors.¹²

Hanifan's account of social capital anticipated virtually all the crucial elements in later interpretations, but his conceptual invention apparently attracted no notice from other social commentators and disappeared without a trace. But like sunken treasure recurrently revealed by shifting sands and tides, the same idea was independently rediscovered in the 1950s by Canadian sociologists to characterize the club memberships of arriviste suburbanites, in the 1960s by urbanist Jane Jacobs to laud neighborliness in the modern metropolis, in the 1970s by economist Glenn Loury to analyze the social legacy of slavery, and in the 1980s by French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu and by German economist Ekkehart Schlicht to underline the social and economic resources embodied in social networks. Sociologist James S. Coleman put the term

firmly and finally on the intellectual agenda in the late 1980s, using it (as Hanifan had originally done) to highlight the social context of education.¹³

As this array of independent coinages indicates, social capital has both an individual and a collective aspect—a private face and a public face. First, individuals form connections that benefit our own interests. One pervasive strategem of ambitious job seekers is “networking,” for most of us get our jobs because of whom we know, not what we know—that is, our social capital, not our human capital. Economic sociologist Ronald Burt has shown that executives with bounteous Rolodex files enjoy faster career advancement. Nor is the private return to social capital limited to economic rewards. As Claude S. Fischer, a sociologist of friendship, has noted, “Social networks are important in all our lives, often for finding jobs, more often for finding a helping hand, companionship, or a shoulder to cry on.”¹⁴

If individual clout and companionship were all there were to social capital, we’d expect foresighted, self-interested individuals to invest the right amount of time and energy in creating or acquiring it. However, social capital also can have “externalities” that affect the wider community, so that not all the costs and benefits of social connections accrue to the person making the contact.¹⁵ As we shall see later in this book, a well-connected individual in a poorly connected society is not as productive as a well-connected individual in a well-connected society. And even a poorly connected individual may derive some of the spillover benefits from living in a well-connected community. If the crime rate in my neighborhood is lowered by neighbors keeping an eye on one another’s homes, I benefit even if I personally spend most of my time on the road and never even nod to another resident on the street.

Social capital can thus be simultaneously a “private good” and a “public good.” Some of the benefit from an investment in social capital goes to bystanders, while some of the benefit redounds to the immediate interest of the person making the investment. For example, service clubs, like Rotary or Lions, mobilize local energies to raise scholarships or fight disease at the same time that they provide members with friendships and business connections that pay off personally.

Social connections are also important for the rules of conduct that they sustain. Networks involve (almost by definition) mutual obligations; they are not interesting as mere “contacts.” Networks of community engagement foster sturdy norms of reciprocity: I’ll do this for you now, in the expectation that you (or perhaps someone else) will return the favor. “Social capital is akin to what Tom Wolfe called ‘the favor bank’ in his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*,” notes economist Robert Frank.¹⁶ It was, however, neither a novelist nor an economist, but Yogi Berra who offered the most succinct definition of reciprocity: “If you don’t go to somebody’s funeral, they won’t come to yours.”

Sometimes, as in these cases, reciprocity is *specific*: I’ll do this for you if you do that for me. Even more valuable, however, is a norm of *generalized* rec-

iprocity: I’ll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road. The Golden Rule is one formulation of generalized reciprocity. Equally instructive is the T-shirt slogan used by the Gold Beach, Oregon, Volunteer Fire Department to publicize their annual fund-raising effort: “Come to our breakfast, we’ll come to your fire.” “We act on a norm of specific reciprocity,” the firefighters seem to be saying, but onlookers smile because they recognize the underlying norm of generalized reciprocity—the firefighters will come even if you don’t. When Blanche DuBois depended on the kindness of strangers, she too was relying on generalized reciprocity.

A society characterized by generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society, for the same reason that money is more efficient than barter. If we don’t have to balance every exchange instantly, we can get a lot more accomplished. Trustworthiness lubricates social life. Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity. Civic engagement and social capital entail mutual obligation and responsibility for action. As L. J. Hanifan and his successors recognized, social networks and norms of reciprocity can facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. When economic and political dealing is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism and malfeasance are reduced. This is why the diamond trade, with its extreme possibilities for fraud, is concentrated within close-knit ethnic enclaves. Dense social ties facilitate gossip and other valuable ways of cultivating reputation—an essential foundation for trust in a complex society.

Physical capital is not a single “thing,” and different forms of physical capital are not interchangeable. An eggbeater and an aircraft carrier both appear as physical capital in our national accounts, but the eggbeater is not much use for national defense, and the carrier would not be much help with your morning omelet. Similarly, social capital—that is, social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity—comes in many different shapes and sizes with many different uses. Your extended family represents a form of social capital, as do your Sunday school class, the regulars who play poker on your commuter train, your college roommates, the civic organizations to which you belong, the Internet chat group in which you participate, and the network of professional acquaintances recorded in your address book.

Sometimes “social capital,” like its conceptual cousin “community,” sounds warm and cuddly. Urban sociologist Xavier de Souza Briggs, however, properly warns us to beware of a treacly sweet, “kumbaya” interpretation of social capital.¹⁷ Networks and the associated norms of reciprocity are generally good for those inside the network, but the external effects of social capital are by no means always positive. It was social capital, for example, that enabled Timothy McVeigh to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. McVeigh’s network of friends, bound together by a norm of reciprocity, enabled him to do what he could not have done alone. Similarly, urban gangs, NIMBY

("not in my backyard") movements, and power elites often exploit social capital to achieve ends that are antisocial from a wider perspective. Indeed, it is rhetorically useful for such groups to obscure the difference between the pro-social and antisocial consequences of community organizations. When Floridians objected to plans by the Ku Klux Klan to "adopt a highway," Jeff Coleman, grand wizard of the Royal Knights of the KKK, protested, "Really, we're just like the Lions or the Elks. We want to be involved in the community."¹⁸

Social capital, in short, can be directed toward malevolent, antisocial purposes, just like any other form of capital.¹⁹ (McVeigh also relied on physical capital, like the explosive-laden truck, and human capital, like bomb-making expertise, to achieve his purposes.) Therefore it is important to ask how the positive consequences of social capital—mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness—can be maximized and the negative manifestations—sectarianism, ethnocentrism, corruption—minimized. Toward this end, scholars have begun to distinguish many different forms of social capital.

Some forms involve repeated, intensive, multistranded networks—like a group of steelworkers who meet for drinks every Friday after work and see each other at mass on Sunday—and some are episodic, single stranded, and anonymous, like the faintly familiar face you see several times a month in the supermarket checkout line. Some types of social capital, like a Parent-Teacher Association, are formally organized, with incorporation papers, regular meetings, a written constitution, and connection to a national federation, whereas others, like a pickup basketball game, are more informal. Some forms of social capital, like a volunteer ambulance squad, have explicit public-regarding purposes; some, like a bridge club, exist for the private enjoyment of the members; and some, like the Rotary club mentioned earlier, serve both public and private ends.

Of all the dimensions along which forms of social capital vary, perhaps the most important is the distinction between *bridging* (or inclusive) and *bonding* (or exclusive).²⁰ Some forms of social capital are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups. Examples of bonding social capital include ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based women's reading groups, and fashionable country clubs. Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement, many youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organizations.

Bonding social capital is good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity. Dense networks in ethnic enclaves, for example, provide crucial social and psychological support for less fortunate members of the community, while furnishing start-up financing, markets, and reliable labor for local entrepreneurs. Bridging networks, by contrast, are better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion. Economic sociologist Mark Granovetter has pointed out that when seeking jobs—or political allies—the

"weak" ties that link me to distant acquaintances who move in different circles from mine are actually more valuable than the "strong" ties that link me to relatives and intimate friends whose sociological niche is very like my own. Bonding social capital is, as Xavier de Souza Briggs puts it, good for "getting by," but bridging social capital is crucial for "getting ahead."²¹

Moreover, bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves. In 1829 at the founding of a community lyceum in the bustling whaling port of New Bedford, Massachusetts, Thomas Greene eloquently expressed this crucial insight:

We come from all the divisions, ranks and classes of society . . . to teach and to be taught in our turn. While we mingle together in these pursuits, we shall learn to know each other more intimately; we shall remove many of the prejudices which ignorance or partial acquaintance with each other had fostered. . . . In the parties and sects into which we are divided, we sometimes learn to love our brother at the expense of him whom we do not in so many respects regard as a brother. . . . We may return to our homes and firesides [from the lyceum] with kindlier feelings toward one another, because we have learned to know one another better.²²

Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40. Bonding social capital, by creating strong in-group loyalty, may also create strong out-group antagonism, as Thomas Greene and his neighbors in New Bedford knew, and for that reason we might expect negative external effects to be more common with this form of social capital. Nevertheless, under many circumstances both bridging and bonding social capital can have powerfully positive social effects.

Many groups simultaneously bond along some social dimensions and bridge across others. The black church, for example, brings together people of the same race and religion across class lines. The Knights of Columbus was created to bridge cleavages among different ethnic communities while bonding along religious and gender lines. Internet chat groups may bridge across geography, gender, age, and religion, while being tightly homogeneous in education and ideology. In short, bonding and bridging are not "either-or" categories into which social networks can be neatly divided, but "more or less" dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital.

It would obviously be valuable to have distinct measures of the evolution of these various forms of social capital over time. However, like researchers on global warming, we must make do with the imperfect evidence that we can find, not merely lament its deficiencies. Exhaustive descriptions of social networks in America—even at a single point in time—do not exist. I have found no reliable, comprehensive, nationwide measures of social capital that neatly

distinguish “bridgingness” and “bondingness.” In our empirical account of recent social trends in this book, therefore, this distinction will be less prominent than I would prefer. On the other hand, we must keep this conceptual differentiation at the back of our minds as we proceed, recognizing that bridging and bonding social capital are not interchangeable.

“SOCIAL CAPITAL” is to some extent merely new language for a very old debate in American intellectual circles. Community has warred incessantly with individualism for preeminence in our political hagiology. Liberation from ossified community bonds is a recurrent and honored theme in our culture, from the Pilgrims’ storied escape from religious convention in the seventeenth century to the lyric nineteenth-century paeans to individualism by Emerson (“Self-Reliance”), Thoreau (“Civil Disobedience”), and Whitman (“Song of Myself”) to Sherwood Anderson’s twentieth-century celebration of the struggle against conformism by ordinary citizens in *Winesburg, Ohio* to the latest Clint Eastwood film. Even Alexis de Tocqueville, patron saint of American communitarians, acknowledged the uniquely democratic claim of individualism, “a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.”²³

Our national myths often exaggerate the role of individual heroes and understate the importance of collective effort. Historian David Hackett Fischer’s gripping account of opening night in the American Revolution, for example, reminds us that Paul Revere’s alarm was successful only because of networks of civic engagement in the Middlesex villages. Towns without well-organized local militia, no matter how patriotic their inhabitants, were AWOL from Lexington and Concord.²⁴ Nevertheless, the myth of rugged individualism continues to strike a powerful inner chord in the American psyche.

Debates about the waxing and waning of “community” have been endemic for at least two centuries. “Declensionist narratives”—postmodernist jargon for tales of decline and fall—have a long pedigree in our letters. We seem perennially tempted to contrast our tawdry todays with past golden ages. We apparently share this nostalgic predilection with the rest of humanity. As sociologist Barry Wellman observes,

It is likely that pundits have worried about the impact of social change on communities ever since human beings ventured beyond their caves. . . . In the [past] two centuries many leading social commentators have been gainfully employed suggesting various ways in which large-scale social changes associated with the Industrial Revolution may have affected the

structure and operation of communities. . . . This ambivalence about the consequences of large-scale changes continued well into the twentieth century. Analysts have kept asking if things have, in fact, fallen apart.²⁵

At the conclusion of the twentieth century, ordinary Americans shared this sense of civic malaise. We were reasonably content about our economic prospects, hardly a surprise after an expansion of unprecedented length, but we were not equally convinced that we were on the right track morally or culturally. Of baby boomers interviewed in 1987, 53 percent thought their parents’ generation was better in terms of “being a concerned citizen, involved in helping others in the community,” as compared with only 21 percent who thought their own generation was better. Fully 77 percent said the nation was worse off because of “less involvement in community activities.” In 1992 three-quarters of the U.S. workforce said that “the breakdown of community” and “selfishness” were “serious” or “extremely serious” problems in America. In 1996 only 8 percent of all Americans said that “the honesty and integrity of the average American” were improving, as compared with 50 percent of us who thought we were becoming less trustworthy. Those of us who said that people had become less civil over the preceding ten years outnumbered those who thought people had become more civil, 80 percent to 12 percent. In several surveys in 1999 two-thirds of Americans said that America’s civic life had weakened in recent years, that social and moral values were higher when they were growing up, and that our society was focused more on the individual than the community. More than 80 percent said there should be more emphasis on community, even if that put more demands on individuals.²⁶ Americans’ concern about weakening community bonds may be misplaced or exaggerated, but a decent respect for the opinion of our fellow citizens suggests that we should explore the issue more thoroughly.

It is emphatically not my view that community bonds in America have weakened steadily throughout our history—or even throughout the last hundred years. On the contrary, American history carefully examined is a story of ups and downs in civic engagement, *not just downs*—a story of collapse *and* of renewal. As I have already hinted in the opening pages of this book, within living memory the bonds of community in America were becoming stronger, not weaker, and as I shall argue in the concluding pages, it is within our power to reverse the decline of the last several decades.

Nevertheless, my argument is, at least in appearance, in the declensionist tradition, so it is important to avoid simple nostalgia. Precisely because the theme of this book might lend itself to gauzy self-deception, our methods must be transparent. Is life in communities as we enter the twenty-first century really so different after all from the reality of American communities in the 1950s and

1960s? One way of curbing nostalgia is to count things. Are club meetings really less crowded today than yesterday, or does it just seem so? Do we really know our neighbors less well than our parents did, or is our childhood recollection of neighborhood barbecues suffused with a golden glow of wishful reminiscence? Are friendly poker games less common now, or is it merely that we ourselves have outgrown poker? League bowling may be passé, but how about softball and soccer? Are strangers less trustworthy now? Are boomers and X'ers really less engaged in community life? After all, it was the preceding generation that was once scorned as "silent." Perhaps the younger generation today is no less engaged than their predecessors, but engaged in new ways. In the chapters that follow we explore these questions with the best available evidence.

THE CHALLENGE of studying the evolving social climate is analogous in some respects to the challenge facing meteorologists who measure global warming: we know what kind of evidence we would ideally want from the past, but time's arrow means that we can't go back to conduct those well-designed studies. Thus if we are to explore how our society is like or unlike our parents', we must make imperfect inferences from all the evidence that we can find.

The most powerful strategy for paleometeorologists seeking to assess global climate change is to triangulate among diverse sources of evidence. If pollen counts in polar ice, and the width of southwestern tree rings, and temperature records of the British Admiralty all point in a similar direction, the inference of global warming is stronger than if the cord of evidence has only a single strand. For much the same reason, prudent journalists follow a "two source" rule: Never report anything unless at least two independent sources confirm it.

In this book I follow that same maxim. Nearly every major generalization here rests on more than one body of independent evidence, and where I have discovered divergent results from credible sources, I note that disparity as well. I have a case to make, but like any officer of the court, I have a professional obligation to present all relevant evidence I have found, exculpatory as well as incriminating. To avoid cluttering the text with masses of redundant evidence, I have typically put confirmatory evidence from multiple studies in the notes, so skeptical "show me" readers should examine those notes as well as the text.²⁷

I have sought as diverse a range of evidence as possible on continuities and change in American social life. If the transformation that I discern is as broad and deep as I believe it to be, it ought to show up in many different places, so I have cast a broad net. Of course, social change, like climatic change, is inevitably uneven. Life is not lived in a single dimension. We should not expect to find everything changing in the same direction and at the same speed, but those very anomalies may contain important clues to what is happening.

American society, like the continent on which we live, is massive and polymorphous, and our civic engagement historically has come in many sizes and shapes. A few of us still share plowing chores with neighbors, while many more pitch in to wire classrooms to the Internet. Some of us run for Congress, and others join self-help groups. Some of us hang out at the local bar association and others at the local bar. Some of us attend mass once a day, while others struggle to remember to send holiday greetings once a year. The forms of our social capital—the ways in which we connect with friends and neighbors and strangers—are varied.

So our review of trends in social capital and civic engagement ranges widely across various sectors of this complex society. In the chapters that follow we begin by charting Americans' participation in the most public forum—politics and public affairs. We next turn to the institutions of our communities—clubs and community associations, religious bodies, and work-related organizations, such as unions and professional societies. Then we explore the almost infinite variety of informal ties that link Americans—card parties and bowling leagues, bar cliques and ball games, picnics and parties. Next we examine the changing patterns of trust and altruism in America—philanthropy, volunteering, honesty, reciprocity. Finally we turn to three apparent counterexamples to the decline of connectedness—small groups, social movements, and the Internet.

In each domain we shall encounter currents and crosscurrents and eddies, but in each we shall also discover common, powerful tidal movements that have swept across American society in the twentieth century. The dominant theme is simple: For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.

The impact of these tides on all aspects of American society, their causes and consequences and what we might do to reverse them, is the subject of the rest of this book. Section III explores a wide range of possible explanations—from overwork to suburban sprawl, from the welfare state to the women's revolution, from racism to television, from the growth of mobility to the growth of divorce. Some of these factors turn out to have played no significant role at all in the erosion of social capital, but we shall be able to identify three or four critical sources of our problem.

Whereas section III asks "Why?" section IV asks "So What?" Social capital turns out to have forceful, even quantifiable effects on many different aspects of our lives. What is at stake is not merely warm, cuddly feelings or frissons of community pride. We shall review hard evidence that our schools and neighborhoods don't work so well when community bonds slacken, that

our economy, our democracy, and even our health and happiness depend on adequate stocks of social capital.

Finally, in section V we turn from the necessary but cheerless task of diagnosis to the more optimistic challenge of contemplating possible therapies. A century ago, it turns out, Americans faced social and political issues that were strikingly similar to those that we must now address. From our predecessors' responses, we have much to learn—not least that civic decay like that around us can be reversed. This volume offers no simple cures for our contemporary ills. In the final section my aim is to provoke (and perhaps contribute to) a period of national deliberation and experimentation about how we can renew American civic engagement and social connectedness in the twenty-first century.

BEFORE OCTOBER 29, 1997, John Lambert and Andy Boschma knew each other only through their local bowling league at the Ypsi-Arbor Lanes in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Lambert, a sixty-four-year-old retired employee of the University of Michigan hospital, had been on a kidney transplant waiting list for three years when Boschma, a thirty-three-year-old accountant, learned casually of Lambert's need and unexpectedly approached him to offer to donate one of his own kidneys.

"Andy saw something in me that others didn't," said Lambert. "When we were in the hospital Andy said to me, 'John, I really like you and have a lot of respect for you. I wouldn't hesitate to do this all over again.' I got choked up." Boschma returned the feeling: "I obviously feel a kinship [with Lambert]. I cared about him before, but now I'm really rooting for him." This moving story speaks for itself, but the photograph that accompanied this report in the *Ann Arbor News* reveals that in addition to their differences in profession and generation, Boschma is white and Lambert is African American. That they bowled together made all the difference.²⁸ In small ways like this—and in larger ways, too—we Americans need to reconnect with one another. That is the simple argument of this book.

SECTION TWO

Trends in Civic Engagement and Social Capital

powerfully positive—of what we used to call “the war,” without at the same time glorifying martial virtues or mortal sacrifice. (This is precisely the dilemma addressed so effectively by director Steven Spielberg in *Saving Private Ryan*.) When a generation of Americans early in the twentieth century reflected on both the horrors of war and the civic virtues that it inculcated, they framed their task as the search for “the moral equivalent of war.”¹ Finally, the story of this chapter contains any practical implication for civic renewal is that.

CHAPTER 15

What Killed Civic Engagement? Summing Up

WE ARE ABOUT READY to sum up our conclusions about the complex of factors that lies behind the erosion of America's social connectedness and community involvement over the last several decades. First, however, we must review the evidence for and against several additional suspects.

First, the American family structure has changed in several important and potentially relevant ways over the last several decades. The downturn in civic engagement coincided with the breakdown of the traditional family unit—mom, dad, and the kids. Since the family itself is, by some accounts, a key form of social capital, perhaps its eclipse is part of the explanation for the reduction in joining and trusting in the wider community. What does the evidence show?

Evidence of the loosening of family bonds is unequivocal. In addition to the century-long increase in divorce rates (which accelerated from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s and then leveled off), and the more recent increase in single-parent families, the incidence of one-person households has more than doubled since 1950, in part because of the rising number of widows living alone. According to the General Social Survey, the proportion of all American adults who are currently married fell from 74 percent in 1974 to 56 percent in 1998, while the proportion of adults who have children at home fell from 55 percent to 38 percent. The Census Bureau reports that the fraction of adults who are both married and have kids at home—the archetypal Ozzie and Harriet family—was sliced by more than one-third from 40 percent in 1970 to 26 percent in 1997.¹

It is a commonplace of cocktail conversation that we meet people

through our spouses and our children. To what extent has the transformation of American family structure and home life over the last thirty years (fewer marriages, more divorces, fewer children, more people living alone) contributed to the decline of civic engagement? The surprising answer is "Probably not much."

Marriage and children do change the kinds of social networks to which one belongs. Both marriage and children increase time spent in community organizations and at home and decrease time spent in informal socializing with friends. Only two types of organizational affiliations, however, are sufficiently strongly related to marital and parental status to make a real difference in the aggregate: church- and youth-related activities.

Americans who are married and those with children are much more likely to be involved in religious activities, including church membership, church attendance, and church-related social activities. As I will explain momentarily, it is not clear which is cause and which effect, but the link is strong. Not surprisingly, parents are also more involved in school and youth groups (PTA, Scouts, and so on), and they are more likely to "attend public meetings on town or school affairs" (emphasis added). Finally, since church- and youth-related activities are the two most common sites for volunteering in America, parents are more likely to volunteer than people of the same age and social status who are single and childless.

On the other hand, neither marital nor parental status boosts membership in other sorts of groups. Holding other demographic features constant, marriage and children are *negatively* correlated with membership in sports, political, and cultural groups, and they are simply unrelated to membership in business and professional groups, service clubs, ethnic organizations, neighborhood associations, and hobby groups. Married people attend fewer club meetings than demographically matched single people.

Married people are slightly (but only slightly) more likely to give and attend dinner parties, to entertain at home, and to take an active role in local organizations. On the other hand, married people are *less* likely to spend time informally with friends and neighbors. Married people tend to be homebodies. As the marriage rate declined, therefore, the main effect on social life should have been to move social activities from the home into more public settings, but there should have been no generic effects on civic engagement as such. Interest in politics is actually slightly higher among single and childless adults than among married people and parents, other things being equal. Having kids is more important in inducing local involvement (leadership, meetings, volunteering), as we have seen. Parenthood is marginally more important than marriage per se as an entrée to community life, but the effect does not appear to extend beyond school- and youth-related activities themselves.

Divorce per se is negatively related to involvement in religious organizations but appears to be unrelated (positively or negatively) to other forms

of civic involvement, formal or informal. Compared to demographically matched never married people, divorced people don't entertain friends less often (though they do give slightly fewer dinner parties), don't volunteer less, don't attend club meetings less often, don't work on fewer community projects, and actually sign slightly more petitions, attend slightly more public meetings, and write to Congress slightly more often. Divorce itself does not seem to be seriously implicated in the general trend toward civic disengagement.

The traditional family unit is down (a lot) and religious engagement is down (a little), and there is probably some link between the two. However, the nature of that link is quite unclear. It might be that the dissolution of the traditional family has led to lower religious involvement, or it might be that lower religious involvement has led to greater acceptance of divorce and other non-traditional family forms. In other words, the decline of the traditional family may have contributed to the decline of traditional religion, but the reverse is equally possible. In any event, the evidence is *not* consistent with the thesis that the *overall* decline in civic engagement and social connectedness is attributable to the decline in the traditional family. On the contrary, to some extent the decline in family obligations ought to have freed up time for more social and community involvement.

If we could rerun the last thirty or forty years, holding the traditional family structure constant—which we can do statistically by giving extra weight to the married people and parents who appear in our surveys—we might produce more religious participation and we surely would produce more involvement in school and youth groups. For those two reasons, that bit of hypothetical social engineering would modestly increase the average level of volunteering. (Ironically, volunteering is one of the few forms of civic engagement for which there is no decline to explain.) However, tinkering with family structure in this way would have virtually no effect on membership or activity in secular organizations (from Kiwanis to the NAACP to the AMA), nor would it halt the decline in political activities such as voting or party work. It would tend to *decrease* the time we spend with friends and neighbors even more than we have in fact witnessed. In short, apart from youth- and church-related engagement, *none* of the major declines in social capital and civic engagement that we need to explain can be accounted for by the decline in the traditional family structure.² In my view, there are important reasons for concern about the erosion of traditional family values, but I can find no evidence that civic disengagement is among them.

RACE IS SUCH A FUNDAMENTAL FEATURE of American social history that nearly every other feature of our society is connected to it in some way. Thus it seems intuitively plausible that race might somehow have played a role in the erosion of social capital over the last generation. In fact, the decline in social connect-

edness and social trust began just after the greatest successes of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s. That coincidence suggests the possibility of a kind of civic "white flight," as legal desegregation of civic life led whites to withdraw from community associations. This racial interpretation of the destruction of social capital is controversial and can hardly be settled within the compass of these brief remarks. Nevertheless the basic facts are these.

First, racial differences in associational membership are not large. At least until the 1980s, controlling for educational and income differences, blacks belonged to more associations on average than whites, essentially because they were more likely than comparably situated whites to belong to both religious and ethnic organizations and no less likely to belong to any other type of group.³ On the other hand, as we saw in chapter 8, racial differences in social trust are very large indeed, even taking into account differences in education, income, and so on. Clearly these racial differences in social trust reflect not collective paranoia, but real experiences over many generations.

Second, the erosion of social capital has affected all races. This fact is inconsistent with the thesis that "white flight" is a significant cause of civic disengagement, since African Americans have been dropping out of religious and civic organizations and other forms of social connectedness at least as rapidly as white Americans. In fact, the sharpest drop in civic activity between the 1970s and the 1990s was among college-educated African Americans. Even more important, among *whites* the pace of civic disengagement has been uncorrelated with racial intolerance or support for segregation. Avowedly racist or segregationist whites have been no quicker to drop out of community organizations during this period than more tolerant whites. The decline in group membership is essentially identical among whites who favor segregation, whites who oppose segregation, and blacks.⁴

Third, if civic disengagement represented white flight from integrated community life after the civil rights revolution, it is hard to reconcile with the generational differences described in chapter 14. Why should disengagement be hardly visible at all among Americans who came of age in the first half of the century, when American society was objectively more segregated and subjectively more racist than in the 1960s and 1970s? If racial prejudice were responsible for America's civic disengagement, disengagement ought to be especially pronounced among the most bigoted individuals and generations. But it is not.

This evidence is not conclusive, but it does shift the burden of proof onto those who believe that racism is a primary explanation for growing civic disengagement over the last quarter century, however virulent racism continues to be in American society. Equally important, this evidence also suggests that reversing the civil rights gains of the last thirty years would do nothing to reverse the social capital losses.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE, particularly the timing of the downturn in social connectedness, has suggested to some observers that an important cause—perhaps even *the* cause—of civic disengagement is big government and the growth of the welfare state.⁵ By "crowding out" private initiative, it is argued, state intervention has subverted civil society. This is a much larger topic than I can address in detail here, but a word or two is appropriate.

On the one hand, some government policies have almost certainly had the effect of destroying social capital. For example, the so-called slum clearance policies of the 1950s and 1960s replaced physical capital but destroyed social capital, by disrupting existing community ties. It is also conceivable that certain social expenditures and tax policies may have created disincentives for civic-minded philanthropy. On the other hand, it is much harder to see which government policies might be responsible for the decline in bowling leagues, family dinners, and literary clubs.

One empirical approach to this issue is to examine differences in civic engagement and public policy across different political jurisdictions to see whether swollen government leads to shriveled social capital. Among the U.S. states, however, differences in social capital appear essentially uncorrelated with various measures of welfare spending or government size.⁶ Citizens in free-spending states are no more engaged than citizens in frugal ones. Cross-national comparison can also shed light on this question. Among the advanced Western democracies, social trust and group membership are, if anything, *positively* correlated with the size of government; social capital appears to be highest of all in the big-spending welfare states of Scandinavia.⁷ This simple analysis, of course, cannot tell us whether social connectedness encourages welfare spending, whether the welfare state fosters civic engagement, or whether both are the result of some other unmeasured factor(s). Sorting out the underlying causal connections would require much more thorough analysis. However, even this simple finding is not easily reconciled with the notion that big government undermines social capital.

Examining trends in the size of American government over the last half century reinforces doubts about the thesis that the welfare state is responsible for our declining social capital. Figure 78 shows that only two things have really changed with respect to the size of government relative to the size of the U.S. economy over the last half century: 1) defense spending generally declined, more or less steadily, from 1951 to 1998; and 2) state and local spending rose steadily from 1947 to 1975. On the other hand, two things have *not* really changed: 1) the size of federal domestic spending (it averaged 2.2 percent of GNP in the late 1940s and in the late 1990s and 2.7 percent at the peak in the mid-1960s); and 2) the relative size of federal vs. state and local spending in the last twenty-five years.

Meanwhile social capital in virtually all its forms increased a lot between 1947 and 1965 and decreased a lot between 1965 and 1998. Thus figure 78

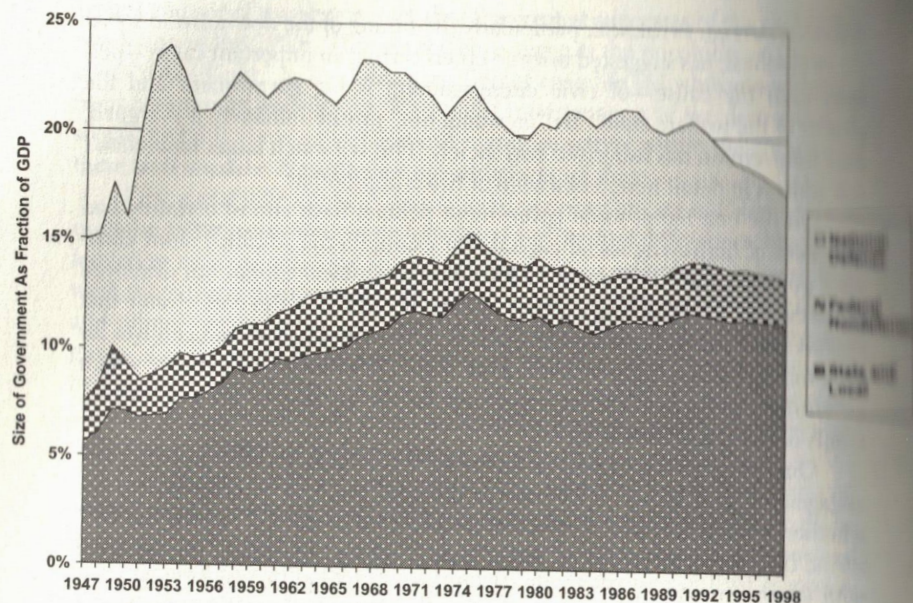


Figure 78: Government Spending, 1947-1998:
State and Local Government Up, National Defense Down

seems to me inconsistent with any theory that blames the decline of social capital or civic engagement on either big government or the relative size of the federal government, compared with state and local government.

IF BIG GOVERNMENT is not the primary cause of declining civic engagement in contemporary America, how about big business, capitalism, and the market? Thoughtful social critics have long feared that capitalism would undermine the preconditions for its own success by eroding interpersonal ties and social trust.⁸ Many of the grand masters of nineteenth-century social theory, from Georg Simmel to Karl Marx, argued that market capitalism had created a "cold society," lacking the interpersonal warmth necessary for friendship and devaluing human ties to the status of mere commodities. The problem with this generic theory of social disconnectedness is that it explains too much: America has epitomized market capitalism for several centuries, during which our stocks of social capital and civic engagement have been through great swings. A constant can't explain a variable.

One version of economic determinism, however, may have more validity—the gradual but accelerating nationalization and globalization of our economic structures. The replacement of local banks, shops, and other locally

based firms by far-flung multinational empires often means a decline in civic commitment on the part of business leaders. As Wal-Mart replaces the corner hardware store, Bank of America takes over the First National Bank, and local markets are succeeded by impersonal markets, the incentives for business elites to contribute to community life atrophy. Urbanist Charles Heying has shown, for example, how such "corporate delocalization" in the last third of the twentieth century tended to strip Atlanta of its civic leadership. The social cohesion and civic commitment of Atlanta's elite rose from the 1930s to a peak in the 1960s and then declined to the 1990s, very much the same trajectory as our other measures of social capital. Heying offers suggestive evidence of similar trends in places as diverse as Chicago, Philadelphia, Dayton, and Shreveport. One of Boston's top developers complained to me privately about the demise of "the Vault," a celebrated cabal of local business leaders. "Where are the power elite when you need them?" he said. "They're all off at corporate headquarters in some other state."⁹

I have no doubt that global economic transformations are having an important impact on community life across America. The link is most direct, however, as regards larger philanthropic and civic activities. It is less clear why corporate delocalization should affect, for example, our readiness to attend a church social, or to have friends over for poker, or even to vote for president. Nevertheless, the connection between civic disengagement and corporate disengagement is worth exploring.¹⁰

LET US SUM UP what we have learned about the factors that have contributed to the decline in civic engagement and social capital traced in section II.

First, pressures of time and money, including the special pressures on two-career families, contributed measurably to the diminution of our social and community involvement during these years. My best guess is that no more than 10 percent of the total decline is attributable to that set of factors.

Second, suburbanization, commuting, and sprawl also played a supporting role. Again, a reasonable estimate is that these factors together might account for perhaps an additional 10 percent of the problem.

Third, the effect of electronic entertainment—above all, television—in privatizing our leisure time has been substantial. My rough estimate is that this factor might account for perhaps 25 percent of the decline.

Fourth and most important, generational change—the slow, steady, and ineluctable replacement of the long civic generation by their less involved children and grandchildren—has been a very powerful factor. The effects of generational succession vary significantly across different measures of civic engagement—greater for more public forms, less for private *schmoozing*—but as a rough rule of thumb we concluded in chapter 14 that this factor might account for perhaps half of the overall decline.

Slightly complicating our accounting for change is the overlap between generational change and the long-term effects of television. Not all of the effects of television are generational—even members of the long civic generation who are heavy TV watchers reduce their civic involvement—and not all of the effects of generational succession can be traced to television. (We speculated that the fading effects of World War II are also quite important, and other factors too may be lurking behind the “generational effect.”) Nevertheless, perhaps 10–15 percent of the total change might be attributed to the joint impact of generation and TV—what we might term in shorthand “the TV generation.”¹¹

All of these estimates should be taken with a few grains of salt, partly because the specific effects vary among different forms of community involvement. Generation is more important in explaining the decline of churchgoing, for example, and less important in explaining the decline in visiting with friends. Nevertheless, figure 79 represents a rough-and-ready image of the relative importance of the factors we have explored. The missing chunk from the pie chart accurately reflects the limits of our current understanding. Work, sprawl, TV, and generational change are all important parts of the story, but important elements in our mystery remain unresolved.

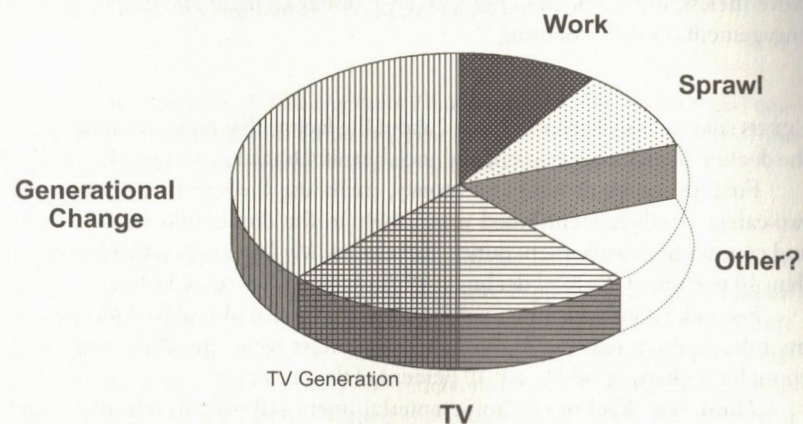


Figure 79: Guesstimated Explanation for Civic Disengagement, 1965–2000

SECTION FOUR

So What?

With the assistance of Kristin A. Goss