A CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

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This article critiques the concepts of communitarianism and social capital as used in the United States and in Europe. For the United States, the author focuses on Robert Putnam's understanding of both concepts, showing that the apolitical analysis of the Progressive Era, of the progressive developments in Northern Italy, and of the situation of labor unions in the United States is not only insufficient but wrong. The critique also includes the difference between U.S. communitarianism and its European versions, Christian democracy and New Labour, and the limitations of both approaches. The uses and misuses of these concepts in the political debate are discussed.

I would like to start this talk by thanking you for inviting me to present the opening speech at this gathering of social scientists, scholars engaged in understanding what is going on in our society and what can be done to improve it. I salute you for this effort. As you may know, I originally came to the United States from Spain, when in 1962 I had to leave that country for political reasons. After living and working for three years in Great Britain and Sweden, I was invited to join the Johns Hopkins University in 1965. I have now lived in the United States for 35 years. For the last three years I have combined my work at Hopkins with work at the University Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, Spain, directing a Public Policy Program jointly sponsored by both universities. As a consequence, I travel between the two countries with considerable frequency, having responsibilities on both sides of the North Atlantic, sides that I believe I know well. I assume this aspect of my biography was a factor in your inviting me to share my thoughts about the concept of *social capital,* an idea now widely discussed and applied in both the United States and Europe, although with different meanings and consequences.

Actually, I believe the first observer of the United States to invoke the idea of social capital, although not the term, was a European, Alexis de Tocqueville: in 1831, in his *Democracy in America,* he contrasted the *sense of community,*

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localism, and equalitarian ethos, which he assumed to exist in the United States, with the *climate of hierarchy, social tensions, and class struggle* in existence in continental Europe at that time. You will recall that the insurrection of the Parisian working class took place in 1848, just a few years after de Tocqueville's book was written. On the "Old Continent," class struggle was very much the name of the game, and the battle for the state was the major focus of political action. Not so in the United States. According to de Tocqueville, the United States was an oasis of social cohesion built upon a local and communitarian democracy in which the town-hall assemblies of New England were the center of democratic activity. This was also people's primary resource—or social capital. In de Tocqueville's interpretation of the United States, the federal state and even the individual states played a minor role, except in the areas of security and military interventions overseas. His profound distaste for the class politics and conflicts in existence on the European continent, which he attributed to feudal inheritance, led him to this antipathy toward the idea of the central or federal state as a key area of political intervention in resolving such conflicts, as on the European continent.

This imagery of the United States as a communitarian society based on the New England town-hall type of participatory democracy has pervaded all dimensions of U.S. culture, from the paintings of Norman Rockwell to calls in the 1990s by Representative Gingrich and President Clinton for a revival of communitarianism in the United States, a communitarianism that seemed to have been lost or at least diluted in the last part of the 20th century. Before President Clinton, the first President Bush called for a similar revitalization of communitarianism and voluntarism, a call that has been repeated by his son, President George W. Bush, as well. You will remember that in January, in his State of the Union address, the current President Bush called for reviving our sense of community, encouraging young and old to become engaged in the service of their communities, and increasing the federal budget for stimulating private voluntarism by 50 percent (1). Actually, in my 35 years of participation in the academic and political life of the United States, I don't believe I have ever seen a U.S. president who did not call for a revival of communitarianism and voluntarism in American society. This call is usually made with more strength and conviction by Republican than by Democratic presidents—with the exception of President Clinton, who made this call a central part of his political platform.

In Europe, the call for communitarianism has always been much less strong, and for the most part has been limited to the Christian democratic tradition, whose emphasis on communitarianism has been accompanied by a focus on the centrality of the family, the need to match rights with responsibilities, and the importance of increasing social cohesion—that is, of reducing the tensions between different sectors of society (2). Other European political traditions have been less committed to communitarianism, except Prime Minister Blair's New Labour, which even changed the famous Clause 4 of the Labour Party Constitution, which called for state intervention in the direction of all spheres of productive life, replacing it

with a new Clause 4 that calls for "the development of a community . . . where we live together freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect" (2, p. 46). Actually, New Labour's public policies are more similar to European Christian democratic policies than to social democratic ones, sharing with the former an understanding that the central role of the state is to contribute to social cohesion, to avoid tensions between different sectors of society, and to prevent social exclusion by developing public policies that tend to focus on the excluded themselves. This version of communitarianism frowns upon the idea of the state as a major agent of redistribution—a characteristic of the social democratic tradition that calls for universalism in the provision of economic and social rights through redistributive policies.

The version of communitarianism evident in European Christian democracy and in New Labour differs, however, from the North American version. The European version is not anti-state, since the state has an important function in preventing social exclusion through assistential and means-tested public policies aimed at the excluded themselves. But the North American version of communitarianism does not assign any major responsibility to the state. In fact, communitarianism in the United States is frequently used as an alternative to state intervention (by federal or state governments). This characteristic of U.S. communitarianism is made clear in a recent article in the *New York Times* in which Tamara Lewin reports on a survey—the *Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey*—of 40 geographic areas across the nation (3). That survey ranked New Hampshire as the region with the highest sense of communitarianism, social cohesion, and social capital in the country. According to the article, the philosophy behind this active participation is to allow people to run their own lives, counterposing this popular participation in communal affairs with governance by government and perceiving government as an outside force that interferes with communitarianism. New Hampshire is indeed the state with the weakest state government, low state income and sales taxes, and the smallest percentage of civil servants per 10,000 people. It is also the state with one of the smallest Medicaid programs.

PUTNAM'S SOCIAL CAPITAL

In the United States, the most articulate description of communitarianism is that put forward by Professor Robert Putnam, director of the *Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey* I have just mentioned. Putnam writes in his now classic *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community:* "for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, a powerful tide bore Americans into even deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades along—silently, without a warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a horrendous rip tide. Without fair warning, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century" (4, p. 27).

It is precisely this sense of community that Putnam (following James Coleman, my professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins when I was in graduate school in the mid-1960s) calls *social capital,* defining it, as did de Tocqueville (though not using this term) as a major resource—if not *the* major resource—for ensuring safety, good schooling, health, and other dimensions of what Putnam calls "quality of life." He attributes the erosion of the sense of community or social capital to a whole set of social, cultural, and technological developments, such as the two-career family, the generational change of values, suburban sprawl, television, and many other forces that contribute to separating rather than uniting "us." This separation, according to Putnam, has caused a deterioration of our quality of life in its many different dimensions, from quality of learning, to safety in the streets, to the prevalence of cardiovascular disease. To prevent such a deterioration, Putnam calls for profound change, similar to the changes occurring in the Progressive Era, that would lead us, not back to a community that is irreversibly lost, but rather to a new future in which people will participate in all spheres of private and public life, from the workplace to places of residence and community to places of gathering, whether in a religious, cultural, or political setting. The purpose of this call for higher participation is to recover and reestablish a sense of community that, while not limited to a territory, can bond "us" together again. "Togetherness," "social cohesion," and "communitarianism" are the elements of a project in which participation in collective endeavors is part of the solution. Actually, following the quantitative trend of most current social science research, Putnam even quantifies the effect of participation on citizens' quality of life: "A ten minutes increase in commuting time—writes Putnam—causes a 10 per cent drop in community activity; joining a club halves your chances of dying next year, and so on" (quoted in 5). This quantification of the effects of social capital reaches an extreme of mathematical elaboration in a typical recent article in the *American Sociological Review* that matches statistical robustness with some remarkably questionable assumptions (6).

I believe I have summarized Putnam's thesis correctly. His work has become exceedingly influential, and as a consequence the term *social capital* is now widely used in the United States. In fact, as a result of the enormous power of the United States today, Putnam's writing has inspired much work on this topic in Europe, including Spain, where you can find a large bibliography in the social science literature that discusses and borrows heavily from Putnam's work in analyzing the Spanish situation. In that respect, one of the most surprising things I have encountered in my reentry into Spanish academic life over the last three years is the huge influence of North American scholarship on Spanish and other European academic cultures. Even in Catalonia, the Christian democratic regional government has published a volume on Putnam's social capital, discussing its relevance to Catalonia, which is edited by a Catalan professor of political science trained in the United States (7).

A CRITIQUE OF COMMUNITARIANISM

With that introduction, let me now critically analyze Putnam's communitarianism thesis, showing its limited and even erroneous conceptualization of the United States today.

The first thing evident in Putnam's communitarianism approach is the remarkable absence of *power* and *politics.* Actually, these concepts and words barely appear in his book, except in his generic call for higher participation. This depoliticization of his analysis is quite remarkable considering Putnam's position as professor of political science at Harvard University and his reputation as one of the most influential political scientists in the United States. That it is remarkable does not mean it is surprising, however. Indeed, one characteristic of not just political science but many other branches of social science in the United States today is their being taken over by the language of economics. This, in itself, is a consequence of the supposed triumph of capitalism, which has closed any debate about what type of society and economic system we want, focusing the debate instead on how to manage the only system we have. Consequently, the purpose of all social action is reduced to accumulating more capital so that the individual can compete better. The capital can be physical, monetary, or social, but it is capital nevertheless. This is how social capital was defined by Coleman (when I took his classes at Hopkins in the 1960s) (8, p. 162) and how Putnam defines it too. In this theoretical scenario, an individual's ability to compete for resources and rewards is enhanced by the networks of which he or she is a part and participant. Participation, organization, and togetherness make individuals stronger, more resourceful, and finally more competitive, by increasing their capital. Thus the purpose of increasing social capital is to increase the overall amount of capital by making more social capitalists. Indeed, this is Putnam's explicit objective as evident in the title and content of his chapter "Toward an Agenda for Social Capitalists." This specific Putnam meaning of *social capital* illustrates the consequences of using economic categories that derive from the dominant orthodox economic model. It also reveals his lack of awareness that the absence of togetherness may be rooted precisely in the existence of capitalism and competitiveness and their adverse effects in alienating and atomizing our citizenry. I find it remarkable that this understanding of the alienation and disaggregation of our citizenry to be a direct outcome of the growth in competitiveness and capitalist relations does not even enter into Putnam's theoretical scenario. If he had considered this, however, he would have seen the clear contradiction between his desire for togetherness on the one hand and his call for the competitiveness that capitalism forces on its adherents on the other. Togetherness would be encouraged not by expanding capitalist relations but by its precise opposite: an expansion of anti-capitalist relations. That Putnam does not see any contradiction between his call for more capitalists (social capitalists) and his desire for more togetherness speaks volumes about the power of capitalist ideology in the United States.

But the other great problem with Putnam's thesis is that his analysis of togetherness and participation completely omits the political element of *purpose.* In other words, what is the purpose of this togetherness and participation? Is the organization, participation, and togetherness of members of the Mafia the same as the organization, participation, and togetherness of those in the labor movement? Of course not. The purpose of togetherness (which immediately defines a group's objectives, alliances, and adversaries) is very different in the two cases. According to Putnam, however, these are two forms of social capital. But is it appropriate to use the term *social capital* to define, for example, the solidarity of the labor movement? I don't believe so. As Stephen Samuel Smith and Jessica Kulynych write in their article "It May Be Social, but Why Is It Capital?" (9), solidarity in the labor movement has been not only a source of strength (and therefore a tactical decision) but also an objective in itself—of brotherhood and sisterhood in a classless society. Moreover, for many years the objective of the labor movement was to transcend capitalism and the competition on which it is based. To see solidarity as a means of getting more capital in order to become more competitive is to fail to understand the history of class struggle in this or any other country. Moreover, the purpose of the labor movement was not social cohesiveness (it wanted to destroy capitalism and eliminate the capitalist class, though not its members), but rather the full realization of a historical struggle to achieve human emancipation. Let me add that even though these objectives of the labor movement have indeed varied with time, still, the countries with lesser inequalities are the countries with stronger labor movements (10).

This absence of politics and struggle is also evident in Putnam's analysis of Northern Italy. Putnam welcomes the de-ideologization of the Italian Communist Party (he identifies ideology with dogmatism), which means, according to him, the depoliticization of Italian politics, a sign of maturity, reasonableness, and tolerance (11). But he fails to realize that the welfare and well-being of Italy's northern regions, which he commends, are the outcome of an enormous struggle carried out and led by the Communist Party, whose solidarity was based precisely in a sense of struggle requiring a totalizing ideology that gave it meaning. Putnam's unawareness of this fact makes his analysis extremely superficial. It reduces social change to a mere social engineering carried out by enlightened elites (his term) with the participation of social agents in the background.

A similar problem appears in Putnam's view of the Progressive Era, a view that is incomplete to an extreme. He concludes his analysis of the Progressive Era by attributing the success of its reforms to the ideas of the "leaders of that era who correctly diagnosed the problem of a social-capital or civic engagement deficit" (4, p. 401). He thus concludes that what we desperately need now is "an era of civic inventiveness to create a renewed set of institutions and channels for a reinvigorated civic life that will fit the way we have come to live." And "we need to be as ready to experiment as the Progressives were" (4, p. 401). Again, this position assumes that the social reforms of that period were the works of social

engineers with the right ideas who found themselves in positions of power. Such a view ignores the huge social mobilizations and the tensions and conflicts among social classes in the United States that lay behind the progressive reforms. Seeing the reforms as derived from enlightened public interventions designed by middle-class leaders, as does Putnam, is entirely wrong. Class conflicts, as well as race and gender conflicts, were constant in those times, adding enormous "pressure from below"—a factor missing from Putnam's analysis of the period. I find it plain overwhelming that the Progressive Era, which Putnam considers a builder of communitarianism and social capital, can be presented as being an outcome of enlightened civic-minded leaders who developed and implemented reforms to increase the social capital of communities, with no mention of the political context in which these reforms took place. Putnam's reading of what happened in the Progressive Era is wrong. It was primarily the strength of the labor movement (and also of the women's movement, through the suffragettes) that forced the power structure to respond, to establish the progressive reforms. And it was due to the strength of these movements that a considerable redistribution of resources took place in the United States. As Howard Zinn, Eric Foner, and other historians have shown, many of the Progressive Era reformers were influenced by socialist movements that *saw the need to rely on federal interventions to redistribute power in the United States, and saw communitarianism and states' rights as a mask for class privileges.*

Needless to say, the Progressive Era was a very complex period, but it is just plain wrong to see the changes in those years as occurring outside enormous conflicts, of which class conflicts were of key importance. Also, some of the major reforms advocated by progressives were primarily in a direction opposite to that now called for by current communitarians. *These progressives emphasized the need for active federal interventions* and less power for the states and local communities, which they saw as controlled by corporate interests and the upper classes, which used states' rights and communitarianism as a way of prolonging their privileges. Indeed, given the multi-class nature of those communities, strengthening communities meant strengthening the pattern of class control in existence in those communities. Social cohesion and social peace in highly exploitative communities were of no benefit to those at the bottom of the power pole—which included the majority of people in many communities. Many of the Progressive Era's social movements (like many of its successor's in the 1960s) thought federal interventions, including federal legislation, were essential for reversing these exploitative relations.

This absence of a political understanding of what was going on during the Progressive Era also appears in Putnam's view of today's United States. For example, in *Bowling Alone* he sees the decline in the percentage of the labor force that is organized in unions as primarily an issue of cultural values among the young. Young laborers, he believes, feel less need or motivation to join unions than did their forebears. Such an explanation ignores the enormous repression by

the federal government and employers against unions in the United States, a repression that includes illegal firings, hostile courts, and nasty opposition to unionization, as well as Congressional and presidential opposition to unions, media hostility, and a whole array of indicators of class power. This repression explains the decline of unionization even while more Americans, including young Americans, are expressing their willingness to join a union today than 20 years ago (12). Social capital in this case depends on political power, highly skewed in favor of employers against laborers. The reversal of this de-unionization will require a major change in the distribution of political power in the United States, including class power, and will require change, for example, in the funding of the political parties, which in itself is a sign and symptom of class power.

It is his lack of understanding of how power (class power, as well as race power and gender power) is distributed in the United States that makes Putnam's solutions so insufficient and, frankly, irrelevant. In his most recent article, written after the events of September 11, his major recommendation for change in the United States comes remarkably close to President Bush's calls to emphasize voluntarism (13). Meanwhile, income inequalities are higher than ever and a million people lose their health insurance every year. Actually, Putnam's apoliticism (and moralism) even lead to a weakened sense of the community and opportunity he is advocating. The community-running and community-funding of public schools in the United States, for example, has led to a highly unjust system that creates huge dislocations, problems not present in the highly centralized and universally funded French educational system distrusted by both de Tocqueville and Putnam. It does seem, after all, that the alternative to communitarianism—European government intervention—dismissed by de Tocqueville is far better for solving our problems than the solutions he preferred.

I would like to repeat here a point I made at the beginning of my talk, referring to de Tocqueville's vision of the United States. De Tocqueville's desire for communitarianism was accompanied, as I noted, by a clear distaste for—if not plain hostility toward—class politics. Indeed, in his less-known *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution* (1856) he explicitly describes how the language of social injustice and the calls for ending such injustice in Europe were responsible for unleashing revolutions, mass mobilizations, and political instability by heightening popular expectations. A similar situation is reproduced in the current debate on communitarianism and social capital. As a matter of fact, I would postulate that the high visibility of these ideas in the United States is related to their political function—as substitutes for an analysis of class (as well as race and gender) power relations, which until recently existed on both sides of the Atlantic. Just 15 years ago, some of the most exciting developments in the social sciences were the analyses of how class structure and power relations were reproduced in our societies. Today that research has practically disappeared, replaced by an analysis of social capital that dismisses class as an irrelevant category, the subject

of ideologues stacked in the trenches of the past. I consider this reality to be a triumph of ideology over science.

Finally, let me make some remarks to those within the progressive tradition who, faced with the enormous dominance of social capital discourse in the social sciences, have been forced to use at least the term *social capital* in order to engage themselves in the debate. I sympathize with this tactical opportunism, but we must all be fully aware that this language carries with it a set of values that runs contrary to the objective of solidarity to which we are committed. In this respect, I find unconvincing Bourdieu's disclaimer about reproducing capitalist values when he states: "The only things I share with economic orthodoxy . . . are a number of words" (14). While it is indeed true that Bourdieu's uses of the concept and term *social capital* are very different from Putnam's or Coleman's (with Bourdieu rooting the capabilities and resources of individuals primarily in the social structure in which they are articulated, seeing these resources as pivotal for either reproducing or breaking capitalist relations), still, the use of this terminology, as Swartz (15) and others have shown, hinders the full realization of Bourdieu's critical work. Abandonment of the use of a solidaristic type of discourse for another capitalist discourse carries a significance and implication that, I believe, we should oppose. Language is not neutral, and we should counter not only feminism and racism but also classism, which is evident in the United States precisely in the disappearance of class discourse in our analysis and our practices. It is an indicator of the enormous power of the corporate class and the profound weakness of the working class in the United States that the very existence of these classes is denied in everyday language. While it is true, of course, that class is only one category of power, its importance has practically disappeared and is rarely referred to in the United States today. Progressive forces should not let this happen.

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