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The Theory That Won't Die: From Mass Society to the Decline of Social Capital

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Though it lacks adequate empirical support, the hypothesis of declining social attachments as a source of American social problems persists. Both mass society theory in the mid-twentieth century and the theory of declining social capital in the late-twentieth century have had broad appeal. This paper demonstrates the continuities in argument and assumptions between these two theories as well as the modifications of the theory in the face of cultural change. It suggests that some of the weaknesses in the theory of decreasing social capital can be traced to the assumptions it shares with mass society theory—assumptions rooted in concerns about individualism.

KEY WORDS: mass society; social capital; intermediate groups; community; individualism.

THE PROBLEM

Within sociology, we can trace the idea that strong intermediate associations are required for a healthy society to Emile Durkheim. Durkheim's formulation of the problem over a century ago remains familiar:

> A society composed of an infinite number of unorganized individuals that a hypertrophied state is forced to oppress and contain, constitutes a veritable sociological monstrosity. . . . A nation can be maintained only if between the State and the individual, there is intercalated a whole series of secondary groups near enough to the individuals to attract them strongly in their sphere of action and drag them, in this way, into the general torrent of social life. (1960:28)

This image has remained as a template in much of social science to this day. Twice during the course of the twentieth century, it has been applied to

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American society: first in mass society theory in mid-century and then in the theory of decreasing social capital at the end of the century. In both cases, it was asserted that (1) the ties of individuals to secondary groups had weakened, and (2) this weakening caused social problems, such as alienation or decreased interpersonal trust. In both cases, commentators from the right and the left of the political spectrum converged in viewing weak social ties as a serious problem and the theory was accorded considerable attention in the popular media. In both cases, however, empirical support for these assertions was dubious.

Mass society theorists saw industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization, and the sheer scale of modern society as destroying the strong group ties—of church, clan, guild, and local neighborhood—that had previously brought order to society and meaningful participation for individuals. The absence of such ties was viewed as leaving individuals alienated and vulnerable to manipulation by elites, demagogues, or extremist social movements. It was a logical extension of this idea to see the mass media as a tool for the manipulation of the masses.

Yet empirical researchers continued to find strong primary group allegiances and organizational affiliations in the American population. There was no evidence to support the idea that population size, density, and heterogeneity weaken the bonds of kinship and local community (Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974:338). Nor did the majority of city dwellers form a "massified citizenry" who interacted with the polity chiefly through the mass media (Greer and Orleans, 1962:645). Efforts to learn whether belonging to organizations protected people against alienation uncovered a complex reality in which membership in some types of organizations was correlated with reductions in some types of alienation for certain categories of people, but no across-the-board correlations were revealed (Neal and Seeman, 1964; Pollock, 1982). It also remained unclear whether organizational participation reduces alienation or whether the less alienated more often join and participate in organizations (Neal and Seeman, 1964).

Communications researchers were unable to confirm the image of a mass man directly influenced by media messages. No one found evidence to support the so-called "magic bullet" or "hypodermic needle" hypothesis, according to which the individual in the mass society was automatically converted to media-conveyed beliefs and attitudes (Bauer and Bauer, 1960). Informal communications within one's groups and the influence of one's subcultures were of far greater significance in affecting one's beliefs. The individual was apparently not the isolated and vulnerable "mass man" postulated by mass society theory. Slowly, the theory faded from view, seeming to disappear altogether after the early 1960s.

By the 1990s, the mass media were themselves becoming "demassified." Television network audiences plummeted as more segmented markets came to dominate cable, local, and independent television stations. Advertisers sought out and self-consciously appealed to market niches. Specialized audiences, Internet chat rooms, and self-help groups of every conceivable sort seemed to have replaced the earlier images of a mass society. And yet... In 1995, Francis Fukuyama proclaimed "the decline of a wide range of intermediate social structures, such as neighborhoods, churches, unions, clubs, and charities" (11), as well as the diminution of trust and sociability in American society. Distrust and asocial individualism "tend to isolate and atomize" Americans, Fukuyama suggested (51), using language uncannily similar to that of mass society theorists. It was also in 1995 that Robert Putnam began to gain fame for his "Bowling Alone" article.

Putnam argued that the demise of bowling leagues is symptomatic of a decline in social networks that leaves contemporary Americans with inadequate "social capital" to engage in cooperative activity. Even though we continue to join large organizations like the American Association of Retired Persons or The Sierra Club, and even though we communicate with others via the Internet, we are deficient in "real ties to real people" (Putnam, 2000:158). As a result, we are less connected to our communities than we were three decades ago. And this lack of social connection brings a diminished sense of trust and reciprocity that leaves us more vulnerable to social disorder and inadequate governance.

Putnam's work received enormous attention, and Putnam himself attained a degree of celebrity that is rare among social scientists. A catchy title and the allegation that Americans had become more selfishly withdrawn from social organizations brought considerable fame. Yet along with the approbation, there was also criticism. In the more popular press, "bowling alone" elicited responses of "bowling together" (Stengel, 1996), "kicking in groups" (Lemann, 1996), and "for whom the ball rolls" (Pollitt, 1996)—all suggesting that there was no decline in civic engagement or community.

Social scientists also disputed the basic finding of decreased civic participation, arguing that both National Opinion Research Center data and those of the Roper Center show stability rather than decline in organizational membership and that newer forms of organization have been replacing those whose decline is chronicled by Putnam (See Bennett, 1998; Hamilton, 2001; Jackman and Miller, 1998; Paxton, 1999; Rich, 1999; Schudson, 1996; Skocpol, 1999; Warren, 2001; Wellman *et al.*, 2001). Since Putnam starts from a baseline of the 1940s and 1950s, many of the organizations that have declined may be less relevant to the lives of contemporary Americans. One critic published an entire book presenting data that contradict the idea of a decline in civic engagement (Ladd, 1999). He noted, for example, that even the much talked-about decline in voting is a matter of fluctuations over time, rather than a long-term trend. Thus, the proportion of the population voting in 1992 was higher than it was in 1948 (when Putnam's "civic generation" was voting). Numerous social scientists were also skeptical that reciprocity and trust would extend beyond the bowling league to the rest of the society and noted that groups with high levels of social capital (e.g., militias) could nevertheless be socially harmful (See Levi, 1996; Portes and Landolt, 1996; Boggs, 2001; Fiorina, 1999; Chambers and Kopstein, 2001).

By 2000, when Putnam's book on the subject was published, he had amassed more data and refined some of his concepts by taking into account the criticism his work had received. Yet the evidence of further scholarship continued to be at best mixed. Just as empirical research on mass society theory was unable to determine whether organizational participation reduces alienation or the less alienated are more likely to join organizations, so too the theory of decreasing social capital does not establish whether organizational participation increases trust and other forms of social capital or whether those who are higher in such traits are more likely to participate in organizations (Stolle and Rochon, 1998; Newton, 1997). People who are more trusting tend to join associations with a more diverse membership, and these, in turn, increase trust, while less trusting individuals join more homogeneous groups which decrease generalized trust (Stolle, 1998). One longitudinal study that attempted to sort out the causal sequence found no support for the primacy of either organizational membership or trust within a youth sample and only weak support for the primacy of membership in an adult sample, where contemporaneous group memberships positively influenced trust, but the influence became negative over time (Claibourn and Martin, 2000). Indeed, these researchers concluded that there is a "need to move beyond a generalized expectation of the relationship between voluntary associations and interpersonal trust" (282).

Although some studies did find evidence of a connection between group membership and trust (Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Stolle and Rochan, 1998; Shah, 1998), others found no support for this connection, which is so critical to the theory of declining social capital (Stolle, 2001; Uslaner, 2000, 2001, 2002; Foley and Edwards, 1999). Moreover, just as mass-society research found that some types of organizations reduced only some types of alienation, so too different types of social capital are found in different kinds of associations (see for example, Eastis, 1998; Woolcock, 1998; Grix, 2001; Glanville, 2004). Amusingly, members of bowling groups are significantly less trusting than church choir members (Stolle, 2001:229).

Though Putnam's assumption of a generational decline in trust is supported by the data, the possibility exists that age—rather than generational succession—might account for the finding, since trust increases as people mature. Putnam's "civic generation"—those born before 1930—appear most trusting because they were already in their forties when the first of the surveys about trust was undertaken. Levels of trust have increased considerably among the baby boom cohort as they grew older, and younger cohorts too have begun to show increased trust in recent years (Alwin, 2002:46). Furthermore, among the young, declines in trust do not appear until the early 1980s, suggesting some interactions between age and period effects (see Robinson and Jackson, 2001).

Even if there has been some decline in generalized interpersonal trust, what this means is not completely clear. Some analysts suggest that the finding is meaningless because trust is always specific and contextual (Cohen, 1999:269; Rosenblum, 1998:49). Although Paxton (1999) finds that the factor loadings and parameters of responses to questions about trust have remained the same over time, some analysts contend that the meaning of trust has changed over time, so that trust is now more often seen as something that is "worked at" and "has to be won" (Giddens, 1990:121). Wuthnow's study of contemporary American attitudes about trust and community finds that many people define trust "only in the context of intimate relationships, leaving people without guidance about how to trust strangers" (1998:186). Increased materialism and inequality have also been noted to produce decreases in interpersonal trust (see Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Rahn and Transue, 1998; Robinson and Jackson, 2001; Uslaner, 2000, 2001), as has the increasing personalization of roles, which makes it more difficult to impute a sense of familiarity to others (Seligman, 1997:158–161).

There is, to be sure, a major difference between the theories of mass society and decreasing social capital: whereas mass society theorists operated, for the most part, without empirical data, social capital theorists are awash in such data. But their data are far from incontrovertible. A recent study of trends in social capital in the United States notes that of six empirical studies of the matter, only Putnam's finds pure decline. Three find no change, one finds an increase, and the authors themselves find a mixture of stability and decline, depending on which measure of social capital is at issue (Costa and Kahn, 2003). Putnam's measures aggregate all kinds of connections between people that may have different meanings to the participants, different effects within the larger polity, and different causes for any decline they manifest. A decline in the frequency of family dinners that seems unlikely to have an impact on generalized trust and reciprocity in the larger society is lumped with organizational declines that might reflect cultural changes away from gender- and race-based organizations (see Skocpol, 1999) and with declines in church membership that may reflect political concerns rather than religious disaffiliation (see Hout and Fischer, 2002). Yet the aggregation of these different changes, coupled with the disregard or disparagement of alternative forms of group involvement, produces a portrait of contemporary American society that can only be considered hyperbolic: "Weakened social capital is manifest in the things that have vanished almost unnoticed—neighborhood parties and get-togethers with friends, the unreflective kindness of strangers, the shared pursuit of the public good rather than a solitary quest for private goods" (Putnam, 2000:403).

Whether or not measures of social cohesion such as Putnam's "social capital index" predict beneficial outcomes—and there is room for debate about the meaning and significance of these correlations—the thesis of concern here is that there has been a national decline in social capital. And that thesis is hard to substantiate. Because Putnam uses survey data and membership numbers, he is led to view social capital as something that inheres in individuals, rather than in specific networks or structures of relationships (Foley and Edwards, 1999). Since social capital is a matter of resources that are embedded in social networks, Putnam's data may not constitute an adequate measure (Lin, 2001:211–212; Portes and Landolt, 1996:19). One would need measures of ties across various groups to assess social capital for the society as a whole (Paxton, 1999). And associations differ in the degree to which their members are involved in multiple organizations (Paxton, 2002) and the degree to which they inhibit or encourage such multiple affiliations (Rosenblum, 1998).

Thus, while late-twentieth-century Americans were more likely to join associations that are "temporary, ephemeral, and contingent" (Pescosolido and Rubin, 2000:63), and while civic activity is more likely to consist of "ad hoc arrangements focusing on specific projects" (Wuthnow, 1998:30), there is no reason to assume that social capital has declined as a result. A quarter of a century ago, an empirical researcher suggested that social solidarity may be the result of "the coordination of activities through network processes" (Wellman, 1979:1226). But "for those who seek solidarity in tidy, simple hierarchical group structures, there may now be a lost sense of community" (1227).

The "lost sense of community" view has a long and enduring intellectual history that appears to survive the absence of empirical verification. In what follows I explore major developments in this theory over the last half-century to show how decreasing social capital theory relies on assumptions very similar to those of mass society theory, as well as the ways in which the theory itself has been modified in the face of change. I trace some of the weaknesses in the theory of declining social capital to the assumptions it shares with mass society theory—assumptions that betray both a primordial individualism and a fear of excessive individualism. I speculate that the appeal of the theory in the United States is rooted primarily in concerns about the excesses of individualism, though nostalgia for older forms of community, left–right convergences, and some disciplinary concerns play a role as well. The exploration begins with an examination of how mass society theory was applied to American society in the mid-twentieth century, was dismissed in the 1960s, reappeared as a theme in social commentary during the 1970s and 1980s, and then emerged in the 1990s as the theory of decreasing social capital.

THE MASS SOCIETY IDEA

Mass society theory is rooted in those nineteenth-century ideas about society that gave birth to sociology itself—ideas relating to the social disorganization produced by industrialization and urbanization. It is traceable to the conservative reaction to the French Revolution—a reaction that saw increasing insecurity and alienation, rather than individualism and secular rationalism, in response to the breakdown of traditional group ties (see Bramson, 1961; Walter, 1964; Giner, 1976).

Thus, while Durkheim argued the need for strong intermediate structures, his contemporary, Georg Simmel, embraced the emerging attachment between the individual and the larger society. In Simmel's view, this attachment created "a common antithesis . . . against the middle part. . . . A personal, passionate commitment by the individual human being usually involves the narrowest and the widest circles, but not the intermediate ones. Whoever will sacrifice himself for his family will perhaps do the same for his homeland. . . . For intermediate structures, however, he will scarcely do it, neither for his province nor for a voluntary association" (1971:267). Furthermore, Simmel argued, there is a sequence of historical stages, so that the great control over the individual once exercised by the guilds is now exercised by the family and the state (268).

During the heyday of mass society theory in the United States half a century later, the same juxtaposition of arguments appears. While mass society theorists saw "social alienation, or the distance between the individual and his society" (Kornhauser, 1959:237) as the central issue, critics of the theory such as Edward Shils perceived "more of a sense of attachment to the society as a whole, more sense of affinity with one's fellows . . . than in any earlier society" (1962:53). And this more widely shared common culture, Shils argued, "has been dialectically connected with the emergence of a greater individuality" (58). Those theorists who embraced individualism as a positive outcome of social change, one that liberates humanity from oppressive social constraints, did not support the idea that weakened intermediate structures constituted a social problem.

What came to be known in the 1930s as mass society theory postulated that as intermediate groups weakened, class, ethnic-group, and religious distinctions were leveled, and undifferentiated masses emerged. The masses were more subject to irrational outbursts "than those who are organically integrated and held firm in the smaller type of group" (Mannheim, 1940:60). Because they were liberated from group constraints, they were deficient in morality and cultural standards. The mass man lives a life that "lacks any purpose" (Ortega y Gasset, 1932:49).

The perception that the masses were becoming dominant was originally seen—in the "aristocratic" version of the theory (see Kornhauser, 1959)—as a threat to the elites. This theme appears quite powerfully in the mid-twentieth century critique of "mass culture," with its imagery of "high culture" being pushed out by inferior, mass-produced forms of culture.

In the "democratic" version of the theory, the masses were seen as a danger to themselves because of their vulnerability to totalitarian movements (see Mannheim, 1940, 1944; Lederer, 1940; Arendt, 1958; Fromm, 1965). But this "democratic" version of the theory was nevertheless infused with elitism. Although Arendt, for example, saw "social atomization and extreme individualization" as preceding mass movements (1958:316), she also suggested that both the Nazis and the Communists "recruited their members from this mass of apparently indifferent people whom all the parties had given up as too apathetic or too stupid for their attention" (311).

AMERICA AS A MASS SOCIETY: THE 1950S

Why, then, does an idea with an elitist European heritage take root in a highly individualistic and democratic American society? And why does it do so in what appears to be a most unlikely time period: the stable, affluent 1950s, dominated by Putnam's "civic generation"?

To be sure, the less well-known underside to the calm and affluent postwar period includes anxieties about nuclear weapons and Communist movements, the Beat Generation writing about alienation, and the literary critics writing of "mass culture" and "mass man." But the prism through which American social behavior was understood at this time was mostly the critique of conformity—of "other-direction" (Riesman, 1950) and the "organization man" (Whyte, 1956). Critics saw Americans as placing more value on harmonious living than on individualism. The new suburbs and the growing ranks of the large bureaucratic corporations, they argued, were filled with people who looked to each other for standards of behavior and sought acceptance rather than uniqueness.

For mass society theorists, what was at issue in the behavior discussed by the social critics was not so much conformity as a "quest for community." Nisbet argued that people were trying to "recapture . . . the small town with all its cohesions and constraints" (1969:26). Despite all the "manufactured symbols of togetherness, the ever-ready programs of human relations, patio festivals in suburbia, . . . for millions of persons such institutions as state, political party, business, church, labor union, and even family have become remote and increasingly difficult to give any part of one's self to" (ix).

Although Nisbet—on the right—was concerned with the absence of belonging, Mills—on the left—emphasized individual powerlessness. Yet mass society theorists of all political stripes characterized mass society as alienating and saw psychological harm to the individual from the remoteness of social institutions. In Mills's view, governments and corporations were becoming larger and more remote, while voluntary associations were becoming mass organizations inaccessible to individual influence. The result was that there were no longer any associations in which individuals could feel both secure and powerful.

Both Mills and Nisbet saw the absence of strong intermediate groups as generating meaninglessness. For Mills, "life in a society of masses . . . isolates the individual from the solid group; it destroys firm group standards. Acting without goals, the man in the mass just feels pointless" (1956:323). Nisbet argued similarly that the individual in modern society "has become isolated from . . . the sense of meaningful proximity to the major ends and purposes of his culture" (1969:72). As a result, some individuals became susceptible to the appeals of "pseudo-community" that were found in totalitarian movements and mass persuasion campaigns.

The hungering for community arose as subcultural differences were eliminated by the homogenization and standardization of modern societies. "If we look at the city of the twenties from the perspective of the city of the fifties," one mass society theorist argued, "the widespread 'marginality' caused by exposure to diverse sub-cultures appears almost attractive when compared with the superficial homogeneity of . . . modern city life. . . . [Today] secondary agencies like standardized news, entertainment, and education have leveled the population, reducing sub-cultural distinctiveness considerably" (Stein, 1960:43–44). Critics like Dwight MacDonald worried not just about "bad" culture driving out the "good," but also about the inability of the masses "to express themselves as human beings because they are related to one another neither as individuals nor as members of communities" (1957:69). By contrast, social commentators who looked with favor on the liberation of the individual from social constraints did not see the mass media as a homogenizing influence. Rather, they viewed the media as offering helpful suggestions to those still in process of separating themselves from "traditional parental cultures" (Gans, 1999:72).

It was precisely such separation from traditional cultures that worried mass society theorists, who saw a resulting "superficiality in the relation of individuals to the ethos and social structure" (Selznick, 1951:325). One highly successful introductory sociology textbook of the 1950s asserted that modern society is a "mass society" in which "the freedom from traditional bonds sets into motion a hitherto dormant force in society. The newly active masses do not always fully accept (or understand) the dominant values" (Broom and Selznick, 1958:39).

The mass man, liberated from traditions and from any sense of standards, poses a threat to cultural elites, Selznick (1951) argued—in the tradition of Le Bon (1947), Lederer (1940), and Ortega y Gasset (1932). Mills, on the other hand, argued that the masses are now manipulated by elites. They have lost the power to act as "autonomous collectivities" and have become subjected to "psychical rape by the mass media" (1956:309).

We can view the appeals of mass society theory at this time as connected to several factors: the breakup of some older communities in the wake of suburbanization—the rural/small-town population decreased from 44 to 37% during the decade of the 1950s, while the suburban population increased from 23 to 31% (Putnam, 2000:208); the beginnings of the nationalization of American culture in the wake of television—65% of American households had television sets by 1955 (Spigel, 1992); and the postwar fears of Communist movements—expressed most vividly in McCarthyism. But while these trends continued, the theory appeared to have vanished by the mid-1960s. Those who believed that mass culture would impoverish the arts and those who feared the demise of small-town traditions continued to find mass society ideas attractive, and the language of mass society remained in the writings of some scholars in the humanities But within the social sciences, not only had there been a dearth of empirical support for mass society hypotheses, but a series of powerful critiques had portrayed the theory as ideological (Bramson, 1961), "more poetic than theoretical" (Walter, 1964:410), internally inconsistent (Bell, 1962), and a "gross distortion" of the truth (Shils, 1962:47). Thus, social scientists discredited the theory, while the educated reading public moved on to more immediately pressing concerns.

THE INTERVENING YEARS: FROM THE 1960S TO THE 1980S

Beginning in the latter half of the 1960s, the very antithesis of the homogenized and atomized masses appeared to take center stage in American society: the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the youth counterculture, the feminist movement, and the gay rights movement. Group identity and group solidarity, rather than the mobilization of atomized individuals, seemed critical to the success of these social movements (Rochon, 1998:124). Gusfield's criticism of mass society theory for its failure to recognize that "attachment to intermediate structures may indeed promote a shared sense of alienation of the group from the total political order" (1962:26) must have seemed prescient. Sociologists now began to argue that intermediate structures may well exert mobilizing effects if there is a precipitating strain (Pinard, 1968), and that radical or extremist movements develop not under conditions of mass society but "out of the same ordinary or typical processes that account for more traditional loyalties" (Halebsky, 1976:8; see also Isaac *et al.*, 1980). The mass media were now seen as generating new identities and political consciousness among minority groups, with "televised militance" promoting "primary group ties . . . that gave meaning to life through identification" (Singer, 1973:146). The media were thus able to transform statistical aggregates into "self-conscious identities"; "women and students are the best exemplification of this process" (148).

As the activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s began to abate, social critics began to decry "the me decade" (Wolfe, 1976). An outpouring of books and articles condemned "the culture of narcissism" (Lasch, 1979) and "the fall of public man" (Sennett, 1978), and attacked middle-class Americans for their withdrawal into a private world concerned only with self-fulfillment. Lasch attributed the narcissist's failure to achieve self-fulfillment to causes that echo mass society themes: to the "overorganized society, in which large-scale organizations predominate but have lost the capacity to command allegiance" (99). The "apparent freedom from family ties and institutional constraints does not free" the individual "to stand alone or to glory in his individuality. On the contrary, it contributes to his insecurity" (38). This is perhaps the oldest argument in the arsenal of mass society theory: the link between individualism and insecurity. Also redolent of mass society theory was a small book by Berger and Neuhaus (1977), arguing that the "mediating structures" of neighborhood, family, church, and voluntary association must be strengthened.

In the 1980s, Bellah *et al.* (1985) continued the critique of "expressive individualism" in *Habits of the Heart* and bemoaned the decline of those true communities that prevent us from becoming a mass society. "If we are not entirely a mass of interchangeable fragments within an aggregate, if we are in part qualitatively distinct members of a whole, it is because there are still operating among us, with whatever difficulties, traditions that tell us about the nature of the world, about the nature of society, and about who we are as a people" (281–282). When *Habits of the Heart* appeared in a revised edition in 1996, its new preface incorporated the declining social capital thesis. There is now, the authors suggested, a "crisis of civic membership" (xi).

It was in the 1980s as well that the communitarian movement arose. Communitarians argued the need to correct liberalism's emphasis on individual rights with an appreciation of the needs and significance of communities. Many of the assumptions underlying the communitarian perspective are akin to those of the mass society theorists. Thus, Etzioni argues that rational, individual decision-making is possible "only within communities," because only there do "people find the psychic and social support that is required to sustain decisions free of pressures from the authorities, demagogues, or the mass media" (1988:xi). And an analysis of communitarian philosophy notes that what "communitarians fear most" is "the atomized, mass society of mutually antagonistic individuals, easy prey to despotism." (Bell, 1993:174).

The mass society arguments that appeared in the social commentaries of the 1970s and 1980s were embedded in popular works that, although written by sociologists (Sennett and Bellah *et al.*) and nonsociologists (Lasch) alike, were not supported by empirical evidence. Only with the emergence of decreasing social capital theory in the 1990s were data brought to bear on the assertions.

AMERICA AS DEFICIENT IN SOCIAL CAPITAL: CONTINUITIES IN THE THEORY

The theory of declining social capital shares several assumptions with mass society theory about the relationship between individuals and society. Both theories argue that an individual without adequate social ties is "mobilizable," a prey to demagogues. Putnam expresses it this way: "Prophylactically, community bonds keep individuals from falling prey to extremist groups that target isolated and untethered individuals" (2000:338). Two presumptions inhere in such assessments: that nonmembers are psychologically deficient or in need of social control and that groups of people are not readily mobilized. Both may fail to be confirmed empirically.

Mass society theorists saw the masses—those freed from traditional bonds—as incapable of behaving in accordance with dominant social values. While Putnam's argument is not so elitist, he does perceive an increased incivility in "interactions among strangers" (2000:142–143) and a decreased adherence to the rules among those who lack organizational ties. "People who are more active in community life are less likely (even in private) to condone cheating on taxes, insurance claims, bank loan forms, and employment applications" (137). The presumption is that individuals who do not take part in community organizations remain anomic, lacking the normative social controls that constrain behavior.

Both theories view the optimal connection between the individual and society as a kind of nesting structure in which individuals are embedded in small groups that are incorporated into larger groups to form a whole society. In the 1950s, Nisbet noted that the most successful and "allegiance-evoking" business enterprises and cultural associations see themselves as "associations of groups, not of raw individuals"(Nisbet, 1969:277). The reason is that the ends of the culture or of any large association within it must be made meaningful to individuals through "smaller relationships" (277). Almost half a century later, many of the organizations whose decline Putnam bemoans are of this sort: national organizations that had local and state chapters with substantial grassroots participation.

Because mass organizations neither build upon nor support their members' primary relations, mass society theorists argued that membership in these organizations tends to involve "a fragile bond" (Kornhauser, 1968:59). Putnam argues similarly that volunteerism among those who never attend church or club meetings is less stable than it is among those who do have such organizational involvements. The pro-life movement has a more stable basis than the abortion rights movement because it draws upon existing church-based groups (2000:154). Implicitly, then, Putnam too thinks that larger cultural ends must be made meaningful, or must be reinforced, by "smaller relationships." Because personal connections are required, technological mechanisms for generating social solidarity are insufficient. Mass society theorists did not consider television as a vehicle for social integration just as social capital theorists question the ability of the Internet to produce true community.

Underlying both theories is the assumption that social solidarity does not occur naturally, that individuals require reasons to participate in the intermediate structures of society. In the past, mass society theorists argued, such reasons were amply present. Now, they are lacking. Thus, "family, church, local community drew and held the allegiances of individuals in earlier times not because of any superior impulses to love and protect,... but because these groups possessed a virtually indispensable relation to the economic and political order. The social problems of birth and death, courtship and marriage, employment and unemployment, infirmity and old age were met... through the associative means of these social groups" (Nisbet, 1969:53–54).

In the decreasing social capital version of the theory, individuals are perceived to resist social cooperation unless they have had enough experiences in groups and associations to generate a sense of trust and reciprocity. Regardless of the nature or purpose of the group, membership itself brings socially beneficial consequences because the alternative is, implicitly, a selfish withdrawal from cooperative social activity. Putnam argues that "joiners become more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic to the misfortunes of others" (2000:288).

The presumption of a primordial individualism that Putnam shares with mass society theory lies at the heart of much of the criticism that his ideas have received. Because he assumes that individuals must be induced to join communal or organizational groups lest they fall into anomic or antisocial behavior, he views social capital as always positive. The only "dark side" of social capital that Putnam sees is the potential for generating individual intolerance or reinforcing inequality. He is able to dismiss the issue by finding correlations between civic engagement and both tolerance and equality (2000:350–363). He thus fails to address the concerns of many critics that associations may themselves have nefarious purposes, that associational life may promote either liberal democracy or nativism (Chambers and Kopstein, 2001:854), and that intermediate structures may either tie people into the society or reinforce shared alienation (as Gusfield had noted in criticizing mass society theory). Indeed, even the American fraternal organizations of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries that represented fellowship and communal engagement have been seen as impeding Americans' ability to achieve a larger social unity (Kaufman, 2002). Social capital at the group level may work at cross-purposes to societal social capital—as in Kaufman's study of fraternal groups or Coleman's example of price-fixing within an industry (1988:98). Individuals may also appropriate social capital in ways that undermine collective social capital—as in Portes's example of individual "connections" that allow them to bypass regulations and gain public contracts (2000:4).

The implicit assumption that individuals may remain "untethered" if not persuaded to join with others has led to an emphasis on face-to-face interaction. But the assertion that face-to-face connections are the only basis for drawing individuals into the larger society has left the theory open to the charge that it takes as a premise what should be a matter of empirical investigation (Selle and Stromsnes, 2001). Furthermore, in privileging face-to-face connections, the theory fails to recognize the numerous beneficial consequences that large-membership organizations may have, not only in representing interests and placing certain issues on the public agenda (Schudson, 1996; Foley and Edwards, 1997), but also in providing individuals with a link to the political system (Selle and Stromsnes, 2001; Minkoff, 1997).

The ever-present danger of anomic withdrawal implicit in the theory has also generated a tendency to view more associations or social ties as better than fewer, so that sheer quantity trumps the quality of the social connections (Grix, 2001). And the perceived need for individuals to form voluntary associations in order to secure democratic cooperation seems to have precluded attention to the role of government in generating healthy associations (see Warren, 2001; Paxton, 2002; Maloney *et al.*, 2000; Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001). Even those who decry what they see as the current dominance of professionally managed large-membership associations have argued that "mass willingness is not enough" to secure democratic participation; institutional and organizational arrangements must enable citizens to have "sustained clout" (Skocpol, 2003:251).

AMERICA AS DEFICIENT IN SOCIAL CAPITAL: CHANGES IN THE THEORY

For all the similarities between the two manifestations of the theory, several important differences reflect the changes of the half-century that separates them. The most obvious difference is the abandonment of the concept of "alienation" and its replacement with the idea of "trust." Why are weak intermediate structures no longer seen as generating alienation? Alternatively, why is the decline of trust—in both institutions and other persons—not seen as a form of alienation? Are the differences between alienation and lack of trust merely a matter of fashions in word usage?

"Alienation" is a concept with a venerable history and considerable intellectual baggage. Its relative absence in contemporary discourse is not accidental, nor is its disappearance from the current incarnation of mass society theory. In its origins and in its use within mass society theory, alienation was tied to the social structure; people felt alienated from a society whose institutions were inaccessible, beyond their comprehension and control.

The entire thrust of the theory of declining social capital is quite different. It assumes that individuals have willfully chosen to reduce their commitments to the society. If mass society theorists saw individuals as being left adrift by the remoteness of the major institutions from their daily lives, declining social capital theorists tend to view individuals as deliberately retreating into their own private universes of concern. The individual ceases to participate, as earlier generations had, in the organizations and associations that serve to tie us together as a society.

A major shift is implicit here, as elsewhere in contemporary social science: rather than seeing the individual as largely a product of culture and social structure, we now view the individual as having "agency." People who are the active agents of their own powers cannot, by definition, experience alienation. Such people self-consciously align themselves with others, uniting with some groups and institutions and disaffiliating themselves from others. Even if the larger economic and political orders are beyond their control, they exercise sovereignty over their daily lives. And they are assumed to be capable of changing the larger social structures that may seem to be beyond them. Indeed, introductory sociology textbooks now discuss the role of "human agency" in changing the social structure; mass media textbooks discuss audiences as "active agents" who decode the meaning of media messages in their own fashion rather than being passive recipients of media influence. Whereas the mass society theory expressed the fear that the media could serve to manipulate the masses for elite or demagogic purposes, television becomes a culprit in the theory of declining social capital in a very different way. The spread of television is seen as a major cause of declining social capital simply because people choose to spend a great deal of time watching television and thus have little time left for participation in community groups and organizations.

As we move from mass society theory to the theory of decreasing social capital, then, the onus of responsibility for social problems shifts from institutional structures to individual behavior. Whereas Nisbet and Mills were concerned with the failure of modern institutions to provide the individual with a sense of meaning and purpose, Bellah *et al.* maintain that although Americans still get involved in civic associations, "they do not understand the moral meaning that was once given to such relationships" (1985:115). They join voluntary associations either to satisfy their self-interests or because of an affinity with certain members, but they lack any vision of the public good, any desire to "sacrifice their self-interests to the public good" (67). In similar fashion, both Fukuyama and Putnam suggest that only "selfish" groups—interest groups or self-help groups—are currently thriving.

Paradoxically, although decreasing social capital theorists see individual behavior rather than institutional structure as the key to the weakness of intermediate structures, they pay scant attention to the meaning or psychological relevance of group participation. Indeed, the experience of group membership seems all but irrelevant to them. Consider the following example. Putnam cites a survey in which respondents were asked, "What are the ways in which you get a real sense of belonging or a sense of community?" Among all age groups, family and friends were the most frequently cited, followed by co-workers. But people born before 1946 were nearly twice as likely as those born between 1965 and 1980 to feel a sense of belonging in their neighborhood, church, local community, and the groups and organizations in which they held memberships. Putnam notes that the younger generation felt less connection to civic communities "without any apparent offsetting focus of belongingness" (2000:275). Implied here is a kind of calculus in which the quantity of social ties—whatever their meaning to the individuals involved—is assumed to be a constant for all people. The quality or intensity of one's connections to others is irrelevant.

This stands in strong contrast to the perspective of the mass society theorists who argued that intermediate groups must be psychologically meaningful if they are to integrate the individual into the society. The absence of attention to the individual's experiences of group membership appears related to the change in focus from social structure to agency. When social structural explanations were dominant, the ability of groups and institutions to incorporate the individual into society was of paramount concern. How these groups functioned and how individuals experienced group life were considered germane to the problem. Once the focus shifts to human agency, people are seen as choosing whether or not to participate on the basis of an individual calculus of costs and benefits. Hence, the experiential dimension of group membership is no longer of concern. What matters is the societal benefits of group membership, the reciprocity and trust that are "transferable from one social setting to another. Members of Florentine choral societies participate because they like to sing, not because their participation strengthens the Tuscan social fabric. But it does" (Putnam, 1993:38).

That mass society theorists took the nature of the group more seriously is nicely illustrated by the treatment of card-playing in the two theories. Whereas social capital theorists consider the decline in card-playing to be yet another indicator of the decrease in social capital, mass society theorists only grudgingly recognized card-playing as a form of "group integration." To the mass society theorist, card-playing was "symptomatic of the intrusion of the mass even into the small group," an indication that "the inner resources of groups, deriving from the socialization of individuals into groups with a rich traditional basis of group identification, have been dissipated" (Crespi, 1957:421). In seeking "entertainment from without," the card-players revealed that they lacked the strengths of what Mills had called "solid groups." As the group itself begins to lose identity in a mass society, it can no longer serve as a mechanism for controlling the individual or integrating him or her into the society. For the social capital theorist, in contrast, group membership needs only to instill traits of cooperation and reciprocity. Any group can serve this purpose, and a strong group identity is likely to signal a less desirable form of social capital—what Putnam refers to as "bonding" rather than "bridging" social capital, or "thick" rather than "thin" trust.

The movement from structure to agency exacerbates the assumption of primordial individualism, producing a tendency to treat social capital as created solely by individual actions that generate trust and reciprocity. Absent here is the element of constraint that has long been seen as central to the functioning of social capital. It is the existence or the possibility of sanctions that makes possible both effective norms and trustworthiness (Coleman, 1988:107). Moreover, Putnam's version of the theory makes no reference to the authority vested in intermediate groups. This is a substantial change from the mass society theory, which argued that such groups could function well only if their authority was not co-opted by a centralized state (Nisbet) or a manipulative power elite (Mills).

SPECULATIONS ON THE ENDURING APPEALS AND CONTEMPORARY RESURGENCE OF THE THEORY

It should not be surprising that the late twentieth-century version of the theory presumes more individual potency than its mid-century predecessor. Theorists too are captives of their times, and the late-twentieth century was a time of progressive individualization. Both European and American social theorists view individual acts of identification with groups as increasingly important in the contemporary world—a world of "neo-tribes" (Bauman, 1991:249), of "specializing identity claims" (Frank and Meyer, 2002:90), of "moral freedom" (Wolfe, 2001), a world in which the basic figure is "the single person" (Beck, 1992:122). Just as mass society theory was a response to the emergence of individualism in the wake of industrialization, declining social capital theory is to some extent a response to increased individualization in the wake of globalization.

It is also, more directly, an outgrowth of the worldwide discourse about "civil society" that emerged following the demise of Communism in Eastern Europe. Though "the ubiquity of the phrase is enough to make it suspect" (Himmelfarb, 1998:117), the idea of civil society has been championed by partisans of all manner of political philosophies and has been studied by researchers in all the social sciences. Civil society concerns abroad became transformed into concern for decreasing social capital in the United States, in a manner reminiscent of the way in which mass society theory was imported from Europe and applied to American social problems.

Yet only in the United States has a decline in attachment to intermediate groups been perceived at both the middle and the end of the twentieth century. Why have Americans been so ready to see themselves as deficient in community? Why did both the mass society and "bowling alone" theories receive great attention in the popular media of their respective eras? While the answer can never be more than speculative, the enduring appeal of this idea calls for some attempt at explanation.

Although mass society theory may appear to express a concern over the fate of the individual in a society of "masses," the concern is rather about the weakening of the intermediate groups that keep individuals in check. Individuals left to their own devices are seen as suffering psychological harm and generating negative social consequences. While the declining social capital version of the theory mostly disregards the psychological consequences of weak group memberships, it too assumes that individuals without strong social ties generate social problems. At issue, therefore, is a fear of excessive individualism. And it is this concern that may account for the theory's enduring appeal.

To a greater degree than elsewhere, the individual is primary in American society. Of the 16 nations included in the 1990 European Values Study, for example, the United States ranks highest in preferring personal freedom to equality, in blaming the individual for being poor, and in favoring jobs that encourage individual initiatives over those in which everyone works together (van Elteren, 1998). Despite the heterogeneity of the American population, its regional diversity, and its occupational and educational stratification, more than 75% of the American population in four different national surveys during the 1970s and 1980s supported free enterprise, the value of competition, "the right to one's own opinion," and the belief that "what happens to me is my own doing" (Inkeles, 1990–91). Support for such economic and political individualism remains dominant in American society, despite some ambivalence among the lower social classes (see Mann, 1970; Bobo, 1991).

But when individualism is defined as self-expression, uniqueness, or autonomy, the ambivalence increases. The antithesis of individualism in this meaning of the term may be either "conformity" or "community," where "conformity" is almost always a negative term, and "community" is almost always a positive one. Indeed, in the 1990 European Values Study, Americans had the highest percentage of all respondents who endorsed statements that the family is very important and that more emphasis on the family would be a positive development (van Elteren, 1998:70). What Gans (1988) terms "middle American" or "popular" individualism is averse to "involuntary conformity," but otherwise more comfortable with familism than with originality and distinctiveness. And some scholars contend that a kind of "local communalism" prevailed at the time of the American Revolution (see Grabb *et al.*, 1999). To be sure, such communal strains were counterbalanced by the relative ease of mobility and relocation, which allowed dissidents to move on and form their own enclaves. And in the contemporary setting, popular individualism is offset by the desire for autonomy associated with the upper middle class. Ambivalence about individualism is manifest in contemporary surveys that indicate a desire for both individual autonomy and the more traditional ties of a less liberated era (see, for example, Wolfe, 1998, 2001).

Clearly, if we value both individualism and community, then we must keep individualism within bounds. The pitfalls of excessive individualism have been recognized at least since deTocqueville's commentary in the early ninteenth century. And over the course of the twentieth century, American social critics were as apt to criticize excessive individualism as excessive conformity (Thomson, 2000).

American ambivalence toward individualism appears to exemplify the idea that every culture involves "a kind of theater in which certain contrary tendencies are played out" (Erikson, 1976:82). On the one hand, Americans have trouble imagining non-individualistic motivations. Community activists, for example, often assume "that they themselves must really be self-interested. . . . [I]t was considered common sense, and they sometimes even scrounged for self-interested sounding explanations of their own involvement" (Eliasoph, 1998:187; see also Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003). Similarly, volunteers legitimate their efforts via a language of fulfillment rather than a language of duty because Americans translate altruistic motives into more familiar selfish ones (Wuthnow, 1991:95–96). On the other hand, Americans do not wish to appear uninvolved with their communities, and they are therefore known to lie to survey researchers in order to exaggerate both their church attendance and their voting frequency. And they compel young people to "volunteer" to help their communities. It is quite easy for such a population to believe that their own communities are weaker than those of previous generations.

Despite the attraction of community, individualism dominates the American narrative. Thus, the perception of Americans as "lonely" has been a constant: *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman, 1950), *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Slater, 1970), and, of course, *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000). The first two of these books are at the top of the best-seller list of books written by sociologists (See Gans, 1997).

When "identity groups" and self-defined "cultural" groups began to enter the public arena in late-twentieth century, the optional nature of individual identification with such groups was emphasized. As a result, even "multiculturalism" was seen as representing a radical individualism (see Bellah, 2002; Hunter, 2002). And in the absence of a common enemy after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, social cohesion appeared to be more problematic, and discussions of "multiculturalism" and "culture wars" were accompanied by concern about "the disuniting of America" (Schlesinger, 1992). At the end of the twentieth century, then, the fear of excessive individualism came to include a fear of excessively individualistic groups.

It is thus not surprising that social capital theorists do not view collective-identity groups, self-help groups, or even interest groups as contributing to the stock of social capital. Putnam expresses concern that "television privileges communities of interest over communities of place," thus encouraging "civic disengagement" (2000:242). Implicit here is the idea that civic engagement is purely local. The statement also reveals a peculiarly dispassionate view of civic participation, with "communities of interest" being defined as outside the realm of civic engagement. In a similar vein, the Internet is seen as a threat to "bridging" social capital because it fosters communication among those with shared interests, albeit different demographic characteristics (178). Without a fear of "selfish" groups, one might well argue that the Internet fosters social capital precisely because it does cut across demographic categories.

The fear of excessive individualism makes self-interested action, whether undertaken by individuals or groups, seem "uncivic." Thus, Putnam dismisses the contribution that an individual's political activities make to the stock of social capital. A person who tries to influence government through such solo activities as letter-writing and petition-signing, he says, is acting "as disgruntled claimant" rather than "as participant in collective endeavor to define the public interest" (1996:27). And the fact that "work-based networks are often used for instrumental purposes" diminishes their "value for community and social purposes" (2000:91). The distaste for self-interested actions is part of a romantic image of community in which conflict does not appear to play a role. Yet clearly democracy requires groups that "assert themselves"; it needs "organized conflict and *distrust*" as well as cooperation and trust (Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999:14).

Clearly, too, in a time of anxiety about our social cohesion, works that remind Americans of their civic traditions are appealing. As Americans no longer take "value-integration" for granted, the work of Bellah *et al.*, has provided "a reassuring and timely restatement of classic American republican ideas" (Favell, 1998:224). This is the case even if in a fluid society with migration from other cultures, "it becomes less self-evident that social cohesion in society follows from the cumulation of the binding ties of diverse micro-societies" (Pahl, 1991:351).

Yet both the mass society and declining social capital theories assume that such small-group ties are the foundation of social integration—and this too is part of their appeal. Indeed, the assumption that social stability requires small, tightly knit communities with clear boundaries and some degree of permanence appears in social commentary from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries. Perhaps Hamilton's observation is correct: Among intellectuals, there is often "a reluctance to give up the old frameworks" (2001:182). And the nostalgic appeal represented by this glorification of the primary group and the local community resonates well with a population ambivalent about its individualism.

Nostalgia for older forms of community has appeared among both the Right and the Left; as Bramson notes, even Marx talked about "idyllic feudal relations" (1961:126).

Perhaps the easy convergence of Left and Right around the idea of weakened intermediate structures has added to the appeals of the theory. As with mass society theory, there are Left and Right variants of decreasing social capital theory. These differ in their perception of the ills of individualism—insufficient social control (Berger *et al.*, 1973; Fukuyama, 1999) versus insufficient social commitment (Bellah *et al.*, 1985)—and in the assignment of blame for the problems of contemporary society—the power of government versus the power of corporations. But all can agree on the virtues of an improved civic sector. And in a time of "culture wars," such convergences may appear particularly desirable.

Although empirical sociologists have joined political scientists and economists in attempting to test the theory of decreasing social capital and to examine its theoretical and methodological adequacy, the "bowling alone" thesis—like mass society theory—has entered undergraduate sociology instruction. The appeal of this theory for sociology instructors may lie not only in its attempt "to understand and explain American society as a whole"—a characteristic of sociology best-sellers (Gans 1997:133)—but in its illustration of the fundamental nature of sociology. Ever since Durkheim carved out a separate academic discipline whose focus was uniquely social, sociology instructors have sought to convince students of the power of social forces. Putnam's work illustrates the operation of such forces insofar as communities and nations with different degrees of social capital are shown to experience different outcomes. Yet, paradoxically, because Putnam's version of the theory is less sociological than Coleman's (with his concern for sanctions) or Skocpol's (with her concern for institutional arrangements) it is more appealing to an individualistic American audience. While Fukuyama (1995, 1999) and Berger (see Berger *et al.*, 1973; Berger and Neuhaus, 1977) argue the need for authoritative intermediate groups, the more voluntaristic form of the theory—the work of Putnam and of Bellah *et al.*—has received the bulk of popular acclaim.

The broad appeal of social capital theory may also lie in its reassuring quality—the idea that society will improve if we cooperate with and trust each other—and its easy remedies. As numerous commentators have pointed out, social improvement through increased social capital does not require any fundamental economic or political transformations (see for example O'Connell, 2003; Pearce and Smith, 2003).

CONCLUSION

In American society, the recurrent perception that individuals are less tied to their groups than they were in the past reflects a society in which individualism reigns. American social theories both assume individualism and fear its excesses. Consider the frequency with which the "search for community" has been invoked to explain any new social phenomenon—from populism and class solidarity in the 1930s to appeals to the mass man in the 1940s and 1950s, from student protest movements in the 1960s to the growth of new religious cults in the 1970s and the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the 1980s (Wrong, 1990:25–26).

In its emphasis on the local community and face-to-face interaction, Putnam's theory is in the tradition of the characteristically American or "congregational" model, which sees the congregation as being created and maintained by the continuous consent of its individual members (Silver, 1990:63). But the image of society as resting on such groups is periodically threatened. The emerging national society of the 1950s that unleashed individuals from their local groups was one such occasion; the emerging global society of the 1990s that further liberated individuals was another. The response in both cases was to reassert that the health of the society depends upon individual participation in local community groups. Theories that won't die are those that confirm our most basic assumptions.

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