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Brotherly Love in Philadelphia: Reports of Its Demise are Exaggerated

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If some public pleasure is concerned, an association is formed to give more splendor and regularity to the entertainment. Societies are formed to resist evils that are exclusively of a moral nature, as to diminish the vice of intemperance. In the United States associations are established to promote the public safety, commerce, industry, morality, and religion...The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build ins, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in the manner they found hospital, prisons, and schools....There is no end which the human will despairs of attaining through the combined power of individuals united into a society....

Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, vol. 1, 1835.

Philadelphia probably yields to no city in the variety of its voluntary organizations, in their age and in their history. Some of the major attractions in the city, like the Carpenters’ Company and the Library Company, are eloquent witness to the early interest of Philadelphians in having a rich civil
society. An alarm has been sounded about a decline in volunteerism as the number of "couch potatoes" grows and watching television replaces civil participation. Apparently confirmed by a half dozen surveys, this has "ominous implications if the political scientist Robert Putnam is right that social capital is declining in America." 

This pessimistic view has been applied to civil society in the City of Brotherly Love. David Boldt asserts that: “Putnam's message may be particularly apt in Philadelphia. Tables in his book show that Pennsylvania ranks below average in its ‘Social Capital Index,’ and, based on Philadelphia's low voting and volunteering statistics, the city is not helping much. Why the decline in social engagement? Among the minor offenders, Putnam indicts financial pressures, which he says are the main reason married women have taken jobs in recent decades; suburbanization, with all that time wasted in commuting; and television, which consumes huge amounts of time while offering little of socially redeeming value. But the main cause has been rising civic apathy in recent generations, who have faced no overarching national crisis similar to that faced by the World War II generation” Of course in the wake of the September 11 tragedy, there is room for speculation about a renewed sense of community replacing cynicism.
In any event, the Bowling Alone controversy with the combative use of statistics about American organizations and their alleged decline, certainly has focused attention on the issue of the health of associations in the new century. Much of the literature generated so far has been characterized by a limited application of that now popular tool of social science, cliometrics, and been sharply criticized. A faculty report from the University of London asserts that, “Significantly, the functional approaches to social capital attached to the founding empirical studies of Coleman and Putnam have both been shown to be questionable - respectively, catholic community as a positive influence on US schooling outcomes and the incidence and impact of associational activity on differential regional development in Italy (and the same applies to Putnam’s US work). In other words, false empirical analysis has given rise to a theory that has subsequently taken on a life of its own as if both theory and data were mutually supportive. Such are the shaky foundations for the evolving knowledge attached to social capital.

Putnam extended his research into other measurements of social capital in an effort to avoid being faulted for just using data on the “funny hats” organizations, as he calls them. Still, with the passage of time his
claims need re-examination, and a city by city approach would be a worthwhile tack. That is the rationale for looking at Philadelphia examples and asking if we really are in a period of decline as far as volunteerism is concerned. Philadelphia is extremely fortunate to have one of the massive studies ever done of any community’s civil society, the 1364 pages of the 1995 volume *Invisible Philadelphia: Community Through Voluntary Organizations*, compiled by Jean Barth Toll and Mildred S. Gillam. Moreover Philadelphia is the home of the Institute for Civic Values with its large variety of community-building programs, as well as of the West Philadelphia Partnership with its social capital focus.

Since Putnam’s original article in the *Journal of Democracy* in 1995 he has somewhat modified his position, both in his book and even more recently in an important article last year in the *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*. Nevertheless, much of his argument is based on the loss of membership in well known, established organizations such as the Optimist service clubs, the Eastern Star fraternity-sorority, and the farmers’ Grange. The 32 national organizations that he surveyed remain therefore at the center of his argument. Putnam on a visit to Australia remarked, “…those are all organisations that have been around for a hundred years, that’s how they got into the graph, but maybe those are just the old-fashioned
organisations, maybe that just shows the rise and decline of a particular set of old-fashioned organisations, what we could call the Funny Hat organisations; maybe they’ve been replaced by another set of new organisations that have grown up, so maybe it’s not the joining-ness that’s down, maybe it’s just joining-ness in those organisations, maybe we’re all now joining New Age poetry clubs, or we’re belonging to Alcoholics Anonymous or something, and maybe that doesn’t show a decline in organisational membership at all.”

Seymour Martin Lipset with impressive prophetic powers cautioned in his book *Agrarian Socialism* (1950) that individual organizations rise and fall, and that so far no complex society has discovered the secret of equilibrium when it comes to particular ones maintaining their stability and social gains. Possibly Putnam has missed this point and has mistaken natural Darwinian selection for ecological disaster. For example, the phenomenal growth of youth soccer in the Philadelphia area as elsewhere suggests that some people who were bowling together are now coaching.

Philadelphia provides examples of this Darwinian winnowing out of groups. Clifford Poutney writes about the competition that service clubs offered to fraternities: “…lodges and fraternities arose largely in reaction to Victorian high culture, replacing competitiveness with brotherhood,
domesticity with fraternity, and stern, evangelical Christianity with intensely
secret, luxuriant forms of ritualism. The fall of Victorianism to the
Progressives, however, deprived fraternalism of its counterpoint, leaving it
adrift amidst the challenges of a new century…Far better equipped to deal
with society’s new demands were the aggressive, efficiency-minded service
clubs, which instead of asylum promised worldwide, active business
networks.”

There are now dozens of computer clubs in the Philadelphia area,
including the Philadelphia Computer Society with all day Saturday sessions
and special interest groups focusing on IBM, Mac, Atari, Amiga, Apple,
Commodore, Tandy, Texas Instruments and many others; the Philadelphia
Area Network Technologies User Group; Philadelphia Area Linux Users
Group; Philadelphia AutoCAD Users Group; the Philadelphia (PHL) HUB
PC User Group with a membership composed only of air traffic controllers,
the Philadelphia Palm Users Group, and the Philadelphia Powerbook Users
Group. Possibly the Main Line Amiga Users Group would be embattled if an
IBM user wandered into its meetings, but one feels that these groups
probably build as much in the way of friendship and trust as did groups that
have dwindled. In other words, new groups have come forward and a look
around a community like Philadelphia shows them to be growing and vigorous.¹⁵

A good example is soccer. Whatever has happened to bowling, soccer clubs are now everywhere. The Philadelphia Inquirer reports:

“Soccer in the spring has begun to rival soccer in the fall - the more popular season - leaving baseball and softball coaches frowning as they compete for players and practice times. When Myron Gilbert helped jump-start Cherry Hill's first organized soccer program in 1972, pioneers would never have imagined that what was once considered the ‘foreign sport’ from Europe would one day be challenging Little League as the rite of spring. But today, soccer worship in South Jersey is not an anomaly. More than 140,000 players are signed up with the Eastern Pennsylvania Soccer Association, a branch of the US Youth Soccer Association that includes the Philadelphia region. Whatever is luring kids and parents to the soccer field is increasing the demand for more teams, more games and more seasons.”¹⁶

The Philadelphia Karaoke Lovers club or the Philadelphia Social Anxiety Club may not be the Grange, but Putnam relies on a decline in membership in organizations and activities that fell on dark days because of changes in interest and constituency rather than a lack of public spirit.¹⁷ The fact is that people play video games with their friends rather than checkers.
The Grange, for example, could not sustain growth as the farming population decreased. While the United Commercial Travelers still maintains a lodge system for lonely salesmen, air transportation makes it possible to be home for the weekend, and the organization has suffered from that sea change.

We now need more particular and focused studies, confirmed by the research done by Andrew Kohut on Philadelphia in a Pew Foundation study. He used lengthy interviews, with the conviction that most surveys regarding civil society have been too superficial. His findings about Philadelphia do not jibe with Putnam’s views about general decline in the United States: "citizen engagement is not a problem in the Philadelphia area, based upon the levels of activity and the related social interactions that were reported in our survey." The study he did for the Pew Foundation concludes that "Most Philadelphians engage in informal activities that promote social contacts and are the basis of interpersonal networks," Kohut adds, "Most respondents, whether they're playing softball or are in a self-help group, say they develop friendships and meet people who they can rely on to help them with personal problems. It's clearly not a case of people withdrawing into their own shells, watching television, not getting out, not establishing networks that provide a form of social capital.” In fact, Kohut was surprised to discover that
Philadelphians were "much more civicly active than I expected. More than half had joined or contributed money to an organization or in support of a cause in the past year. Almost as many had joined with coworkers to solve a problem. Three in ten attended civic meetings, and as many as that had contacted elected officials in the past year. Ninety-two percent engaged in some civic activity, and 83 percent were involved in two or more activities in the year prior to the interview." An amazing forty-nine percent of those he interviewed had done some sort of volunteer work in the preceding month." In summary, the Pew results show "no indication of a social capital shortage in Philadelphia. Most people think they can have at least a moderate impact on making their communities a better place. That's the view of 83 percent of suburbanites; it's the view of 73 percent of city residents. Most Philadelphia citizens think they know how to get things done, to improve their neighborhoods, their local community, and their schools."

Kohut found that social trust, which Putnam links like a Siamese twin to volunteerism, does not have such a close connection. Kohut claims that social trust "bears only a limited relationship to volunteerism. . . . Blacks who are low in interpersonal trust are as apt as whites to volunteer in their communities. There's a stronger relationship between trust and civic engagement -- less trusting people vote less, they don't attend meetings, they
don't reach out to public officials. But education, race, and age are much more crucial to citizen engagement than interpersonal trust."  

Pessimism and optimism about the health of American civil society have been around for a long time. In 1991 when Robert Fowler tackled the issue of community in America, he acknowledged that, "One interpretation suggests that although community had had its moment in American history, the unfolding of our story has sapped its possibilities." But he went on to criticize those who "...describe a crisis or rather many crises and agree that community is not a hegemonic idea in America culture and, sometimes, that it has never been."  

Alex Inkeles in a 1979 essay for a volume edited by Lipset, *The Third Century: America as a Post-Industrial Society*, found a continuing commitment in American history to community participation and a consistently high degree of interpersonal trust compared to other countries. About the current revived Bowling Alone discussion, he comments, "Social science seems more devoted to the recycling of old ideas rather than to the invention of new ones."  

Less Americans are joining the Odd Fellows, but more every day are involved in college alumni groups -- if only because more are going to college. While it is generally agreed that volunteerism and associationalism
are pivotal to nurturing and sustaining democracy, research into the supporting intermediate organizations, including Freemasonry, is not as specific and focused as it could or should be. Ronald Inglehart warned: "There is no question that economic factors are politically important, but they are only part of the story. I argue that different societies are characterized to very different degrees by specific syndromes of political culture attitudes; that these cultural differences are relatively enduring, but not immutable; and that they have major political consequences, being closely linked to the viability of democratic institutions." What those links are is the challenge for Masonic research in the coming years.

1. “As a first approximation, civil society may be defined as all social interests not encompassed by the state or the economy. In its political aspects it also excludes private life, although recent attacks by feminists and others on the public/private distinction make this boundary less clear. Prominent examples of civil society in action would include the early bourgeois public sphere discussed by Habermas, the insurgent ‘free spaces in U.S. political history constituted by women, blacks, workers, farmers, and others, the democratic opposition in Eastern Europe prior to 1989, and, in the West, feminist, antinuclear, peace, environmental, and urban new social movements…Civil society is a heterogeneous place, home to the Michigan Militia as well as the movements I have mentioned.” John Dryze, “Political


5 Volunteerism and associationalism became a hot topic in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, partly because political scientists were interested in seeing how all the new states can end up firmly in the democratic camp and are looking for an elixir. Unquestionably the search for an understanding of what creates a viable political culture that will support democracy has taken on enormous importance in the aftermath of the Cold War, and fortuitously today, this has meant that there is a "renaissance" in political culture scholarship -- or a "return", as Gabriel Almond puts it.

6 “Cliometrics is an approach to historical research which combines explicit models with formal statistical techniques to analyze painstakingly collected and refined data, often very large quantities of data. Most scholars date the genesis of the field to 1958, when two economists — Alfred Conrad and John Meyer — applied their techniques to one of the most important hypotheses of U.S. economic history, that the Civil War was unnecessary because slavery would have ‘collapsed of its own weight’ as a result of its inherent inefficiency” “Proposal for the First Conference on German Cliometrics” at the University of Toronto website, http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~germclio/bkground.htm


See http://www.iscv.org/.


Radio Interview, op.cit.


Clifford Putney, ”Service Over Secrecy”, Heredom 144-145.

http://www.compududes.com/cclubs.htm#PENNSYLVANIA


