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Cliometrics of Freemasonry

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The Cliometrics of Fraternalism

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Freemasonry is not alone in wondering where all the members have gone. Just ask a Pythian or Odd Fellow. The kinds of clubs and societies that attract people have changed through the years, and those that have survived the decades, have changed inside their familiar buildings. Most of us know that the discussion has been sparked by various publications of Professor Robert Putnam of Harvard, author of *Bowling Alone*. It seems to me that one of the principal shortcomings of Robert Putnam’s analysis of the state of civil society in the United States is that he does not give the oldtimers enough credit for surviving. How many groups like the Masons have been around so long?

One of the considerations that we find missing in Robert Putnam’s use of what he calls the “fancy hat” organizations like the Masons to bolster his thesis about the decline of American volunteerism is his failure to take into account the individual histories of the groups that he discusses. The time
really is overdue for a more focused, critical look at the main thesis of Professor Putnam, which will best be done by studying local groups – Freemasonry offers a treasure trove of institutional history that needs to be examined.

Associations come and go, reflecting change in society, and using as Professor Putnam did examples such as fraternal groups to prove there is a recent malaise that threatens democracy is a risky business without access to archives. Some associations have simply failed to meet the needs of a better educated public with changing attitudes towards groups based on gender and race. A Darwinian process of selection goes on all the time among the many thousands of American groups, and different kinds of voluntarism are constantly being invented, -- all of which underlines the need for more detailed examination of the issues than so far has been the case of what challenges the Bowling Alone controversy presents.

The recent consolidations in the business world of the Internet and Web are a case in point. Hundreds of companies have vanished or merged. Despite the demise of many Silicon Valley companies, nobody thinks that this means that the Internet is going to be less important or that the Web is going to fade away. Nor is the earlier disappearance of once successful companies like the Pennsylvania Railroad or Trans World Airlines suggest
that people are no longer traveling or that business in general is in a
downward spiral. The conclusions that Putnam draws about social capital
from his use of 32 major American organizations like the Women’s
Christian Temperance Union and the Elks – and various Masonic bodies --
are no more valid than conclusions about economic capitalism based on the
fortunes of the companies that were blue chips back in 1929.

With regard to Freemasonry, it needs to be noted that the history of
secret and ritualistic organizations has never received the attention from
professional academics that the subject deserves. This is evident from
Putnam’s studies, because he treats organizations such as the Shrine and
Eastern star as separate movements, when actually they draw their
membership exclusively from the Masons or from relatives of Masons, and
of course would decline as they have declined if the Masons did – his
observations about their membership figures are rather like someone not
realizing that the sophomore class is largely dependant on the numbers
admitted to the freshman class.

So instead of more generalizations, it is time for specifics. What are
some of the sources waiting to be examined? Consider just two, the
innumerable lodge histories and the miles of shelves of proceedings of grand
bodies. These are under-utilized sources, but the problem is that they are not available in even large research libraries. To do justice to the topic of civil society however, access to such material is a necessity. Unfortunately many fraternal groups have failed to keep their records and so now that the debate over civil society could use such material, it is not to be had. Fortunately, in the case of Freemasonry, the situation is very different. We do have major collections and they are underused. Considering how widespread Masonic groups are, involving all kinds of people and in virtually every community, social scientists should give more attention to this aspect of political culture.³

What can we expect if we do go to the coalface and look at specific lodges and this mass of undigested evidence? The cliometrics of the situation, to use a voguish word for statistics, mean that change can be tracked in much more detail than has been the case so far. Of course, we all realize that voluntary organizations are not exempt from social change. In *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (1967), Seymour Martin Lipset and Bendix raised questions about the changes brought about by upward mobility and the mechanisms by which people adjust to such changes. Even forty years ago research was and it still is needed into the mobility and the stability of not only American social structure but also the various groups
like the Masons that it compromises. Lipset’s point was that there was a continual, dynamic and sometimes problematic process of engagement between the individual and the associations. The debate over Putnam’s claim that American associational life has steeply declined serves to underline the lack of research into the specific histories of the groups he has cited. Masonic scholars like Paul Bessel and Brent Morris have shown us just how much can be wrestled from Masonic records if one has the will.

The Bowling Alone thesis partly relies substantially on statistics which show a fall in membership in organizations that simply may have declined because of changes in constituency and inability to innovate rather than any general lack of altruism and public spirit. An early morning shave with Occam’s razor is suggested. Everett Ladd remarks, “Unless one is prepared to argue that a particular organization is uniquely valuable in civic terms, what is one to make of its losing ground? Why should we care that the Benevolent Protective Order of Elks (BPOE) has fewer members now than in the 1950s? Putnam offered no evidence — nor have other civic-decline-thesis proponents — that the loss of Elks and Jaycees has not been matched, or even surpassed, by increases in other groups equally attractive in their social/civic reach.”
While Putnam is right that a number of organizations have taken a beating, this may be because of economic and social changes beyond their control, or, in their not keeping up with the increased level of education and changing tastes of the public. The way to get at the truth in this matter is to study individual lodges and communities. For example, while Putnam does touch on gender and race as influences, claiming that “the pace of disengagement among whites has been uncorrelated with racial intolerance”, joining what so long remained largely male Anglo-Saxon Protestant movements is no longer attractive to many young people in an increasingly pluralistic society.

The initial praise given the Bowling Alone description of decay in American society has given way to a chorus of reservations. Professor Theda Skocpol of Harvard writes, “Perhaps unintentionally, Putnam largely ignores the cross-class and organizational dynamics by which civic associations actually form and persist -- or decay and come unravelled. An association may decline not only because people with the wrong sorts of individual traits proliferate in the population, but also because opportunities and cultural models for that association (or type of organization) wither in the larger society and polity. An association may also decline because the defection of crucial types of leaders or members makes the enterprise less resourceful
and relevant for others.”\textsuperscript{11} Claiming that Putnam has missed the growth of small local organizations as the preferred venue for voluntary service, Ben Wattenberg comments, “In a demassifying America, it is a mistake to derive sweeping conclusions about our civic health from the fate of an unrepresentative sample of mass organizations.”\textsuperscript{12}

Along with the difficulties introduced by too widesweeping generalizations about the vast array of American organizations, the decline of an organization may not be regarded as bad for American democracy.\textsuperscript{13} It might be positive. A black or woman or Jew or Catholic who was formerly excluded from organizations that went into decline would not necessarily think that the overall quality of civil society had also declined as a consequence. For some organizations, recent changes made in hopes of recruiting members may be half-hearted, too little and too late, and their demise will be unlamented.\textsuperscript{14} The still overwhelming white male version of the Shriners is not essential to democracy.

If groups that did long bar the door to women or blacks or Catholics, or at least keep it partly closed because of prejudice -- be it race or gender or creed -- have now suffered meltdown, democracy is not worse off. After considering the Bowling Alone gloom, Professor Gaudiani replies: “In at least one sense, American democracy did not really establish the possibility
of democratic civil society until relatively recently when equal opportunity became explicit law. We are not the same people we have been. The United States has never been as culturally, ethically, racially and religiously diverse as it is today. Never before has so large a percentage of our population experienced as much higher education. Never before has such a large percentage of African Americans participated in or above the middle income group. Never before have so many women entered the professions, just to name a few of the successes of the last 30 years. There were no `good old days´ -- no golden age for democratic civil society during which we were all at the same table.”

Some of these organizations have been suffering membership losses since the 1920s. It is the general observations made about a sudden decline which have attracted the most attention and so need strict examination. The problems of once proud and large organizations are not a new phenomenon in the United States. Research by Dr. Brent Morris shows the last year of growth for several: Knights of Pythias (1921), Odd Fellows (1923), Grotto (1925), Knights Templar (1926), Royal Arch Masons (1926), Shrine (1926), Royal and Select Master Masons (1927), Freemasons in general (1928) and Scottish Rite Masons (1929). He observes, “By the 1920´s, fundamental changes in American society were beginning to cause changes in
fraternities...It is important to note that nearly all had experienced declining membership before 1929, and in fact had only insignificant increases before their last year of growth. By this time, many of the needs formerly filled by fraternal orders either were not pressing or were met by other groups.” 16

This contradicts a thesis of decline based on, to quote Putnam, the “last decade or two”. The figures he uses look convincing only until one realizes that several groups we are asked to worry about started disappearing during the Coolidge administration. 17

One area of this debate that is likely to be singled out is the ultimate effect on political and social life of the Internet. We are impressed by the animated discussion, lobby and support groups have sprung up via the Net. The Bowling Alone thesis partly relies on rather general surveys which show a decline in conventional membership in conventional organizations that may have declined because of a failure to use new means of communication such as the Net. 18 Here again the Masonic experience may be relevant, as the Masons are making good use of the Net. In fact, there may be no single fraternal group that has moved onto the Net with more effect.

To sum up, this new interest in volunteerism has some old antecedents. In *The Politics of Unreason* (1970), Earl Rabb and Seymour Martin Lipset considered the question of the support of organizations and
why their fortunes varied. They suggested that a useful concept was that of “selective support”. Commitment constantly varied and involved Joiners, Supporters, and Approvers. The Joiners are the mainstays and indeed do join, and they support in terms of voting and giving. The Supporters are fellow travelers and approve, but do not join. The Approvers are a sympathetic audience but do not join and they do not consistently support. The numbers in these categories vary and the ability to attract Joiners and their time and cash depends to an extent on the ability of an organization to keep up with changes in terms of what a constituency wants, to skillfully use communications, and to maintain the vitality of its leadership. This intriguing thesis about Joiners remains to be tested in local Masonic situations.

In respects, the Bowling Alone excitement is, as Professor Alex Inkeles of Stanford suggests, not the discovery of an alarming fatal illness but simply a rediscovery of the basic fact that the health of voluntary organizations waxes and wanes: selective support is the bottom line. What now is needed on a much larger scale than so far has been the case is the investigation of individual groups.

Masons have the tools for this investigation. The original purpose of Masonic libraries was not to support social science research but to preserve
the past of the organization for a relatively small circle of interested members. Fortunately because the Masons have had the resources to employ professional help and in at least some (though alas not all) cases to adequately house their records, we now have available to us a treasure trove of yet little used information by which the various contending ideas about the history of American volunteerism can be tested. Whether and when the neighborhood lodge admitted various nationalities, how national difficulties like the depression affected a local group, what Masons thought about issues like the anticlericalism in the Mexico of the 1930s – all of these subjects await investigation in the neglected resource of our Masonic archives.

1 Members of what appear to almost all observers to be secret societies, often assert that matters are not secret but 'discrete'. Allen E. Roberts, *Freemasonry in American History*, Macoy Publishing, Richmond (Virginia), 1985, 1. “Secrecy”, Royal Arch Mason, Vol.18 No.4, Winter 1994, 118. As for ritual: "The trend of Masonic thought at any given period is probably better reflected in the rituals in use at that time than anywhere else, and this phase of Masonic study and research has been sadly neglected, probably due to the many difficulties confronting the one undertaking it." Wm. L. Cummings, "Rites and Ritual", *Royal Arch Mason*, Vol.18 No.4, Winter 1994 (originally published in the June 1944 issue, 179-183), 107.


3 "...the Shriners, the Order of the Eastern Star, the International Order of job's Daughters, the Order of the Golden Chain, the Order of the Amaranth, the Prince Hall organisation, not to mention the Mystic Order of Veiled Prophets of the Enchanted Realm!!, The Ancient Egyptian Order of Sciots!! Or the Order of the White Shrine of Jerusalem. And I assure you that this little list has hardly scratched the surface!" Henry Engelsman, "From the Editor's Chair", *The Diadem*, April 1994, No.14, 1. "Young Protestant middle-class men sought their rituals not only in the fraternal and beneficiary lodges, but also in scores of voluntary associations with primarily religious, reform, political, or economic objectives. College fraternities are an obvious example, but they involved few men and their initiations were brief and underdeveloped. Fraternal initiation was more important in Mormonism, temperance societies, the Know-Nothings and the Knights of the Golden Circle, the Grange, labor and veterans' organizations, and the life insurance industry. Historians of each of these subjects have commented on the peculiar role of initiation, which they generally have attributed to shield members from blacklisting, and fraternal life insurance firms used ritual to remind members to pay premiums. What is less appreciated is the extent to which founders and members regarded ritual as important in and of itself." Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1989, 6. See also Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture*, 1880-1930, Princeton University Press, Princeton (New Jersey), 1984, 221.


6 Rich recalls an elderly lady of his acquaintance who was a stalwart member of the Widows of World War I and constantly bemoaning an inability to find new recruits.
8. The Grange could not sustain growth as the farming population decreased but it is still a lively organization. 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 had to meet falling membership by reinventing itself and finding new purposes. UCT lodges have become a sponsor of the Special Olympics for the retarded, of a Junior Golf Tournament, cancer education, an International Safety Poster Contest, and a “Hugs Not Drugs” program for families dealing with drug problems. See http://uctfraternal.org/programs.htm


13. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder: “We like intermediate institutions when they have good effects and dislike them when they have ad ones. What we want, it would seem, is not civil society, but civic -- what the Romans called civitas; that is public-spiritedness, sacrifice for the community, citizenship, even nobility. But not all of civil society is civic minded.” Freed Zakaria, “Bigger Than the Family, Smaller Than the State: Are voluntary groups what make countries work”, The New York Times Book Review, 13 August 1995, 25. Cf. Regina Nowicki de Guerra, “Neighborhood

14. For example, the contribution to democracy is debatable of the many PTAs at all-white schools during the 1950s and 1960s. The PTA has had a mixed record in facing many of the changes which the country at large has faced. Nationally, the largely white PTA only merged with the National Congress of Collared Parents and Teachers in 1970. In 1977 the word “church” finally was stricken from its list of objectives and “house of worship” substituted in deference to non-Christians. As for membership figures, they began to rise after twenty years of decline in 1983 and as some of the autonomous regional and local groups affiliated or reaffiliated. See “PTA History and Milestones” at http://www.pta.org/apta/index.htm.


16. S.Brent Morris, A Radical in the East (Ames, IA: Iowa Research Lodge No.2, 1993), passim. The Odd Fellows started to disappear in the 1920s, and the decline from 1920 to 1935 exceeded all its growth from 1900 to 1920. In 1920 the Odd Fellows had 1,736,000 members. In 1940 they had 666,000 members. Morris documents how other, now nearly vanished organizations such as the Patriarchs Militant, Rebekah, and Knights of Pythias also peaked around 1920 and then began to disappear. ibid.

17. There was an increase in fraternal membership immediately after World War II, partly attributed to the fact that those who served in the war had not been able to join and now were “making up for lost time”. The death of many who joined at that time is another reason for the present sharp membership decline.

18. Among other priorities is research that might show that students from the “me” generation may be among the more adamant non-participants that have influenced Bowling Alone discourse. “Another irony: Although Putnam directs our attention toward succeeding generations, he gives short shrift to
the cultural splits between older and younger Americans that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. Putnam does not view a "sixties and seventies period effect" as an important cause of declining civic engagement, on the grounds that everyone would have dropped out in equal numbers. But ever since the work of Karl Mannheim, historical social scientists have hypothesized that epochal watersheds have their biggest influence on the outlooks of young adults. Perhaps Americans reaching adulthood in the sixties and seventies looked anew at the world, and did not find so attractive those civic associations that their elders still held dear.” Skocpol, “Unraveling From Above,” *op.cit*.