

Editorial Unit

Media Department

Date: 15 / 01 / 2007

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Press Release

Social Capital and Democracy at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina Prof. Robert Putnam Discusses His Theories of Political Science

Alexandria—Renowned Harvard Professor of Political Sciences, Prof. Robert Putnam delivered a lecture yesterday at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. The lecture, on the subjects of Community Involvement in Changing America and Making Democracy Work, was moderated by Dr. Ismail Serageldin, director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Prof. Putnam is known as an authority on the subjects of civic engagement, civil society, and social capital. He is author and co-author of a dozen books and over thirty scholarly articles published in twenty languages. His book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) has achieved world renown.

Professor Putnam began by offering thanks to Dr. Ismail Serageldin, the Director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina for inviting him to lecture at his institution. He also expressed his admiration of what he termed the "marvelous" building, referring to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina as an "achievement" and to its director as "one of the world's leading intellectual entrepreneurs."

In the lecture, Prof. Putnam offered a brief summary of his book *What Makes Democracy Work*. The book, recently translated into Arabic, explores the simple question posed by Prof. Putnam at the start of his lecture: how come some places have more effective political institutions than others, even while they share the exact same formal political structure? While democracy, parliamentarism, and fair election are crucial to the success of a government, we remain in the dark over why these same institutions function more smoothly and efficiently in certain areas, while failing miserably in others.

Opportunity to discover the answer to these questions presented itself to Prof. Putnam when he visited Italy in 1970 at a time when the new system of regional governments was first being implemented. Like a botanist who seeks to study the effect of different soils on the growth of plants applies proper experimental controls to ensure that all conditions—except for soil type—are identical, so was Prof. Putnam provided the opportunity to undergo a similarly controlled political experiment. His task became to simply observe the development of the various regional government—all identical on paper and with an identically large amount of power, funding, and human resources.

The differences in "soil" among the regional governments was at times economic: parts of Italy—particularly the north—are among the most developed and industrialized in all of Western Europe, while others—the south—are among the most backward. Differences in education were also present, as well as differences in religion and ideology, with some areas—for example, the area surrounding Venice—being deeply Catholic, while others had been dominated by radical left-wing ideologies.

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Studying the efficiency levels of the regional government between 1970 and the early 1990s, it became clear to Prof. Putnam that they developed inconsistently, some flourishing and becoming models of efficient and effective government, and some others proving disasters of corruption, inefficiency, and unresponsiveness.

Prof. Putnam then delved into the different practical methods he used to assess and measure the efficiency of the regional governments. Among the measuring rods used was the stability of the government and budgetary discipline: whether or not the funds available was spent as was promised in the regional government budget.

Prof. Putnam also relied on what he called a "slightly fictitious" method of assessing the efficiency of the different regional government through the help of a friend who assumed the identity of one Giuseppe Bianco. Under the name Giuseppe Bianco, the friend contacted healthcare officials in all regional governments by mail, requesting a certain reimbursement form. Prof. Putnam then recorded how many of the regional governments responded to the request, and after how many days. Again, the fictitious Segnor Bianco telephoned each of the regional governments asking for the same form, with the crucial number here being the number of healthcare employees his phone call was relayed to before an employee admitted to being the person responsible for this kind of reimbursement forms. The number of governments that actually sent the forms was also taken into account. In the third and final step, the friend went in person to the regional governments' healthcare office, measuring their efficiency by the number of desks he was relayed to before eventually finding the needed employee. The same steps were followed in the fields of technical education and agricultural development, as well as others, with the results being recorded.

When tens of thousands of Italians were asked to assess the efficiency of their regional governments, the citizens' judgment was found to agree with the researcher's conclusions reached at according to data and experiment. Prof. Putnam then went on to ask what the "secret ingredient" was that allowed some regional governments to flourish into efficient systems while others entered a quagmire of inefficiency and corruption. While Prof. Putnam admits to having supposed *education* to be the main deciding factor in the degree of efficiency, his research discovered that the most accurate predictor of whether or not a democracy would function properly, is none other than the number of *choral societies* in a certain region. Not only choral societies, but also football clubs, reading groups, and other similarly horizontally-structured (rather than vertically-structured: depending on hierarchy) social set-ups were found to be at the heart of the success of democracies. Regions that enjoyed the most efficient government were also found to enjoy a dense network of such civic organizations.

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These groups, according to Prof. Putnam, are norms of 'generalized reciprocity.' Quoting baseball great Yogi Berra's famous "if you don't go to someone's funeral, they won't come to yours," Prof. Putnam explained generalized reciprocity as the willingness to help others without the expectancy of return.

Delving into history in order to discover the origin of these choral societies, Prof. Putnam discovered that the areas that are currently wealthier, in fact had more choral societies even centuries ago. While that could lead us to presume that choral societies and similar groups are the result of wealth and free time, the exact reverse was found to be true. Regions equally poor a millennium ago, went in different directions as some areas had a surge of the number of choral societies. The areas with more choral societies eventually enjoyed better economic development.

The effect of those choral societies, however, runs deeper than economic development. Evidently, resident of areas with more choral societies and similar groups also enjoy a higher degree of health, life expectancy rates, education, and even personal happiness. These choral societies seem to be the ultimate secret of social, political, and personal success.

Because the number of current choral groups is an accurate predictor of efficient governance, and the number of current choral groups depends largely on the number of choral groups established over the past millennium, a rather depressing fact emerges: namely, that areas or countries that currently does not enjoy this level of social connection are doomed to inefficiency for centuries ahead. Prof. Putnam, however, expressed his optimism at the possibility of creating these social connections where they do not exist.

Prof. Putnam went on to define the concept of social capital that explains this phenomenon. While physical capital is a tool that allows you to be more productive, and human capital is the training, education, and skill acquired by a person that makes that person more productive, social capital is similarly a predictor of productivity. One is more likely to function productively in a working environment where all members horizontally collaborative, than in an environment where one is busy watching out for enemies. The basic premise of the theory of social capital is thus a very simple one: that social networks are of value to members of the network.

It is common knowledge that most people find employment through "who" they know, rather than "what" they know. Prof. Putnam's observation accounts, not only for cases of blatant nepotism, but also for the many cases where a person seeking employment *hears* of a vacancy through an acquaintance, instead of finding about it from the classifieds. Studies have in fact shown that the depth and extent of the power of a person's social network goes as far as to affect a person's lifetime income. Thus the dollar value of a person's address book is found to be higher than that of his or her academic degrees.

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The effect social capital has on personal health has also been studied and found to be extremely positive. All other factors constant, the likelihood of a person's death over the next twelve months is cut in half by his or her joining one social group. If the person joins three group, the probability of mortality drops three quarters. Social isolation thus becomes as big a health threat as smoking.

Far from being of no use to those who are not members, social networks also affect bystanders. Prof. Putnam illustrated the point by giving an crime rate and urban security. Criminologists attest that the best predictor of a low crime rate in a certain area is the number of people who know each other's first name. however, one's lack of social interaction with one's otherwise tightly-knit neighborhood does not exclude one from the protection afforded the entire area through the healthy social interaction between the others. The person is thus outside the network, yet benefiting from it as a bystander.

This example also proves that social capital, while extremely powerful, is profoundly underappreciated. One does not participate in choral societies or neighborhood barbecue parties with the express purpose of protecting one's property or maintaining one's health. These benefits come as an often unnoticed byproduct of healthy social connections and interaction among peers.

Prof. Putnam then went on to discuss the concept of social capital as it applies to the American society. Noticing himself that the American internal system of governance has not been functioning very efficiently, he compared statistics of confidence in government polls between the 1950s and '60s, and now. Americans who trusted that their government was doing its best for them averaged at 60% in the 1950s and '60s, while the number was as low as 16%, last year.

Seeking to analyze the differences in social capital in America during this period, Prof. Putnam used membership records kept by social capital organizations such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the Knights of Columbus, the American Medical Association, scouts groups, men's clubs, and other such official social organizations. Rather than simply using the number of members of each organization as evidence of its popularity at a certain point (risking changes in, for example, the number of parents during and after the Baby Boom), Prof. Putnam sought the more accurate solution of using the percentage of those who joined a certain organization out of those who may have. Thus, instead of the number of doctors registered with the American Medical association, Prof. Putnam relied on the proportion of those who joined out of all licensed medical doctors at the time.

According to the data collected, social capital in America continued to rise for most of the 20th century, beginning at the late 1960s and early '70s a decline that became sharper and faster and the years progressed, resulting in a huge depression in social capital in the late 20th and early 21st century.

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Social capital, however, depends mainly on informal interpersonal social interaction rather than organization-based interaction. Prof. Putnam discovered a treasure in the form of an archive of surveys of American people's private habits, held over decades. The surveys included such crucial information as the number of times the person had been to church over the past year, the number of times he visited friends or was visited by friends, and even the number of picnics he or she went on. This archive became a precious source of data for the study of the changes in social capital in America.

This more personal data corroborated the findings reached through the membership records of social organizations. Attendance of dinner parties dropped 40% between the years 1975 and 2006. An average American in 1975, according to the survey archive, went on five picnics. The number of picnics that the average American of 2006 participated in, however, was down to two—a situation Prof. Putnam referred to jokingly as "a national picnic crisis."

The drop in social capital is an especially serious threat to the United States, due to the fact that the functioning of its institutions depends largely upon interpersonal connections and cooperation. Social capital thus acquires special importance for American democracy. Formal and informal communication, connection, and collaboration with equals in a horizontal manner gives us much-needed training that enables us to make a democratic system work. Without that training, it becomes harder to maintain an effective and efficient democracy.

Prof. Putnam again expressed his optimism that "it is possible to create picnics" and that all is not lost. This optimism raises the question of who should take action to revive social capital in any society? Action could be taken by the government "from the top down," or "from the bottom up" in a grassroots manner. Building connections and social capital requires, however, that power not be centralized, as centralization of power does not allow people to exercise their cooperative skills. Education also plays a crucial role, particularly education pertaining to the skills and norms of civic cooperation. Leadership and proper planning are also important to the process of making democracy work through social capital. Above all, a "sense of hope and mission" are required for the achievement of higher levels of social capital. Prof. Putnam concluded his lecture by emphasizing the need for us to realize how things as decidedly apolitical as choral societies and picnics can be extremely influential on all areas of our lives, including the political system of which we are part.

After the lecture, Prof. Putnam answered several questions from the attendees. Asked about the significance of the closely-knit larger family and circle of friends in Egypt, and the apparent lack of positive effect on furthering an efficient democracy, Prof. Putnam responded that what matters most in the building of social capital is relationships with members of the community who may otherwise be complete strangers. Family, friends, and people we have come to trust do not count as crucial to social capital. At this point, Prof.

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Putnam explained that human relationships in social capital can be divided in two distinct categories: bonding social capital and bridging social capital. While bonding social capital unites us with those who are somewhat similar to us, bridging social capital brings us together with those who are different. It is the later, and not the former, that has the most impact on the value of social capital; it is also, unfortunately, the harder of the two to formulate. A society that cherishes bonding relationships only and does not include a healthy amount of bridging, is an invariably deeply divided society similar to that of Belfast and other areas where two or more groups fail to tolerate on another.

Prof. Putnam also answered a question on the role of religion in building social capital. Prof. Putnam, who is currently writing a book on role of religion in the American society, pointed out that half of all social capital in America is related to religion. The challenge with religion, however, remains its tendency to create bonding relationships rather than bridging. We need to tap into values and networks afforded us by religion, without being hampered by its social the constraints.

In response to a question on social capital and national disasters, Prof. Putnam discussed the situation of social capital in America following 9-11. Prof. Putnam observed a sharp increase in social capital following the event as evidenced in the increase of trust between various ethnic groups whose relationship had been formerly marked by hostility. The "spike" in trust and connection, however, did not last, which Prof. Putnam attributes to the failure of leaders to encourage the maintenance of the high level of social capital. The aftermath of 9-11, seen as a rare opportunity to solidify the social connectedness of the American society, did not fulfill its positive potential in terms of social capital.

Asked about the possible causes of the decline in American social capital, Prof. Putnam briefly listed the suburban sprawl, which placed more physical space between people; increase in working women who had previously shouldered most of the responsibility of building social capital as housewives (Prof. Putnam here emphasized that this must never be taken as an argument against women working outside the home); and television, which he described as having "lethal" effects on social life, as we tend to even neglect to watch the news which inform us of the state of others. In the words of Prof. Putnam himself, we "watch Friends instead of having them."

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