The business of apocalypse: Robert Putnam and diversity

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Abstract: The work of political scientist Robert Putnam on social capital and community values and their relationship to 'diversity', or racialised difference, has been heavily popularised, feeding into the current genre of apocalyptic cultural commentary. It has also been taken up at the highest government levels in both the US and the UK as containing the answer to multifarious social and cultural problems. The basic lesson that emerges from Putnam's research is that high levels of diversity currently have a negative impact on levels of social capital. It is an approach that, as argued here, displays serious methodological and analytical shortcomings.

Keywords: Bloom, community, culture wars, multiculturalism, social capital

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In this essay, we offer a critique of the work of Robert D. Putnam, the Harvard-based political scientist famous for popularising a vocabulary of ‘social capital’ and one of the most influential academic authors of recent years. Our intervention situates his writing and thinking about society in what we call the apocalyptic genre of public discourse. With its hallmark gestures of constructing social problems as cultural emergencies and revealing their solutions through appeals to tradition, the apocalyptic genre becomes an emotive and missionary science whose force propels public debate and even policy-making today. Putnam has recently taken his extensive work on social capital— the idea that interpersonal connections and contacts constitute value—and recentred it explicitly around questions of ethno-racial diversity and its relation to community. Most of this work is still unpublished. Its basic arguments have nevertheless begun to circulate: besides emerging on a number of websites associated directly with Putnam’s research, it has also become a major theme of his frequent lectures. Placing Putnam’s ideas on diversity in the context of the apocalyptic tendencies in his previous work reveals a clear affinity to the content and form of an old conversation, most recently rehearsed during the 1980s era of ‘culture wars’ which concerned arguments over the imminent decline of civilisation and the dangers of multiculturalism and feminism. Far softer than the conservative cultural warriors, Putnam essentially argues that diversity poses a critical challenge to community and must thus be managed accordingly. The culture wars proved the marketability of this kind of argument. But, as serious cultural criticism, his argument obscures more than it reveals, lending a veneer of economistic and empirical legitimacy to flimsy analysis and helping to establish the conditions of possibility for questionable social policy.

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In 1987, Allan Bloom published The Closing of the American Mind. An uncompromising indictment of the decadent intellectual and moral depths to which the United States had slid, it surprisingly topped best-seller lists across the country. Its publishers Simon & Schuster called the book’s first run ‘a publishing phenomenon’ and the paperback edition a ‘literary event’. Indignant, Bloom captured a certain strain of the national mood by asking his readers to ‘[p]icture a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home doing his math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV’. This archetypal teenager stood in contrast to the nation’s pantheon of political and industrial heroes, those who had paid in blood and toil to create the basic conditions for a lifestyle now ungratefully enjoyed. Intended as a portrait of ‘today’s youth’, Bloom confronted us with an adolescent whose body throbbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the
joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music.²

While, as the above passage suggests, ‘literary event’ seems somewhat hyperbolic, *The Closing of the American Mind* was certainly big business. The impeccable timing of its release placed it at the leading edge of the so-called ‘culture wars’, and a remarkable 750,000 copies were sold in its initial year of publication. It was a sign of those times, and its loud polemics were complemented by a score of other works that stemmed from the same essential preoccupations: decadence and doom. These themes suggest something important about the rise of and fascination with the book, and link it to currents in western culture more profound than its immediate context. The secret of Bloom’s success was not that he wrote the most convincing diagnosis of a set of social or cultural problems. It was the way in which he harnessed his ideas about those ‘problems’ to a literary category that, under the right conditions, has historically found a vast and sympathetic audience: the genre of *apocalypse*. And, as authors working in this genre are supposed to do, he offered solace, solutions and even redemption. If we only listened to Bloom and returned our attention to selected classics of western philosophy, the apocalypse could be avoided, or at least suspended. As the two titles of the last book of the New Testament suggest, every apocalypse is, after all, also a revelation.

America, in its long-standing association with discourses on the end of history and manifest destiny, has for centuries served as fertile ground for fantasies of finality. It is thus to be expected that the skilful deployment of the apocalyptic genre, in turn, is a lucrative endeavour in the American culture industries. The alarmist tendency in contemporary public culture, which habitually frames even the most marginal topics as personal or social emergencies, is not the exclusive property of screen-writers, news editors and authors of self-help manuals. Understood as a particular way of talking about cultural and social affairs, the discourse of emergency extends to politics (as a way to win votes or as a manoeuvre to disengage the public from inopportune news cycles) and academia (as a way to win funding and high-profile book contracts). In the business of commentary, where politics and academia tend to overlap, the rhetoric of emergency serves as a blanket argument for having something to say and a ticket to creating a public persona.

The conservative participants in the ‘culture wars’ that we have been living since the late 1980s have excelled in invoking this rhetoric in order to politicise ethnic diversity, tapping into a history of race relations that runs parallel to the continuous history of creating and recreating the American republic. Clearly, the ‘war’ Bloom’s book wrought was less about which political philosopher to read (Plato
not Sartre) than about objective social difference politicised as multi-
culturalism, with all of its polemical themes: affirmative action, 
ethnic studies, new curricula, and so on. In a nutshell, Bloom and his 
allies argued that multiculturalists and feminists were actively waging 
a war – mostly within the university and in the media – on the moral 
fabric and institutions of America, thus constituting a threat to 
American life itself. Someone had to stand up and draw the line. 
Bloom did.

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While Bloom took his stand in the humanities, in modern societies it is 
the social scientists who have been entrusted with the task of identify-
ing new social and cultural emergencies – variously called ‘collapse’, 
‘decline’, ‘crisis’ and ‘fall’ – and revealing the path to salvation. 
A recent and prominent example of the social-scientific literature of 
apocalypse is Robert D. Putnam’s 541-page Bowling Alone: the collapse 
and revival of American community (2000). Putnam, an American poli-
tical scientist with an impressive international following, would surely 
 oppose any association between his work and Bloom’s. Clear differ-
ences in style and temperament separate the two. In his writings, inter-
views and public presentations, Putnam maintains a tone of concerned 
optimism, frequently reiterating that he does not like to be seen as 
a ‘cultural grouch’, all of which is in striking contrast to Bloom’s 
pedantic rage. Nevertheless, there is a family resemblance. Indeed, 
from the very outset of Bowling Alone, Putnam notes the apocalyptic 
concern central to his work, placing it in what he euphemistically 
calls the ‘declensionist tradition’ of American social research. But 
his declensionism is not without hope: while the guiding metaphor of 
his study, ‘bowling alone’ (and not in leagues), may be symptomatic 
of the collapse of American community, it is not too late to engender 
that community’s revival. As he notes in the introduction, ‘it is 
within our power to reverse the decline of the last several decades’.4

Like Bloom’s, Putnam’s notoriety has risen tremendously with his 
investment in the business of apocalypse. Backed by the distribution 
power of a major commercial publisher, in its first two years Bowling 
Alone sold at least 150,000 copies, a significant number for an academic 
publishing. It elevated Putnam to the status of social scientist 
celebrity. ‘Now’, he writes in the afterword to the book, ‘I was invited 
to Camp David, lionized by talk-show hosts, and . . . pictured with my 
wife, Rosemary, in the pages of People.”5 The author’s insouciant view 
of American popular culture and his own sudden appearance as a 
player in it should not distract from the fact that, although the scope 
of its success may have come as a surprise, the book was crafted with 
a keen eye to its commercial potential. One former intern referred to 
Putnam’s mode of scholarly production as the ‘General Motors of
academic enterprises'. And as Putnam confided to friends in 1995, according to his own citation, the media attention made him think that ‘[w]e may be running a risk of our marketing operation getting too far out in front of our product development’. There really is something like a ‘marketing operation’, including a web page (bowling-alone.com, with links to Simon & Schuster and Amazon.com) full of information on how best to alert the public to the ‘collapse of American community’. There is also a proselytising element to all of this, with the website offering advice on how to spread the word of community revival and Putnam himself, in at least one interview, comparing his participation in the project to that of a ‘missionary’.

The commercial success, combined with the appeal, urgency and admirable accessibility of his research, has left Putnam extremely well-positioned, both politically and institutionally. Besides his constant and extensive travels to present his research, Putnam has been hosted by both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. His consulting work includes the National Security Council, the World Bank, the Council on Foreign Relations, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency. Among his many initiatives is the Saguaro Seminar at Harvard University, a working group of intellectuals and activists whose mission is ‘to develop a handful of far-reaching, actionable ideas to significantly increase Americans’ connectedness to one another and to community institutions’. Its activities include the ‘bettertogether’ (all one word, and now also the title of Putnam’s most recent book) report, which details the conclusions of the Saguaro Seminar, and the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, the ‘largest-ever survey [nearly 30 000 respondents] on the civic engagement of Americans’. The projects, along with Putnam’s work on Bowling Alone, appear to operate in close concert, with their respective websites often grounding their claims by hyperlinking to each other. There is also an identifiable, unifying theory that holds the project together.

‘Social capital’ is the key concept that has enabled Putnam’s rise. Its modern invocation is often traced to the sociologist James S. Coleman, whom Putnam credits with placing the term firmly in the lexicon of social science research. Coleman’s theoretical insight limits social capital to the benefits accrued by individuals as they operate within particular and relatively bounded contexts (for example, a specific trade union). Putnam has expanded this more restricted idea into one that speaks to the well-being of society at large. His version of the term indicates the generalised value of ‘social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’. In his popular work, he often reduces social capital to the thesis that ‘social networks have value’. The term’s explanatory parameters are less than clear, a problem which is not
helped by the fact that ‘capital’, as the resources of human productive capacity, is always already ‘social’. But the basic idea – not by any means Putnam’s alone – is that human relationships (from the creation of friendships and business connections to the formation of formal organisations) need to be given greater attention in the theorising of a number of social and political problems, including democratisation, economic development and, most explicitly in Putnam’s recent work, building community solidarity. By thus popularising a language for thinking about the less obvious forms of capital, Putnam has effectively opened the door to a truly massive and heterogeneous body of scholarly work enabled by ‘social capital’.

Putnam’s first foray into social capital is the concluding chapter of *Making Democracy Work* (1993), which, not insignificantly, began to circulate with the rise of Clinton-era liberal multiculturalism at home and Third Way politics abroad. The study’s objective was to offer an explanation for Italy’s drastic regional variation in levels of effective democratisation. Though criticised for its simplistic view of Italian culture and history, a point that the author has since gracefully conceded, it nevertheless offered a compelling narrative to explain the regional differences in levels of democratic practice and economic development. Putnam concluded that the presence of community-spirited citizens encouraged by membership in civil society associations – in short, citizens with a high reserve of social capital – made democracy work and turned the wheels of economic progress. The riddle of underdevelopment had been solved (again). It was a question of traditions, norms, trust; in short, culture. Eradicate the culture of mistrust, rebuild ‘community’ and you can bet that democracy will begin to work.

*Bowling Alone* imports Putnam’s turn to social capital into the American context. The overarching concern of the book (and of the eponymous and widely-cited 1995 article that preceded it) is the idea that American communities are in decline, and that this decline has been brought about by people losing interest in social activity. Putnam’s current declensionist concern still revolves around community, but it now focuses on a specific problem apparently related to that downward trend: racial and ethnic diversity. More precisely, what Putnam has been perceiving for some time is the negative correlation between ethnic diversity, on the one hand, and community cohesion and social trust, on the other.

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This thesis and its association with Putnam’s work briefly flared up in the press last February, when *The Economist* published a short piece announcing that Putnam, in a forthcoming visit to 10 Downing Street, would break some bad news about diversity. Identifying
Putnam as ‘one of Tony Blair’s favourite gurus’, the dark narrative that opened the article began by asserting that his ‘research has taken a dismal turn’. In a meeting described as ‘a private seminar organized by the home secretary’, The Economist suggested that Putnam would address his ‘large ongoing survey of American communities [which] seems to show, uncomfortably, that levels of trust and co-operation are highest in the most homogeneous neighbourhoods’.¹⁷

The article quickly dropped Putnam’s social capital research for a consideration of the relations between immigration and welfare. But it clearly hit a nerve. The timing was awkward, coming right alongside the tangible rise of a new nativism on both sides of the Atlantic, witnessed in Samuel Huntington’s screed against Mexican immigrants in Foreign Policy (March–April 2004) and David Goodhart’s case for the drawbacks of diversity in Prospect Magazine (February 2004).¹⁸ With all of this in the air, The Economist piece apparently left Putnam and his associates somewhat rattled. The following message entitled ‘NOTE REGARDING The Economist story of February 26, 2004’ now emblazons the homepage of the Saguaro Seminar:

The Economist story . . . that mentioned our work presented an incomplete and misleading account of a research project that is still underway. To draw policy recommendations from our research in progress would be premature, but speaking personally, Robert D. Putnam and the Saguaro research team support immigration and welcome diversity. It would be inappropriate to comment further on press reports or to describe any interim findings at this stage, but when we have something substantive from our research to report publicly, we shall.¹⁹

* * *

Putnam, however, has been relatively public about his diversity research for a few years now, especially outside the US. In late 2001, the day before a conference on ‘bringing communities together’, he was quoted in the Ottawa Citizen as noting the ‘special challenges that are posed to building social capital by ethnic diversity’. The article, which called Bowling Alone ‘a Bible for people concerned about declining community values in North America’, continued by informing the public that in ‘an exhaustive study, Mr. Putnam has found that social connectedness is less likely to be found in areas of the United States most affected by recent waves of immigration’.²⁰

The question of diversity has since become a common theme in Putnam’s public appearances. One of the most significant of these took place in June 2003 when he toured Sweden, where he presented his research to a large audience assembled in the national parliament and also to the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social
Sciences (SCASSS) in Uppsala. While his presentation to parliament spent considerable time on listing the virtues of communities with high social capital, it ended with a series of startling graphs that appeared to show the negative relationship between social capital and racial diversity in the United States. The Uppsala lecture (both authors of this article were in attendance) developed this theme.

Putnam began the lecture by foreshadowing the disclaimer since posted on Saguaro’s website, repeatedly assuring his audience that he was in favour of immigration and understood the value of multicultural communities. He also expressed his anxiety at his own findings, noting that he had not ‘gone public’ with the data. He thanked his hosts for providing him with an amicable forum to discuss his research (although it must be said that a certain hostility was palpable in a number of questions that followed the lecture). He continued by reporting that his statistics spoke the clear message that diversity is bad for social capital. The lasting impression given by his framing of the problem – which made much of the contemporary US case by dwelling upon the proliferation of ethnicities, the flow of new immigrants and the presence of African Americans – was that diversity may at some level account for the decline of social capital and, eventually, the collapse of American community. But whose community is collapsing? And how does ‘diversity’ show up in Putnam’s social capital projects at large?

* * *

To begin with, it is an objective fact that white people get a lot of play in Putnam’s social capital industry. The websites advertising his work are heavily populated by white people. Go to bettortogether.org, click ‘about the report’ and you’ll see a photo of white people playing together in a band; the link to ‘what is social capital?’ yields white people enjoying a picnic; around the Saguaro site there are many images of serious-looking white people, engaged in lively debate or concerned thought. Visible minorities appear here and there, usually in the background, sometimes surrounded by white people, always listening. This lack of attention to the ways in which ‘commitments to diversity’ are both produced and certified through images is unexpected. In an age where the issues of durable social inequalities that reside at the heart of questions of racialised difference have been largely replaced by aesthetic (as opposed to political) representation, perhaps Putnam’s groups should be commended for resisting this kind of cheap tokenism. It is nevertheless perplexing, not only because of the marketing standards of current times, but also in the light of some of the basic concerns of Putnam’s project.

That Putnam is worried about (even if supportive of) diversity is a point that he has made clear on a number of occasions. Again, the Uppsala lecture was exemplary in this regard. To ground his concerns,
he cited a raft of empirical investigations (including the above-mentioned Community Benchmark Survey directed by Putnam himself) that seem to demonstrate that excessive difference is simply bad for social capital (which, in the language of the social capital industry, is another way of saying ‘bad for the general health of communities’). By ‘diversity’, he means to indicate ‘race’. Despite his insistence upon the infinitely diverse markers of diversity, both his examples and narrative consistently take diversity as self-evident and conflate it with racialised difference.21 Putnam’s question, then, becomes something like: why is diversity (as racialised difference) bad for social capital (as the thesis that ‘networks have value’)? Read in the same light, the images that accompany the Saguaro and bettertogether websites force a perhaps unwelcome companion question on to the scene: how are the valuable networks that constitute social capital bad for diversity?

The sticky hinge in these questions is, of course, the word ‘bad’. Highlighting the normative implications of badness will imply that the answers to those questions say less about real social relations than about the impact of those social relations upon the values and commitments of the person who asks the question; on the questioner’s ideas about the bad, its causes and remedies. These values and commitments are not difficult to trace within Putnam’s organisations. In response to the frequently asked question: ‘Is all social capital good?’ the unnamed authors of the bettertogether site flatly respond ‘No’. Some of its forms can have ‘bad social consequences’. But they go on to conclude that ‘[f]ortunately, malevolent uses of human and social capital are relatively rare . . . which is why . . . we should continue to try to build social capital’. The situation boils down to this: under the assumption that social capital is generally something ‘good’, and given the stated commitments to diversity of Putnam and his followers, the fact that ‘diversity’ and ‘social capital’ do not always line up presents a problem.

While Putnam makes a habit of discussing these issues among friends (the Uppsala lecture, the ‘private seminar’ at 10 Downing Street), they are also available for public review on Putnam’s internet ventures. The ambivalence towards the social benefits of diversity shows up in the report of the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey. Indeed, the ambivalence around diversity is captured in the very title of the section that deals with the topic, calling our attention to ‘The opportunity and challenge of diversity’ (emphasis added).22 Immediately notable in the narrative that follows is the fact that it is hard to tell from the report exactly what constitutes the actual ‘opportunity’ of diversity. The report refers to ‘ethnically diverse metropolitan communities’ as ‘the most distinctive type of American community today’. While this sounds encouraging, it is not necessarily an endorsement, given that, as Putnam warns again and again, those communities
are virtually bankrupt of social capital and have moved dangerously close to ‘collapse’. The persistence of strong ethnic identities and the possibility of having a positive intercultural experience are both suggested as potential attributes. The only tangible ‘asset’ of ethnically diverse communities, however, is vaguely expressed through the well-worn language of food: diverse communities represent a kind of ‘multicultural stew’ that adds ‘chimichangas, kimche and collard greens, both literally and metaphorically, to the traditional American cuisine’.23

While the advantages of diversity for social capital research remain mysterious, the drawbacks or ‘challenges’ presented by diversity are apparently quite obvious. They are at least precise enough to be presented on the website in bullet-point form. Relative to a more homogeneous community, Putnam’s research concludes that greater diversity means that a community will exhibit less trust, sociability, political participation and interclass mixing. During his presentation in Uppsala, Putnam vigorously insisted on the correlative validity between the diversity of a community and these negative social factors. He was willing to concede a little more in terms of the direction of their causality, suggesting that a complex and multidirectional interaction between the categories that he calls ‘diversity’, ‘community’ (which often seems to stand in for ‘social capital’) and ‘(in)equality’ was ultimately at work. But, again, his examples suggested the negative value of diversity for social capital.

In the Uppsala lecture, Putnam offered several cases to back up his concerns. For example, he returned repeatedly to the ‘fact’ that Los Angeles, with its ample diversity, exhibits a poverty of social capital.24 An all-white, small town in South Dakota, on the other hand, was cited as awash in social capital. This comparison is somewhat extreme. To ‘prove’ that many neighbourhoods in a megalopolis like Los Angeles, with all of the tensions and mobility of modern urban life, have relatively low levels of trust, sociability, political participation and interclass mixing is to theorise the obvious. To contrast that obviousness with the social situation of a rural South Dakota community is to set up a comparison whose explanatory value is questionable. And, finally, to empty those social spaces of both their histories (which in the case of South Dakota includes a well-known legacy of racism and genocide) and their everyday, physical realities (which in the case of Los Angeles includes the assault on urban infrastructure under way in the US since at least the early 1970s), is to run the risk of proposing facile explanations to intensely complex social problems. Putnam’s faith in social capital as a social good leads him to find in diversity a ‘challenge’ to be confronted, as opposed to an opportunity for asking perhaps more interesting questions like: is social capital at play in the production and ensuring of homogeneity in small South Dakota towns? Does social capital depend upon ‘diversity’ to maintain its
unequal distribution? What are the relations between social capital and institutional racism? And so on.  

In general, Putnam’s method – which relies largely on polling and surveying attitudes and behaviours, noting curious correlations and speculating on their significance – disallows a more rigorous approach to questions about diversity. Most of the proof behind Putnam’s diversity-social-capital matrix is reducible to the views that people have towards other people. But even these views are bereft of any historical and cultural content. It is in this spirit that he was able to announce in his Uppsala lecture, with a kind of expectant astonishment, that people in homogeneous rural South Dakota register more tolerant attitudes than their Los Angeles compatriots when asked about the possibility of meeting a person ethnically different from themselves. But when Putnam proposes white rural communities as evidence of the production of tolerance through high social capital, he hides the basic fact that the people in his South Dakota example have very little probability of making good on their tolerance unless they leave their largely segregated community for the Indian reservation next door. Social capital, it would seem, thrives in places where ‘diversity’ has been effaced.

Putnam, of course, wants to see an increase in interracial harmony. Yet he seems too committed to theorising its possibilities in a sentimental way, through simplistic formulae that suggest that if people ‘felt’ better about each other, social problems would largely dissolve. He opens Bowling Alone with the narrative of a bowling league in a medium-sized American city (Ypsilanti, Michigan) and a man, John, whose life was saved due to a kidney donation on the part of his bowling team-mate, Andy. Putnam makes much of the fact that while John is black, Andy, his organ donor, is white. The idea here is that the interpersonal wealth – the social capital – accrued through the network-value of the bowling league could overcome historical racial hostility and save a man’s life: ‘That they bowled together made all the difference.’ Although the magnitude of the gift in this anecdote is not to be diminished, there are a number of other, more interesting stories here, beginning with an analysis of why a white man donating an organ across racial boundaries to save a friend’s life should be surprising at all; continuing with an analysis of the relations between social capital, organ donation and male bonding; and ending by reading this anecdote in the context of the notorious race-based inequality of access to health care in American society. But then again, dealing in easy solutions provided by narrative trinkets plays a big part in the genre of apocalypse, and goes hand in hand with the avoidance of dealing with real social problems, like the savagely unequal distribution of material resources.
The story about the relationship between diversity, trust, equality and social capital continues, and a new chapter has been in progress since the (symbolic) economic centre of the western world was reduced to ashes on September 11, 2001. Robert Putnam commented on the violence shortly afterwards in an op-ed column for the New York Times called ‘A better society in a time of war’ and in a more recent article published in The American Prospect, in which he reminds us that: ‘Nearly two years ago, I wrote in my book Bowling Alone that restoring civic engagement in America ‘would be eased by a palpable national crisis, like war or depression or natural disaster, but for better and for worse. America at the dawn of the new century faces no such galvanising crisis’.” 28 The apocalyptic force of foreign invasion and shadowy enemies made ‘palpable’ underwrites both of these articles. For the New York Times, Putnam compared September 11 with Pearl Harbor and noted the positive effects of that earlier emergency on the American mind and soul. Self-sacrificing Americans from the greatest generation put community back on track, and the list of things that Americans had done – planting victory gardens, offering rides in their cars to hitchhiking soldiers and war workers, ordinary citizens volunteering for the Red Cross, Boy Scouts recycling rubber for the war effort – has been reformulated for the Saguaro Seminar’s list of do-it-yourself community-making activities. Putnam noted: ‘we Americans have surprised ourselves in our solidarity’ and cited as evidence rises in blood and financial donations and increases in attendance at places of worship. He asked: ‘will this new mood last?’

It is today apparent that many were quite comfortable with the old mood. The spectacular collapse of Putnam’s ‘new mood’ seems now to announce itself by the news cast, as American solidarity has dipped to its lowest point in decades. Only a war profiteer could understand this American society as better in a time of war. The evidence is well known: the lists of unpatriotic intellectuals drawn up at high levels of government; new state powers to monitor the reading habits of ordinary citizens; members of the immigrant work-force upon which the American economy depends being rounded up and held without charge, or on petty charges. Americans are told by their government to live in constant fear of terror, aided by a kind of ‘terrorometer’ that fluctuates between green and red. And, finally, it must be remembered that the conditions for the ‘new mood’ of a ‘better society’ seem to rely on a ‘national crisis’ that includes palpable mayhem and mass murder: beyond those burned and buried in the World Trade Center, tens of thousands of civilian deaths, at minimum, in Iraq alone. 29

If apocalyptic arenas at home or abroad – Manhattan, Kandahar, Baghdad, Madrid – constitute the necessary preconditions for the ‘revival’ of American community in the twentieth century, community as a value that triumphs over all others must be called into question.
Putnam’s burden is that he wants diversity and community, but that the ‘facts’ he culls from ordinary Americans from South Dakota to Los Angeles show that diversity might, in fact, spell the demise of community. Given the actual reality of unprecedented migrations in a globalised world, would it not be prudent when faced with such a ‘problem’ to ask not why diversity seems to pose a threat to community, but why community seems to pose a threat to diversity? However the question is framed, the opening of the American mind towards these urgent issues is probably not facilitated by sermons on social capital from the literature of doom.

References

1 Allan Bloom (1930–1992) graduated from the University of Chicago in 1955 and went on to publish a number of works on political theory, among them the critical translation and interpretation The Republic of Plato (1968) and the translation and introduction to Rousseau’s Emile (1978). Bloom gained an international reputation for his critique of contemporary society and university policy, The Closing of the American Mind (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1987), and was widely hailed by conservative commentators as an authoritative voice on contemporary cultural problems.

2 The Closing of the American Mind, op. cit., p. 75.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 506.
7 Bowling Alone, op. cit., p. 506.
8 From an interview on The Connection, National Public Radio (11 July 2000).
13 The absence of Pierre Bourdieu from any serious consideration by Putnam is striking, until one realises that Bourdieu’s work is in many ways anathema to Putnam’s. The salient distinction is Bourdieu’s relentless attention to the unequal accumulation and distribution characteristic of all forms of capital (social, cultural, human, etc.). See Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The forms of capital’, Richard Nice, tr., Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education, edited by John Richardson (New York, Greenwood Press, 1986).
14 For review and critique of social capital theory, especially as it plays out internationally, see J. Harriss and P. de Renzio, “‘Missing link’ or analytically missing?”, Journal of International Development (Vol. 9, no. 7, 1997), pp. 919–37 and Ben Fine, ‘The developmental state is dead – long live social capital?’, Development and Change (Vol. 30, 1999), pp. 1–19.
15 It is somewhat mystifying that in a work devoted to the social and economic dissonance between northern and southern Italy, Putnam can ignore the writings of
Antonio Gramsci. When Putnam briefly poaches Gramsci (from Tarrow’s *Peasant Communism*), he does so only to reaffirm his own view of the South as ‘a great social disaggregation’ (p. 146), and ignores the fact that Gramsci’s pathbreaking thesis runs counter to the social capital diagnosis. For Gramsci, the problem of southern disaggregation is not reducible to trust or community, but to the South’s *de facto* condition of dependency vis-à-vis the colonising, industrial North. ‘Making democracy work’, then, cannot be understood as a question of building trust in local settings, but must rather be thought of in terms of *building alliance* between the traditionalist peasantry of the South and the new, industrial proletariat of the North. See Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question*, Pasquale Verdicchio, tr. (West Lafayette, Bordighera, 1995), esp. pp. 20, 42-7; Robert Putnam, with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: civic traditions in modern Italy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993).

16 In a brief report to *Australian Policy Online*, Andrew Leigh, an intern for Putnam, notes that the question of ‘social capital and diversity’ has been the central concern of Putnam’s research team since 2001. See <http://www.apo.org.au/webboard/items/00021.shtml>.
19 <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/>.
21 ‘Racialised’ difference differs from ‘racial’ difference because it highlights the *process of producing* difference (social, cultural, biological, religious, etc.) as *race*. We do not understand diversity as something that is simply there to be identified but rather as something that must be insisted upon and continually maintained. Diversity, then, works and even exists only through relations of power. Its very conceptualisation thus becomes an important question for interpreting research on social capital.
22 <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/communitysurvey/results3.html>. Since last summer, a note has been added to the page which claims the ‘preliminary’ nature of these conclusions.
23 <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/communitysurvey/results3.html>. This is an odd trinity of ‘new’ culinary forms to be presented against ‘traditional American cuisine’. The ‘chimichanga’ is regional and quite rare in Mexico, owing its wide proliferation in the US to the marketing strategies of frozen food distributors, Taco Bell, and school lunch menus, if not to the US invasion and appropriation of Northern Mexico in 1848. ‘Kimche’ is a Korean speciality whose dissemination in the US dates at least to the refugees that entered the US in the wake of the Korean War and probably to the nineteenth century. ‘Collard greens’ refer to the American South and are typically associated with African American cuisine, or ‘soul food’. They could only be excluded from the realm of ‘traditional American cuisine’ in the same way that some would exclude the presence of African Americans from ‘traditional American society’. Finally, the figurative language itself is weak, given that the ‘stew’ thus proposed would have no culinary appeal.
24 It is an unfortunate coincidence that Putnam’s Los Angeles is also the apocalyptic setting of Joel Schumacher’s *Falling Down* (1993), a film in which Michael Douglas plays the universal white man beset by the three communities symbolised in Putnam’s ‘multicultural stew’: Mexican, Korean and black.
25 Some scholars have been moving towards these types of questions. For new work on the relations between social capital and diversity that does not always echo Putnam’s, see Paula D. McClain, ‘Social capital and diversity: an introduction’

26 The obvious counter-example here would be Brazil, where people have generally registered tolerant attitudes toward racialised difference for decades, and yet quite visible informal and institutionalised racism persists. For a recent review of race relations and state policy in Brazil, see Mala Htun, ‘From “racial democracy” to affirmative action’, *Latin American Research Review* (Vol. 39, no. 1, 2004).

27 *Bowling Alone*, op. cit., p. 28.


29 Statistics on civilian deaths resulting from the invasion and occupation of Iraq vary widely. The non-profit group Civic reports more than 5,000 civilians killed during the so-called major combat phase in Iraq between March 20 and May 1, 2003. The Project on Defense Alternatives estimates between 3,200 and 4,300 civilian casualties during this same period. In military action to date, the website Iraq Body Count estimates up to 16,500 civilians killed. A Johns Hopkins study published in *The Lancet* estimates that as many as 100,000 civilians have died in Iraq as a direct or indirect result of the invasion and occupation.