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Can Robert Putnam Save the American Dream?

Bryce Vickmark

Robert Putnam

By Marc Parry | MARCH 12, 2015

The event is billed as a lecture on a new book of social science. But the speaker visiting Cambridge's Lesley University this Monday night sounds like a political candidate on the hustings. Robert D. Putnam — Harvard political scientist, trumpeter of community revival, consultant to the last four presidents — is on campus to sound an alarm. "What I want to talk to you about," he tells some 40 students and academics, is "the most important domestic challenge facing our country today. I want to talk about a growing gap between rich kids and poor kids."

Two decades ago, Putnam shot to fame with "Bowling Alone," an essay-turned-best-selling-book that amassed reams of data to chart the collapse of American community. His research popularized a concept known as "social capital." The framework, used in fields like sociology and economics, refers to social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust they create. "He's one of the most

important social scientists of our time," says Gary King, director of Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science, because of his ability to blend scientific rigor with popular appeal.

But tonight Putnam sets the science aside, at least to start. He opens his Cambridge talk with a story. It's about two young women, Miriam and Mary Sue. Their families, he says, both originally came from the same small Ohio town. Miriam, who had well-educated parents, went off to an ultra-elite East Coast university. Mary Sue, the daughter of high-school graduates who never held a steady job, ended up on a harrowing path of abuse, distrust, and isolation.

Removing a sheet of paper from a folder — the notes from an interview that one of his researchers conducted with Mary Sue — Putnam reads off the particulars. Mary Sue's parents split up when she was 5. Her mother turned to stripping, leaving Mary Sue alone and hungry for days. Her only friend until she went to school was a mouse who lived in her apartment. Caught selling pot at 16, she spent time in juvenile detention, flunked out of high school, and got a diploma online. Mary Sue wistfully recalls the stillborn baby she had at 13. She now dates an older man with two infants born to two different mothers.

"To Mary Sue," Putnam says, "this feels like the best she can hope for."

He pauses. "Honestly, it's hard for me to tell the story."

Miriam is Putnam's own granddaughter. Mary Sue (a pseudonym) is almost exactly the same age. And the backdrop to this tale is the professor's hometown of Port Clinton, once an egalitarian community where people looked after all kids, regardless of their backgrounds. In Putnam's telling, Port Clinton now symbolizes the class disparities that have swept the country in recent decades — a "split-screen American nightmare" where the high-school lot contains one kid's BMW parked beside the jalopy in which a homeless classmate lives.

"In Port Clinton now, nobody thinks of Mary Sue as one of 'our kids,'" Putnam says. "They think she's somebody else's kid — let them worry about her."

At 74, the professor is embarking on a campaign with one basic goal: getting educated Americans to worry about the deteriorating lives of kids like Mary Sue. It kicks into high gear this week with the publication of his new book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (Simon & Schuster). The basic argument: To do well in life, kids need family stability, good schools, supportive neighbors, and parental investment of time and money. All of those advantages are increasingly available to the Miriams of the world and not to the Mary Sues, a disparity that Putnam calls "the opportunity gap."

Ever since the Occupy Wall Street movement emerged in 2011, much public discussion has focused on the unequal distribution of income in today's America. Traditionally, though, that kind of inequality hasn't greatly concerned Americans, Putnam writes. What they have worried about is a related, though distinct, issue: equality of opportunity and social mobility. Across the political spectrum, Putnam writes, Americans historically paid lots of attention to the prospects for the next generation: "whether young people from different backgrounds are, in fact, getting onto the ladder at about the same place and, given equal merit and energy, are equally likely to scale it."

Our Kids focuses on that second issue: the distribution of opportunity. The book thrusts Putnam into a lively debate that is complicated by a lag in the available data. As Putnam notes, the conventional way of measuring social mobility — comparing a son or daughter's income or education when they are in their 30s and 40s against what their parents achieved when they were in their 30s and 40s — ends up being three or four decades out of date. (Poor youths featured in *Our Kids* won't turn up in statistical assessments of social mobility until the 2020s.) Putnam avoids this "rearview mirror" method. Instead, he directly scrutinizes

what has been taking place in children's lives over the past three decades. As he reads that data, the future looks bleak. Social mobility "seems poised to plunge in the years ahead," Putnam writes, "shattering the American dream."

Scholars have written about class gaps for years. Charles Murray, a more conservative analyst than Putnam, covered similar terrain in his 2012 book *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (Crown Forum). But two things distinguish *Our Kids*. One is its scope. Putnam combines a panoramic synthesis of scholarly literature (on family structure, parenting, schooling, and community life) with real stories about growing up in America today (culled from ethnographic interviews with upper- and lower-class families around the country).

The second is its author's personal crusade. *Our Kids* will probably be Putnam's last book. The professor sees it as both a piece of research and a platform for social change. He timed its publication to coincide with the presidential primary season. He briefed President Obama on its findings. He has spoken about the research with most of the people who have been talked about as possible candidates for president in 2016.

As Putnam stirs up national discussion about the opportunity gap, he's also trying to help grass-roots reformers who want to close it. He plans to convene five working groups of experts on various topics, like early childhood and community institutions, whose members will suggest possible solutions to these problems. By summer, Putnam intends to share that work with leaders who want to experiment at the local level — the mayor of Dayton, say, or the archbishop of San Antonio. It's a strategy inspired by the Progressive Era at the end of the 19th century, when national discussion gave oxygen to local reforms.

"Here's my target: I want this issue, the opportunity gap, to be the most important issue in the next presidential election," Putnam says at the end of his Cambridge talk. "The thing that says 'I'm serious about wanting to be president' is you have an answer — some answer — to the opportunity gap."

The following day, I meet Putnam for lunch at a seafood restaurant near Harvard Square to find out what started him on this campaign. The answer: an undergraduate's paper.

Nearly a decade ago, in an annual class Putnam teaches on social capital, a generalization in the scholarly literature didn't sit right with one of his students. To understand the series of events that unfolded from there, it helps to know a bit about the concept of social capital. The term, as Putnam defines it, refers to different kinds of connectedness, such as our informal links to relatives, friends, and acquaintances and our participation in communal functions like churches, sports teams, and volunteer activities. The basic idea of social-capital theory is that "social networks have value," Putnam writes. "Community bonds and social networks have powerful affects on health, happiness, educational success, economic success, public safety, and (especially) child welfare."

Bowling Alone, published in 2000 by Simon & Schuster, reflected a national sense of civic malaise with its argument that Americans had been pulled apart from each other and from their communities over the last third of the 20th century. The research also met with opposition. Had group life really atrophied, scholars asked, or had it just evolved beyond rotary clubs and other traditional forms of organization? Should the shrinkage be chalked up to less civic engagement, or to housewives becoming working women? Putnam himself followed *Bowling Alone* with a more hopeful volume in 2003, *Better Together* (Simon & Schuster), which chronicled efforts to renew communities and create fresh forms of social capital.

What struck Putnam's Harvard student was one theme in the social-capital course at that time: the growing trend toward volunteering among high-school kids. The student, who came from a poor town out west, didn't buy it. Students in her high school were not volunteering more. She guessed that a rise in résumé padding among collegebound kids accounted for the trend. And when she dug into the data, Putnam says, she turned out to be right. The rise in volunteering was concentrated among kids who planned to attend college. What's more, the class gap extended beyond volunteering. You could see it in other social-capital indicators, like community involvement and social trust.

"It was not something that I had ever thought of, actually — class differences among kids in social capital," Putnam says.

He didn't think too hard about it at first. The professor treats his research a bit like an industrialist managing a factory, tackling broad questions by assembling teams of scholars to divide up the work. (*Bowling Alone* involved nearly a dozen graduate students and postdocs sifting through the literature on topics like sports sociology, public health, urban design, and media consumption.) In the 2000s, Putnam's shop was cranking away on a study of diversity's effects on civic life, plus a 700-page book on the country's changing religious landscape (*American Grace*, Simon & Schuster).

But as Putnam's team started to look more seriously at the class conundrum that his student had identified, it became clear they had stumbled onto one corner of a larger story. The professor began to encounter other research by scholars who had started to worry about the consequences for children of rising income inequality. Animating this new empirical work was a concern that income inequality, which had grown over the past 35 years or so, might lead to kids' having increasingly unequal opportunities. And those unequal opportunities, the thinking went, might translate into lower social or economic mobility.

For Putnam, a key moment came when his trail led to the work of a Stanford sociologist, Sean F. Reardon. Reardon had turned up a class gap similar to what Putnam was seeing, only in a different domain: children's academic achievement. The sociologist found a growing class divide in math and reading test scores. "The achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families is roughly 30 to 40 percent larger among children born in 2001 than among those born 25 years earlier," Reardon wrote in a chapter he contributed to the 2011 book *Whither Opportunity?* (Russell Sage Foundation).

And on it went. In the literature on family structure, Putnam observed that a "neo-traditional" pattern of Ozzie-and-Harriet-like marriages had emerged among the college-educated upper third of American society, with divorce rates diminishing from their 1970s peaks. By contrast, sexual partnerships became less stable among the high-school-educated lower third of the population, with childbearing increasingly separated from marriage.

When it came to raising kids, Putnam learned, there had been essentially no difference in the amount of time that children got with their parents in the 1970s. But now the average infant or toddler of college-educated parents receives half again as much daily "*Goodnight Moon* time" — that is, time spent on developmental activities like reading — than kids of high-school-educated parents.

Or take religion. Involvement in faith groups had historically been less class-biased than other community activities. But now, Putnam found, poor families tended to participate less in religious communities than rich families. And young people's church attendance, which declined across the country in recent decades, dropped twice as rapidly among kids from the bottom third of the socioeconomic scale as among kids from the top third.

In the winter of 2011, Putnam reached a turning point. He had a hunch he was onto something big. It was similar to the way he felt with *Bowling Alone*. The question was whether to press forward. Over the winter holidays, Putnam huddled in his pond-side New Hampshire retreat with his research team; his wife, Rosemary; and his close friend and *Better Together* co-author, Lewis M. Feldstein. On one hand, Putnam was getting old. Would he even be able to finish one more book? On the other hand, this story, with its emphasis on what inequality was doing to kids, seemed like it could resonate across the ideological spectrum. The ultimate "purple" issue.

"I thought it might be a politically significant angle into the problem of inequality," Putnam tells me.

When I ask him to elaborate, Putnam fixes me with his pale blue eyes. In the photos I'd seen of him, the professor seemed like an avuncular sort, with a ruddy complexion and quirky chinstrap beard. Now, gripping his fork across the table, he comes across more like a moralizing Victorian grandfather.

"I want to change America," Putnam says.

Unsure if he's poking fun at himself, I chuckle.

"No, I do," Putnam says. "And I want to change America in a more egalitarian direction."

To attempt that — to write a book that might reach a large audience — Putnam knew he needed one more thing. He needed to track down stories about real people. The professor decided to begin his search in the small Ohio town where his own story had begun. That step, it turned out, would stir up a hornet's nest.

The Port Clinton of Putnam's youth was something of a Lake Wobegon, nobody very rich, nobody very poor. The dads of his high-school classmates worked in auto-parts factories and small businesses, or they fished and farmed. The moms stayed home. Parents, ministers, and shopkeepers supported all the town's kids. For example, the high-school quarterback, whose working-class parents didn't have a clue about college, got a leg up from a local minister, who mentioned his name to the university where he ended up. Such mobility was common among Putnam's peers in the Port Clinton High School class of 1959. According to research Putnam conducted for *Our Kids*, nearly 80 percent of those classmates got more education than their parents.

In the spring of 2012, Putnam dispatched a young ethnographer, Jennifer M. Silva, to begin interviewing kids in the lakefront community of 6,000 people. The field notes she sent back gobsmacked him. After Silva emailed the "Mary Sue" story — the one that opened his Cambridge talk — Putnam listened to the interview tape to make sure what he had read was a reasonable summary of her life. There had been nobody like Mary Sue when he was growing up in Port Clinton, he says. Literally nobody.

Putnam decided to publish an opinion article about the situation in *The New York Times.* The 2013 essay, "Crumbling American Dreams," held up his hometown as an example of everything gone awry in America. The op-ed triggered a backlash in Port Clinton. The schools chief, a former mayor, ordinary people: all publicly criticized Putnam. "NYT Opinionator piece paints sad picture of Port Clinton," the local newspaper headlined. The main reaction: How dare this famous scholar spit upon the town that had boosted him up?

But the story took another twist: "a backlash to the backlash," as Putnam puts it. A local United Way leader, Chris Galvin, stuck up for the professor. Her argument — stop shooting the messenger, we've got a problem here — carried the day. Not

only that: She started programs for mentoring and kids' play. When the professor went back to town about a year later, he was hailed as a hero. The mayor embraced Putnam and apologized for misunderstanding him.

"There's a decent chance that they may actually end up out of this whole thing becoming one of the first places in America to turn it around," Putnam says.

Whether Putnam will have as much success persuading the rest of the country is an open question. Even one of his allies is dubious.

Isabel V. Sawhill, an economist at the Brookings Institution, agrees with the themes of *Our Kids*. But she expresses pessimism about Putnam's ability to "move the needle politically on these issues, especially in Washington." In Sawhill's opinion, Putnam's book pays insufficient attention to a widely held American belief: If someone is poor, it's their own fault.

"I'm all for a stronger public and private effort to help these kids," says Sawhill, an expert on poverty and social mobility who chairs one of the groups Putnam created to help close the opportunity gap. "But I'm skeptical that a very large proportion of the public sees it that way and is willing to push their elected officials to do substantially more than they're doing now. I just don't think we're gonna turn into a Sweden."

An early *New York Times* review laments something else lacking in Putnam's book: an analysis of the political or economic forces behind the transformation it bemoans. *Our Kids* fails to convey how drastically income inequality has increased and how much influence the rich now wield in American political life, wrote Jason DeParle, a journalist who focuses on poverty. "To frame inequality, as Putnam largely does, as a product of inadequate empathy and weakened civic institutions is to overlook the extent to which it's also a story about interests and power," he argued.

Another sensitive issue is race. Putnam acknowledges the prevalence of racial injustices, both in the Port Clinton of his youth and in America today. But he emphasizes that the problems described in *Our Kids* affect all Americans. That tactic worries some. In a long article about Putnam's work, *The Washington Post* reported that some advocates have voiced concern "that it would appear as if a country that had overlooked poor black kids should rally to the cause of poverty now that many of the poor kids were white, too." Race, the newspaper wrote, is "where Putnam is most vulnerable to criticism."

Putnam's collapse-of-the-American-dream story may also meet resistance. Social mobility, Sawhill notes, is the subject of "huge debate." Last year, for example, a team of economists released a major study finding that Americans' chances of scaling the economic ladder hadn't changed (though mobility is lower in the United States than most developed countries). The paper gainsaid both Republican and Democratic politicians who have claimed otherwise. "The data thus far don't appear to support the view that mobility is plunging," Raj Chetty, a Harvard economist who co-wrote the paper, tells me in an email. "In fact, I think the best reading of the data suggest that mobility is improving slightly."

Putnam is more doubtful that Chetty's early results will hold up "when the full returns from the younger generation begin to arrive, about a decade from now." And he isn't waiting around to find out.

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