



A Transatlantic Divide?

Social Capital in the United States and Europe

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Synopsis:

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Social capital theories have stimulated renewed interest in the world of voluntary associations and community associations¹. The core claim is that typical face-to-face deliberative activities and horizontal 'bridging' collaboration within voluntary organizations far removed from the political sphere – exemplified by sports clubs, labor unions, and philanthropic groups - promote interpersonal trust among people unlike each other. In turn, trust is seen as cementing the bonds of social life, generating the foundation for building local communities, civil society, and democratic governance². Participation in bridging associations is thought to generate individual rewards, such as career opportunities and personal support networks, as well as community goods, by fostering the capacity of people to work together on local problems. Communities rich in social capital are thought to have schools supported by engaged parents, neighborhoods resistant to crime and vandalism, and local government connected closely with citizens. This theory has stirred widespread interest, not least because of Putnam's claim that social capital is a valuable individual and collective resource which has gradually dissipated among the post-war generation in the United States.

What is the evidence for the distribution of social capital and for parallel developments becoming evident elsewhere? Putnam concluded that a general decline in social capital has not occurred simultaneously throughout postindustrial societies over the last generation, based on a comparison of detailed case-studies from a range of advanced industrial societies, including Sweden, Britain and Japan³. Yet this comparison leaves open two major questions that deserve systematic cross-national research.

The first concerns whether the United States (like California) is essentially 'ahead of the curve'; in particular whether the primary factors thought to be contributing towards the fall in social capital documented in America -- namely the rise of commercial television, two-career families and urban sprawl -- may potentially cause a similar erosion of social capital to arrive later elsewhere, if other OECD countries eventually 'catch up' with these developments. Yet it remains unclear whether European societies will necessarily experience similar social trends, if these patterns are essentially historically 'path-dependent'. For example, nearly all other postindustrial societies had a stronger role for public sector broadcasters, which shaped the traditional culture and regulation of broadcasting, so that commercial television has had to adapt to this context. Urban and suburban sprawl has certainly also occurred in many societies other than the United States, but the geographic location of traditional metropolitan areas in Europe, combined with stronger planning regulations and the wider availability of public transport rather than dependence upon automobiles, means that the extent of this phenomenon may well remain more limited than in America. Even the social consequences of the rise of two-career families and working mothers may differ sharply in the United States and Europe, given contrasts in the widespread availability

of public crèches, child-care, and pre-school facilities. Many European states have traditionally been characterized by larger, more corporatist arrangements, where business and union organizations play a larger role in governance. If social capital has eroded during the postwar era in the United States, therefore, due to the path dependency of cultural traditions and historical institutional structures, this may prove yet another example of American 'exceptionalism' rather than a broader phenomenon.

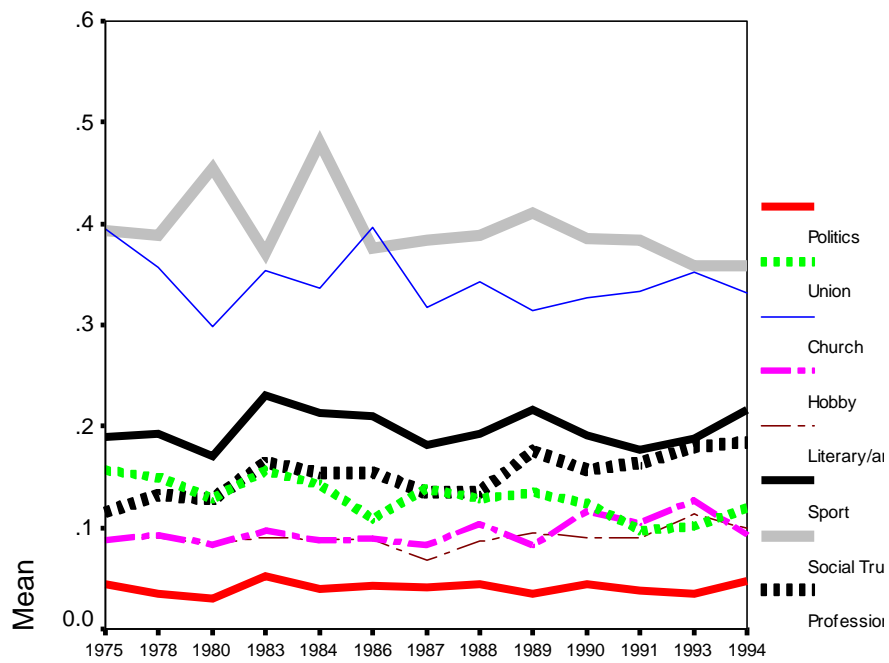
The second major issue that remains unresolved concerns the consequences of the changing nature of associational life, and the displacement of solidaristic by individualistic organizations. Putnam observes that many postindustrial societies have seen (i) *a general decline in the mass membership of traditional 'bridging' institutions* thought capable of generating and sustaining bonds of identity, friendship and engagement in community life, notably unions, churches and political parties; and also (ii) *the simultaneous rise of more informal, fluid and personal forms of social connection, which are more individualistic in orientation*, exemplified by the growth of new social movements and advocacy groups concerned with specific issues such as human rights, environmental protection, and globalization. Many others have expressed similar concern, for example Theda Skocpol has emphasized that America experienced a 'great civic reorganization' in the shift from federations and voluntary organizations engaged in mobilizing mass memberships towards professionally managed advocacy groups focused on elite-level lobbying, research, and communications.

If the shift from more solidaristic to more individualistic organizations has occurred in many postindustrial nations, as observers commonly suggests, it raises major questions about the consequences of this development for the pursuit of collective goals, for civic engagement, and for social inequality. In particular, if traditional large mass membership organizations that provided a channel for working class mobilization fade, and if newer advocacy groups and social movements attracting more professional and educated supporters spring up in their place, this raises fears that class disparities in the distribution of social capital will gradually be exacerbated. In Putnam's words: *"The newer forms of social participation are narrower, less bridging, and less focused on collective or public-regarding purpose. An important hypothesis that emerges from our initial survey is that the newer forms may be more liberating but less solidaristic – representing a kind of privatization of social capital."*⁴ Yet the evidence supporting this argument remains to be established. An alternative interpretation is that the greater permeability and fluidity of new social movements and advocacy groups could potentially widen the shared networks and social capital among groups who were traditionally marginalized and under-represented through the mass membership of political parties and unions, including women, young people, and ethnic minorities.

To examine these issues, and in particular the relationship between the type of associational membership, solidaristic and individualistic orientations, and social equality, we draw upon the initial release of the first round of the European Social Survey, with representative surveys conducted in 2002 from 15 nations in West and Central Europe⁵. The European Social Survey (the ESS) is a new, academically-driven social survey designed to chart and explain the interaction between Europe's changing institutions and the attitudes, beliefs and behavior patterns of its diverse populations. For comparable evidence we also draw upon the U.S. General Social Survey, 1972-2000, conducted by NORC.

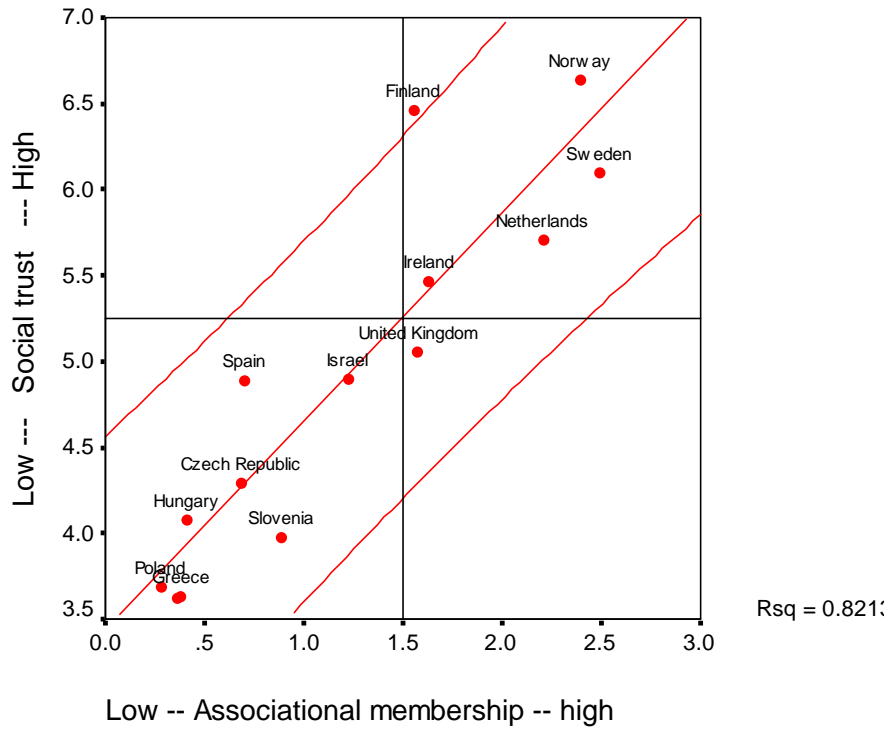
The distribution of associational membership

Figure 1. Trends in associational membership and social trust, US 1975-1994



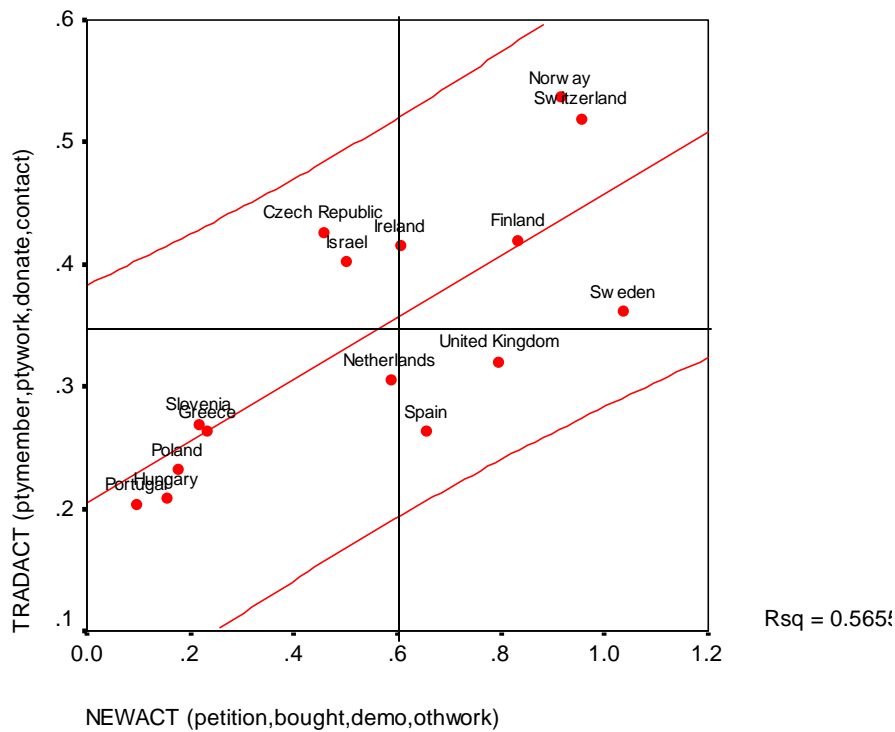
Source: US General Social Survey, 1975-1994

Figure 2



Source: European Social Survey, 2002

Figure 2: The relationship between traditional and newer forms of political activism



Note: Q "There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] to help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?" (Yes/no)

Traditional activism:

- Working in a political party or action group
- Donated money to a political organization or group
- Contacted a politician, government or local government official
- A member of a political party

Newer activism:

- Signed a petition
- Taken part in a lawful public demonstration
- Boycotted certain products
- Worked in another organization or association.

Source: European Social Survey, 2002

¹ Pierre Bourdieu. 1970. *Reproduction in Education, Culture and Society*. London: Sage; James S. Coleman. 1988. 'Social capital in the creation of human capital.' *American Journal of Sociology* 94: 95-120; James S. Coleman. 1990. *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge: Belknap.

² The seminal works are Robert D. Putnam. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Robert D. Putnam. 1996. 'The Strange Disappearance of Civic America.' *The American Prospect*, 24; Robert D. Putnam. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. NY: Simon and Schuster. More recent comparative research is presented in Susan Pharr and Robert Putnam. Eds. 2000. *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Robert D. Putnam. Ed. 2002 *Democracies in Flux*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ Robert D. Putnam. Ed. 2002 *Democracies in Flux*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. "At the most general level, our investigation has found no general and simultaneous decline in social capital throughout the industrial/postindustrial world over the last generation." P.410.

⁴ Ibid. p.412.

⁵ *The European Social Survey* (the ESS) will cover at least 19 nations and will employ the most rigorous methodologies. It is coordinated by Roger Jowell and the National Center for Survey Research, and funded via the European Commission's 5th Framework Programme, with supplementary funds from the European Science Foundation which also sponsored the development of the study over a number of years. For more details see <http://naticent02.uuhost.uk.uu.net/index.htm>. Data for an initial fifteen countries, along with comprehensive documentation, is accessible at <http://ess.nsd.uib.no>. The remaining countries will be added in future releases. We are most grateful to the Central Coordinating Team and the work of all the survey investigators who have made this data available for analysis.