

The Foundation Review

Volume 13 | Issue 3

9-2021

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Recommended Citation

Layton, M., & Martin, T. (2021). Book Review: The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again. *The Foundation Review*, 13(3). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1581>

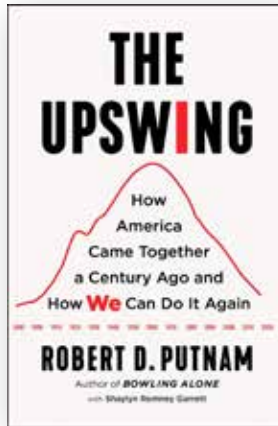
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The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do it Again

Book Review by Michael Layton and Tory Martin

Robert D. Putnam, Malkin Research Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, is arguably the most insightful researcher and writer on American community since Alexis de Tocqueville. In 2013, President Barack Obama awarded him the National Humanities Medal for “deepening our understanding of community in America.” His popularization of the concept of social capital,¹ first in *Making Democracy Work* (1993), combined with his rigorous, data-driven analysis of the decay of communitarian bonds within American life — most deeply explored in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2001) — have set the stage for countless conversations and efforts to repair the divisions and distractions that seem to be isolating us from one another. When Putnam speaks, people tend to listen.²

His understanding of social capital — how it is accumulated, invested, and depleted — therefore has currency for a sector dedicated to channeling “private action for the public good.” In their



2020 work, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do it Again*, Putnam and co-author Shaylyn Romney Garrett take a simultaneously broad and richly detailed look at the growth and decline of “community connectedness and social solidarity in America” from approximately 1890 to 2015 (p.105).

The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do it Again
Robert D. Putnam with Shaylyn Romney Garrett
Simon & Schuster, 2020, ISBN: 978-1-9821-2914-9

Putnam and Romney Garrett begin with the assertion that over the past 125 years, American community feeling has experienced an “I-We-I” curve.

Firstly, they demonstrate that many of the same deeply concerning realities we face in the United States today — gross wealth inequality, systemic and violent racism, pervasive social isolation — were also present during the late 19th century’s Gilded Age. In the 1890s, Americans sat at the bottom of an “I” trench that placed individual interests far above community needs.

Under the broad banner of the Progressive Movement, and in addressing a series of national and global challenges (the Great Depression,

¹ In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam defines the term as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19).

² Our own institution, Grand Valley State University, invited Dr. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett to discuss the book that is the subject of this review, on April 6, 2021, as part of its Presidential Roundtable Series, The Constitution, Elections, and Democracy. (<https://www.gvsu.edu/hc/robert-putnam-and-shaylyn-romney-garrett-the-constitution-439.htm>)

World Wars I and II), Americans transformed their society and themselves. The result was a golden age of associations resulting in political, social, and economic reforms, which moved us to a pinnacle of connection, the “We” of the curve, during the 1950s and 1960s. Sadly, the bottom fell out in the 1970s (due, perhaps, to an over-emphasis on community, and thus conformity, they write), and our society collapsed back into an “I” trench, where we remain today.

Depressing as their meticulously detailed story often is (two chapters on the experiences of African Americans and women throughout this I-We-I curve demonstrate where our rhetoric and achievements have fallen short, a fact the authors readily and frequently acknowledge, to their credit), Putnam and Romney Garrett tell their story in the hope of inspiring our nation to take action, to draw upon the lessons of the Progressives, and to reclaim our sense of shared purpose. “...America’s upswing...[was]...the result of countless citizens engaging in their own spheres of influence and coming together to create a vast ferment of criticism and change - a genuine shift from ‘I’ to ‘we’” (p. 338).

Philanthropy is precisely the realm of American life that seeks to promote citizen engagement, to encourage people coming together, and to ferment criticism and change, therefore we are offering a review of this book to the readers of *The Foundation Review* to address three questions that we believe are particularly relevant: How do the authors view the role of foundations in the creation of that first We moment? Second, what assessment do they offer of the actual and potential role of philanthropy in the next upswing? And finally, what lessons can we extract from the book on how foundations can support the creation of a 21st century We?

First, as far as the contribution of foundations to the first upswing, Putnam and Romney Garrett are rather, well, uncharitable. Foundations are hardly mentioned, and identified most frequently in chapter 6, *Race and the American We*, which cites “interventions undertaken by the white establishment” (singling out the Rosenwald Foundation’s important work in

funding schools for Black Southerners, for instance) as one of the factors contributing to progress toward racial equality (p. 225).

While recognizing that “by far the most consequential force for positive change was the organizing and advocacy of blacks themselves,” — Putnam and Romney Garrett identify the important work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and highlight the journalism and activism of Ida B. Wells, for instance — they do not otherwise discuss black philanthropy. This neglect is a reflection of the philanthropic literature itself; recognizing the philanthropic traditions and contributions of people of color is an ongoing struggle in the field. Authors like Tyrone McKinley Freeman and Tanisha C. Ford are leading this struggle, recounting the philanthropic biographies of people like Madam C.J. Walker (Freeman, 2020) and Mollie Moon (Ford, 2021) and enriching our understanding not only of the contributions of people of color but also expanding our understanding of philanthropy itself.

Further, it is an odd lacuna in the book that there is no mention of the founding of the first community foundation in Cleveland in 1914, nor of the tireless work of its creator, Frederick Goff, to promote the model across the nation (Sacks n.d.). Goff himself had impeccable Progressive credentials, as a banker endeavoring to make financial services available to minority and immigrant communities and as an advocate for improving public transportation and its desegregation. The community foundation model he pioneered is an enduring and significant institutional expression of communitarian generosity, creating a We that brings together a community to address its problems and mobilize resources to do so.

This omission is especially strange given that Putnam has had long-term engagement with community foundations. He offered his research expertise in partnership with community foundations around the United States, for instance, for the development of the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (Roper, 2000). The only mention of a community foundation

in *The Upswing* occurs in the preface, where he mentions the “New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, beginning with its longtime president (and dear personal friend) Lew Feldstein.”³

Additionally, the private foundation model itself took shape during the Progressive Era as one vehicle for channeling private wealth for the public good. While the authors mention the fact that John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie supported the estate tax (p. 57), they do not point out how this reform served as a catalyst for the creation of private foundations. They do point out that “megagifts” from the Gilded Age’s Robber Barons and today’s billionaires are a “by-product of the massive increase in inequality,” but assert that “It may seem hard to be critical of the generosity of Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and Mark Zuckerberg” (p. 142). This statement ignores the veritable cottage industry of books and commentary that does exactly that, from the likes of Edgar Villanueva (2018),⁴ Robert Reich (2018), and Anand Giridharadas (2018), to name some of the most notable.

Second, what assessment do the authors offer of the actual and potential role of philanthropy in the next upswing? They hone in on mailing lists as the primary marker of nonprofits’ community engagement and are skeptical of its impact. “Mail-order ‘membership’ turns out to be a poor measure of civic engagement,” they write (p. 123). While, admittedly, using the size of an organization’s membership rolls as a metric of engagement tends to be more of an exercise in organizational vanity than impact, dismissing the utility of a large, semi-engaged membership underestimates the potential impact of nonprofits. Especially when those efforts result in more informed voting, shifts in consumer choices, and other actions that advance a notion of the public good.

Putnam and Romney Garrett also largely overlook the relatively steady presence of volunteering — much of which is organized by nonprofits — as a vehicle for community

engagement. According to AmeriCorps, 77.3 million Americans (30.3%) volunteered in 2017 (most recently available year) for a total of 6.9 billion hours of service (2018). Undertaking an analysis of data on volunteering from 1967 to 2017, Susan M. Chambré writes, “Research on various economic, political and historical influences indicates that volunteer rates have not declined over time. Instead, they rise and fall within a 10% range that is related to political, social, and ecological events” (2020, para. 4).

Thirdly, how can foundations support the creation of a 21st century We? Putnam and Romney Garrett’s message is extremely important for our sector — even if their consideration of foundations is scant and occasionally dismissive. Philanthropy is increasingly defining itself as an ecosystem, one in which funders, nonprofits, and volunteers interact not only with one another but with our sister sectors — government and business — and with the public. As Independent Sector’s President and CEO Daniel Cardinali points out, civil society is not something “external” to the work of philanthropy, rather, “It’s us, all of us who occupy the space between business and government, all of us who do what we can to create better communities and a better world” (2019, para. 18).

Putnam and Romney Garrett make a profoundly important point in *The Upswing*: Americans have come together to heal their society before, and we can do it again. What’s more, we can build something even greater. “[I]n engineering a new American upswing, we must set our sights higher than our predecessors did and stay fiercely committed to the difficult but ever-worthy project of fashioning an American ‘we’ that is sustainable because it is inclusive” (p. 339). We wholeheartedly agree with this assertion — and we see a critical role for philanthropy in achieving that future.

It does seem fitting that eight chapters and 314 pages are devoted to describing and documenting the I-We-I curve, especially the upswing that

³ Putnam and Feldstein co-authored *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2004).

⁴ Villanueva’s book was reviewed by Juan Olivarez, 2018, in *The Foundation Review*, 10(4), <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1450>.

created our strong mid-century We, and that the authors “devote one final chapter to exploring how America’s last upswing came to be, and hope we might engineer another one today” (p. 316). After all, the hard work of advancing economic equality, creating greater social comity, of generating a stronger and much more inclusive community, is not the work of two individuals, no matter how insightful, but is the common challenge of us all.

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