
A Cautious and Cautionary Tale: Robert Putnam's *Our Kids*

Robert Putnam: *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. New York: Simon and Schuster 2015

First of all – this is a deeply depressing and disturbing work about the growing rates of poverty among American children in the last decades.¹ It points to the “linkage from economic hardship to stressed parenting to bad outcomes for kids”.² It is an important book that abounds with data that clearly prove that situation is deteriorating. I read it as a cautionary tale, an extremely cautionary tale for all of us – as it shows “the consequences of an economic system whose values grow increasingly toxic” (Eisenberg, 2015: p. 295). Not that I think that the historic and social situation is directly “translatable” to this part of the world, clearly not, but the book does invite certain associations, especially in the light of conservative restoration coupled with neoliberal pressures (see Apple, 1993) we are witnessing on a wider scale.

At the same time – being completely differently situated as the author of the book, as a female in a post-socialist central European context with strong affinities towards feminist rethinking of social phenomena – I have some serious issues about the book and its theses or interpretations. I certainly cannot agree entirely with one of the reviewers that this is an overly critical or extreme work (see Cayetano, 2016). The book is thoroughly researched and backed up by hard data from Putnam's own research and

1 Not to mention the moment in which this review is written – a particularly bad moment for America under the president in office. But the book was written before the current administration took over.

2 I am using Putnam's book as e-book, so I am unable to give page numbers.

numerous other studies, so I do not wish to sound completely negative in my judgement. But what I find extremely and sometimes even annoyingly problematic is the traditionalist (or should I say: conservative) methodological and conceptual framework.³ Perhaps it is merely “conventional” (as in “conventional indicators of social mobility”). Nevertheless, I think it is time to change our vocabularies or, at least, rethink them. I will – hopefully – elucidate this in the course of this review.

As the author himself has put it: the subject of the book is the transformation of America as a place that used to offer decent opportunities for all the kids to a place, half a century later, where the kids living on the “wrong” side of the street cannot imagine the future that awaits kids from the “right” side of the tracks. They are “being denied the promise of American Dream” – in contrast to the postwar prosperity (the author’s case study city is his native Port Clinton, Michigan, where, he claims, socio-economic class was not so strong a barrier for kids of any race as it would become later, in the twenty-first century). Whereas his numerical proofs are not to be doubted as this is a book well-grounded in hard data, I do see problems on a “soft” side. It may be true that “the escalator that had carried most of the class of 1959 [Putnam’s own high school class] upward suddenly halted when our own children stepped on”, but what about the stories of those who are not the majority represented in these data? Furthermore – and I do apologize for my dogmatism here – I find it hard to accept that the native talent and fortitude were all it took, back then, to climb the social ladder.

Putnam explains his starting point:

The same 1950s boom that sustained Port Clinton’s egalitarian culture led the historian David Potter in his 1954 bestseller *People of Plenty* to claim that American affluence had allowed more equality of opportunity “than any previous society or previous era of history had ever witnessed.” Even if the popular belief in equality of opportunity was exaggerated, he added, it had led Americans to believe that if we can’t make it on our own, it’s our own fault. Equality in America, Potter wrote, had come to mean not equality of outcome, as in Europe, but “in a major sense, parity in competition”.

One barrier looms larger than it did, claims Putnam, and that are class origins which means that class-based opportunity gap among young people has widened in recent decades. He does acknowledge that gender and ra-

3 E.g.: “Marriage” is used throughout as a sort of state to be desired; it apparently does not stand for “stable relationships” of other kinds. (I am not referring here to analyses of divorce, cohabitation and multi-partner fertility that are present in the book.)

cial biases remain powerful, but they would, he claims, represent less burdensome obstacles today than they did in the 1950s. The basic narrative of Putnam's book is undeniably true – “the gap between rich and poor kids in America is getting more severe on all sorts of dimensions” (cf. Eisenberg, 2015: p. 292), but this reading of the situation could be – I think – backed up by mentioning other axes of marginalization as intersections are so powerful at marginalization that they need to be taken into account: not only merely summarizing the effects of one, two or three oppressive categories, but acknowledging how these categories can mutually strengthen or weaken each other (see e. g. Winker and Degele, 2011). Gender for example is not put out as a very defining determinant for upward mobility – which works in Putnam's conceptual framework where gender equality or feminist theoretizations of it are hardly on the radar.⁴

The book consists of two different perspectives. One is personal narratives or interviews with youngsters and their families from different backgrounds and geographical parts of the USA in order “to help reduce the perception gap”, which adds a different view, gives voice to the ones hereto unheard.⁵ The other is statistical data and its interpretation. Both focus on class divisions which translate, as it seems, to the division between parents with or without college education. The controversial part, for me at least, is the interpretative frame of the areas where inequality is most strongly visible. These are, as identified by the author: families and parenting styles,⁶ schooling and community support. Of course, these areas are not controversial *per se*, but become such after Putnam has put them in his interpretative frame in which he is reading statistical data at face value. Putnam claims, basing his claim on previous research, that “children

4 He, however, does acknowledge that feminist revolution transformed gender and marital norms. But I think that certain feminist insights and/or rethinkings simply cannot be ignored any more in the building of critical knowledge.

5 Personal narratives need to be carefully read, of which the author is aware, see e. g. the part about the “golden memories of yesteryear”, but perhaps not quite enough since such narratives are not reports, but may be veiled by childhood nostalgia (for what never was?). The description given by many of his 1959 class respondents “We were poor, but we didn't know it” could be debatable in this light.

6 One of them being (over-)involvement of parents or over-parenting (aka helicopter parents and Tiger Moms) in school work and affairs, which, in my opinion, only widens the class gap – the “entrance” of parents into schools and virtually all areas of school activities does not necessarily prove a good thing (as can be illustrated by the Slovenian case with its over-involvement of parents to the point of absurdity). One dimension of over-parenting approach in America is that “parents in upscale communities also demand a more academically rigorous curriculum”. It may be true that parental engagement with schools encourages (could encourage?) higher performance especially among socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, but are those parents able, have time etc. to intensively parent? Putnam is aware that questions about causality are not easy to answer.

who grow up without their biological father perform worse on the standardized tests, earn lower grades, and stay in school for fewer years, regardless of race and class. They are also more likely to demonstrate behavioural problems ...” The power (and danger) of such statements – and I do not by any means opt here for a post-statistical society! – lies in generalizations and in turning a blind eye to individual stories, not to mention essentialist readings. This is of course not a suggestion to mothers to persist in abusive relationships, but it treads on a very slippery terrain which is legitimized by the very conventional conceptual framework mentioned before. It is of course not solely the difficulty of the book, but also of the disciplines the author is indebted to.

Similarly, as he claims, “The collapse of the traditional family hit the black community earliest and hardest, in part because that community was already clustered at the bottom of the economic hierarchy”. One can, surely, understand the point that social changes brought some very difficult consequences – but do we claim here that traditional family is something that must be preserved by all means and is thoroughly and in every case a good affair? Again, the trouble is in the interpretation and essentialist understandings.

Furthermore, while I can of course agree that “stable, two-parent loving families” are good for children (“two-parent”, it is not stated but it can be safely assumed, means heterosexual relations) and that stability in this regard is a good thing⁷ and that poor single moms can have on general even harder times than moms in a relations, but what about moms with abusive husbands, not to mention black single moms etc.? (And how exactly loving families and happy marriages Putnam is talking about should be defined?) Should not there be real and realistic initiatives to help single moms out instead of discussing the possibility that welfare benefits gave poor single moms an incentive to have kids. Putnam refers to “some careful studies” that have confirmed a modest, statistically significant effect of that sort. Should Americans rather not think along the lines of introducing sexual education in schools (it is a rhetorical question, I am aware of that, even more at the present moment) since this is a good measure to help prevent teen pregnancies, and make contraception more readily available? More or less individual actions (such as “Avoid the stork”) towards “changing the norm from childbearing by default to childbearing by design” may not have as much effect as would a national initiative.⁸

7 To increase marriage rates, Putnam proposes seeking help from religious communities that can influence their members without involving government (!).

8 For a current trends in this regard, see for example S. Singh (2017) at <http://feministing.com/2017/06/21/missouri-votes-to-let-employers-fire-people-who-use-birth-control/> for

Similarly – I have to bring this up since it is presented as a powerful predictor of how children will fare as they develop – there are family dinners. Putnam quotes his source that youths who ate dinner with their parents at least five times a week, “did better across a range of outcomes: they were less likely to smoke, to drink, to have used marijuana, to have been in a serious fight, to have had sex . . . or to have been suspended from school, and they had higher grade point averages and were more likely to say they planned to go on to college”. This is again an example of troubles with the interpretation. Besides, it might give the impression that this is causal, not perhaps correlational. I find such categories particularly upsetting – family meal does not have to be a pleasant event – the line of thought should be developed further as to what these meals actually stand for (caring parents, caregivers or important adults, economic stability aka enough money to provide for regular meals, etc.).

Let us turn now to the school part of inequality. As reported by Putnam: in terms of enrolment in early childhood education the United States ranks 32nd among the 39 countries in the OECD, which is a low rank considering the importance of preschool education. But the “opportunity gap” is said to be already large by the time children enter kindergarten, which the author connects to the gaps in cognitive achievement by level of maternal education. Schooling, he claims, plays a minor role in creating score gaps. This could again be a very controversial terrain: maternal sensitivity and nurturance as almost a sole factor to influence a life of a child.⁹ But “regardless of their own family background, kids do better in schools where the other kids come from affluent, educated homes. This pattern appears to be nearly universal across the developed world”. That is why Putnam names the American public school today an echo chamber: the advantages or disadvantages that children bring with them to school have effects on other kids. This is connected to the so called neighbour-

some latest “endeavours” to end virtually all family planning (disclaimer: it sounds as something taken out of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*): a new Missouri bill would target abortion providers and sanction employment and housing discrimination against people who use birth control or have an abortion . . . In other words, if the bill is passed, you could be evicted in the state of Missouri for having an abortion, using birth control, or becoming pregnant while unmarried.

- 9 The point where I really hold a grudge against the author is his using the experiments in rats (how mother rats nurture their newborns and how often) as a proof that “providing physical and emotional security and comfort” can make a great difference in children’s lives (to which I of course totally agree). Such experiments in e. g. in apes have been analysed critically by feminist researchers of science, especially Donna Haraway, who explains this laboratory-induced psychopathology as particularly dangerous to social world as it invariably deals with mother-infant relations and defines a “natural” motherhood (see Haraway, 1989). It is quite agonizing to read about pain induced to laboratory animals in psychological experiments.

hood effect: “growing residential segregation by social class is a key underlying cause of differences in kids’ educational experiences”. Children attend schools of different quality. Again, the solution to this problem does not seem to be very realistic: Putnam suggests moving poor families to better neighbourhoods. (If poor families are moved to better neighbourhoods, what then becomes of the poor neighbourhoods? Are better ones still better?)

Extracurricular activities are described by Putnam as “a near-perfect tool”, invented by the Americans, to foster equal opportunity (as they provide a natural and effective way to provide mentoring and inculcate soft skills, says Putnam). But, as they are mostly provided in a form “pay-to-play”, one can see them as just another dividing factor. Putnam suggests that this should be amended, but his proposals somehow do not look quite realistic: his appeal is for more funding for extracurricular activities.

Indeed, it is the anger factor that I miss sometimes in this documentation of the expansion of inequality, and that is why I read this as a cautious tale: documenting, but not really seeking reasons for it (culprits?) and realistic and/or political changes. The rise in inequality recognized by Putnam in this book seems “to spring if not from natural causes, then from unlucky but well intentioned policy choices,” as put by M. Eisenberg (Eisenberg, 2015: p. 294). Putnam touches upon possible causes for “this breathtaking increase in inequality”, but does not put a finger to it. They are, as he says, much debated: globalization, technological change, de-unionization, changing social norms, post-Reagan public policy ... So the premise of American national independence “all men are created equal”, as important as it may be, looks in these murky waters very much devoid of any contents, even if claimed by Putnam, that “Americans of all parties have historically been very concerned about this issue”.

The George W. Bush administration is mentioned as an example of trying to improve things: it is said to pursue an array of policy experiments designed to enhance marriage and marital stability and rigorously evaluated the results. Putnam does not make any comment on such policy experiments (by the way, he acted as a consultant to several American presidents) nor takes a stand as regards various political decisions. He does, however, state that

The absence of personal villains in our stories does not mean that no one is at fault. Many constraints on equal opportunity in America today, including many of the constraints apparent in our stories, are attributable to social policies that reflect collective decisions. Insofar as we have some responsibility for those collective decisions, we are implicated by our failure to address removable barriers to others’ success.

To end with, as put by one of the reviewers, M. Eisenberg, “this book is a frustrating subject for review. It is praiseworthy and disappointing [...] scholarly, but hobbled by its patterns of selective attention and language” (Eisenberg, 2015: p. 290) and, as said in the beginning of this review, very conventional in its presentation and concepts. Childhood poverty, described in this book, is a problem because it reduces productivity and economic output, raises health expenditures etc., but it is also a problem because it is plain simple wrong (naïvely as this may sound). All things said, *Our Kids* is an important, empathic book, but often, as I tried to show, too cautious in its course. It certainly provokes serious debates, and that might be a good thing.

Valerija Vendramin

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