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# Democratic Decline and the Politics of the Upswing: How the United States May Have Come Together a Century Ago but Can It Do It Again?

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev)**Matthew Flinders** 

## Abstract

Robert Putnam's *The Upswing* (written with Shaylyn Romney Garrett) provides a powerful meta-analysis of American social, political, economic and cultural change throughout the twentieth century. What this analysis reveals is the existence of an almost perfect arc of social progress which begins from a low position around the Gilded Age at the beginning of the twentieth century and then climbs across all variables until reaching a highpoint around 1960. The Progressive Era, Putnam argues, engineered an 'upswing' against inequality, polarisation, social disarray and a culture of self-centredness. Since then, however, the data suggest that a severe downswing has occurred which explains the existence of deep divisions and polarised politics in the United States. Putnam's core argument is simple: The United States has pulled itself out of a trough before and it can do it again. In a post-Trump context, this argument could hardly be more welcome which may explain the rave reviews this book has generally received. Nevertheless, the core weakness of *The Upswing* is that it arguably tells us far more about how the United States 'came together a century ago' but far less about how it 'can do it again' in the future.

## Keywords

social capital, civic life, Obama, democracy, Trump

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The United States is a deeply divided and troubled democracy. The Trump Presidency and the impact of COVID has only deepened divides and laid bare the existence of embedded structural inequalities. In this context, Robert Putnam's latest book *Upswing* (written with Shaylyn Romney Garrett) has arguably been published with impeccable timing. The United States is, as one review of this book puts it, 'yearning for an Upswing' (Kahloon,

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2020). With this in mind, it is difficult to think of anyone in the world more suited to identify a route map or blueprint for reversing a downwards spiral of civic apathy. Putnam's name has become almost synonymous with the analysis of social capital. For four decades, his books have charted civic decline, eroding trust and social division. *The Upswing* cannot therefore be understood on its own but is best seen as the culmination of a lifetime's scholarship that has evolved from – to note just a few of his books – *Hanging Together* (with Nicholas Bayne, 1984) through to *Making Democracy Work* (1993), *Bowling Alone* (2000), *Democracies in Flux* (2002), *Better Together* (with Lewis M. Feldstein, 2003), *American Grace* (with David Campbell) and *Our Kids* (2015). The standard of this scholarship and the scale of its contribution to the design of public policy have been acknowledged in a great raft of prizes, awards and honorary degrees. In 2013, he was personally awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Obama for 'deepening our understanding of community in America' (The White House, 2013).

Obama's experience not just as a politician but more importantly as a former community activist in Chicago would have undoubtedly resonated with Putnam's emphasis on social solidarity and collective endeavour. 'This was true democracy at work', Obama (2020: 11) writes about social movements where ordinary people came together to make change:

democracy not as a gift from on high, or of a division of spoils between interest groups, but rather democracy that was earned, the work of everybody. The result was not just a change in material conditions but a sense of dignity for people and communities, a bond between those who had once seemed far apart.

This focus on social bonds and trust that Putnam has consistently explored is not, however, the sole reason for his success. What has also marked-out Putnam's scholarship has been a very particular and relatively rare form of *solution-orientated* political science. As Gerry Stoker (2013) has argued, how to actually solve pressing socio-political challenges has in recent decades become a neglected justification for political science. Even the most cursory analysis of the vast body of scholarship which has in recent years attempted to trace the 'end', 'death', 'decline', 'suicide', 'crisis', or 'twilight' of democracy reveals a predominantly *problem-orientated* approach.<sup>1</sup> As a result, readers of this corpus will be left knowing a huge amount about the problems or challenges faced by democratic governance but far less about what might be done to address them. Putnam, by contrast, has always undertaken his research as a precursor to dealing with the far thornier questions concerning *what can be done*.<sup>2</sup>

This emphasis on 'what can be done' leads me not to the beginning but the end of Putnam's *Upswing* and, more specifically, to the acknowledgments and the admission that

This book has a slightly unusual history. While tinkering with several obscure datasets – his favorite pastime – Robert Putnam stumbled over an unexpected confluence of historical patterns, tempting him into renegeing on a promise to his long-supportive wife, Rosemary, that *Our Kids* (2015) would be his last book. (p. 343)

Tinkering with obscure datasets is undoubtedly a niche pastime but, as many scholars and writers will know, such structured serendipity is the perfect strategy for grappling with complexity. And yet, the problem with Putnam's *Upswing* is that it is arguably *too heavy* on 'How we [American society] came together in the past' and far *too light* on the thornier

question of ‘How we can do it again’ in the future. Given that this latter element of the book’s sub-title provides *the* raison d’être of *The Upswing*, and in light of the already mentioned solution-orientated approach that has been the hallmark of Putnam’s career, this critical claim demands explanation.

This ‘past-heavy, future-lite’ claim is presented through a three-part process of review and discussion. The first part provides a precis of *The Upswing* with a focus on the core thesis regarding the ‘I’-‘We’-‘I’ arc. The second section questions the core assumption that it is in history that clues regarding the creation of a blueprint for civic and national renewal can be found. Although adopting such a doubtful disposition is the academic equivalent of sitting ‘outside the whale’ given the admiration and acclaim *The Upswing* has already received, an outsider’s perspective often yields fresh insights (discussed below). It is this book’s belief that the challenges of the past are in any meaningful way relevant to the challenges of today, and its belief that the social foundations of a civic revival can be identified within contemporary American politics that provide the fault line which this article seeks to explore. The storms of the past, it will be argued, are very different to the storms of today. This leads into a focus not on the balance between the individual and community (i.e. the explicit spine of this book) but on the balance between idealism and realism (i.e. the implicit but possibly more enlightening aspect of this book – its deeper story). Putnam’s book is full of belief and hope but if an upswing is going to occur, its architects and leaders will have to pit themselves against the gritty realities of American life. In order to tease this argument out the final section draws-upon Barack Obama’s presidential memoirs and specifically the notion of being ‘Inside the Barrel’.

## The ‘I’-‘We’-‘I’ arc of the twentieth century

*The Upswing* opens with a first-line focus on Alexis de Tocqueville’s travels around the United States in the 1830s. It was at this time a newly formed nation but de Tocqueville made observations and revealed insights – Putnam (2019: 1) suggests – that ‘only an outsider’s perspective could yield’. Central among his observations was a realisation that the United States possessed a distinctive civic culture. On one hand, the men and women he watched and listened to had a fierce commitment to personal liberty and a pioneering spirit which bristled against external interference; and yet, on the other hand, he observed the coming together and mutual support that these people offered each other and it was this sense of civic action and civic responsibility which formed a strong counter-balance to rampant individualism. This is, of course, and as Putnam acknowledges, a fairly rosy interpretation of history which conveniently overlooks the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of African Americans and the disenfranchisement of women. But the core social dimension that de Tocqueville first identifies and which then runs like a golden thread throughout Putnam’s illustrious academic career is the balance between the twin ideals of freedom and equality. Or, put slightly different, between ‘respect for the individual and concern for the community’ (Putnam, 2019: 2). Putnam’s career has been dedicated to the analysis and understanding of this balance, largely through a focus on the concept of social capital.

Whether comparing the introduction of regional government in Italy (in *Making Democracy Work*, 1994), the decline of team sports in the United States (*Bowling Alone*, 2000) or the evolution of social capital across a range of polities (*Democracies in Flux*, 2002), Putnam’s work has always focused on how the potential tension between respect for the individual and concern for the community is managed in order to achieve a healthy

equilibrium. It is in exactly this context that *The Upswing* makes three core arguments. The first is that across a range of dimensions (economics, politics, society, culture, race and gender), the data suggest that the United States has lost any sense of balance and is, in effect, plumbing new depths when it comes to inequality, unfairness and individualism. The second argument is that the United States has been in this trough before in the Gilded Age from the 1870s to the early-twentieth century; and the final, undoubtedly hopeful, but also controversial argument is that because it has pulled itself out of a trough before it *can* do it again in the future, and therefore, escape its current crisis.

Crisis is, of course, a powerful description of any situation. It is also one that has hovered, shadow-like, around almost any democratic discussion for much of the last 50 years. Democracy, it seems, exists in a perpetual swirl of crisis. Those readers who doubt this point might look back to the landmark report of the Trilateral Commission – *The Crisis of Democracy* – which caused such controversy at the mid-point of the second-half of the twentieth century (Crozier, 1975). And yet possibly, the biggest contribution of *The Upswing* is (paradoxically) its explication of just how divided the United States has become. To phrase this in terms of crisis is not hyperbole and it is important to note that the bulk of this book was written *before* the Trump Presidency and *before* the healthcare impact of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The scale of the American challenge is itself laid bare by Putnam in a series of historical charts which span the twentieth century and serve to illustrate that the ‘arc of the twentieth century’ is relatively clear, irrespective of specific social dimension or variable. The curve is one that starts from a very low base at the beginning of the century when individualism was high and concern for community low; it gradually climbs through the first-half of the century due to the achievements of the Progressive Era, peaking in the 1960s; and then falls back into the trough at the end of the century as a combination of factors shift the balance back away from the ‘We’ to the ‘I’. The aim of setting out this curve is not to deny the existence of positive signs of social progress – throughout the twentieth century, houses got bigger, child mortality fell, car ownership increased, life expectancy rose, more people finished high school and graduated from college – but it is to highlight that even these positive trends mask underpinning increases in forms of inequality which themselves reflect structurally embedded factors that too often appear resistant to change. But for Putnam, the ‘arc of the twentieth century’ tells a story not of disenchantment or decline but of recovery, revival, resurgence and the rebirth of a nation that recognised a need to temper the worst excesses of individualism and to use the state as a bulwark of positive social change. The key point that Putnam (2019: 19, emphasis in original) wants to make is that the United States has pulled itself out of similar situations in the past and it can do it again today:

And finally we turn to the implications of our findings for reformers today. For the arc we describe is not an arc of historical inevitability, but an arc constructed by human agency, just as Shakespeare suggested. Perhaps the single most important lesson we can hope to gain from this analysis is that in the past America has experienced a storm of unbridled individualism in our culture, our communities, our politics, and our economics, and it produced then, as it has today, a national situation that few Americans found appealing. But we successfully weathered that storm once, and we *can* do it again.

Whether the storm raging across the United States today is quite the same as the one that the architects of the Progressive Era faced is a point we will return to below but what this book does provide is a clear statistical sense of why the United States appears so deeply

divided. It also helps explain Trump's entry to the apex of American politics and the attractiveness of Trump's *ism* to large sections of the American public. Trump's brand of simplistic 'Us' and 'Them'/'America First' politics offered a clear emotional connection to those who felt the system was unfair, stacked against them and therefore that they had little to lose by taking an electoral risk (see Flinders, 2020). Put slightly different, Trump was not *the* problem and it is arguably more accurate to suggest that his rise to the presidency was simply symptomatic of a deeper social malady. It is the contours and curves of this malady – the loss of any sense of workable balance between respect for the individual and concern for the community – that Putnam maps out with such precision and clarity that forms the core contribution of this book. This contribution is also possibly the book's weakness in the sense that it tells the reader a huge amount about the problems with American life and society that were already largely well-known. Returning to de Tocqueville and the benefits of an outsider's perspective, when viewed from this side of the Atlantic, it is difficult to think that anyone could have observed the threats and theatre of Trump's America and not come to the conclusion that something was seriously wrong.

But *problem-orientated* analyses already exist aplenty – although admittedly not with the scale of statistical ambition and historical sweep contained within *The Upswing* – and what is needed given the depth of the contemporary trough that Putnam charts is exactly the more *solution-orientated* approach which is initially promised. *How* can the civic potential of modern America be unlocked? *What* does mending democracy in the United States actually mean in the twenty-first century? *Where* are the new narratives that need to be told or the novel forms of social glue that can bind American society? *If* history provides insights and lessons that can inspire a new upswing, then how can they be used to forge a fresh blueprint for national renewal? These are the questions that *The Upswing* so usefully provokes and which also demand that I sit to some extent 'outside the whale' in an Orwellian sense of foregoing the comforts and protection afforded by remaining *within* the dominant worldview of a specific tribe (Orwell, 1964 [1940]).

The dominant belief emerging from the collective consciousness of a vast number of reviewers is that '*The Upswing* is a masterpiece; it weaves seemingly unrelated stories into a grand master narrative of the last hundred years. A triumph'. Other reviews make similarly effusive claims and one could be forgiven for thinking that the brilliance of this book is what Elinor Ostrom (2000) once termed 'a self-evident truth', a common sense wisdom almost beyond discussion. To question or reject dominant assumptions, irrespective of their focus, is a risky endeavour; like the fish who leaves the shoal or the animal that strays from the pack, going it alone can be a dangerous path to take (far safer and easier never to stray from the path of conventional opinion). But as Ostrom (2000: 33) (herself a Nobel Prize winner) emphasised, the 'danger of self-evident truths' is '[T]he fact that something is widely believed does not make it correct'. With this in mind, it is necessary to state my position very clearly. *The Upswing* is a brilliant book that offers an unrivalled account of American social change. It intertwines disparate facts and demographic trends into a flowing and accessible narrative but it is far stronger in terms of explaining the past than it is about charting the future.

## Outside the whale

Bob Putnam is proud of his Irish ancestry and has travelled around the island that is Ireland piecing together the fragments of his family tree. By travelling to the Emerald Isle, Putnam was, in essence, seeking to identify and understand his roots, and through



that to achieve a sense of stability and anchorage. This focus on the need for individuals to feel anchored could take us on an intellectual journey from Émile Durkheim's work on social anomie, through to C. Wright Mills' writing about alienation and 'the trap' of modern life, to Zygmunt Bauman's work on liquidity and fear, right up to the 2020 work of Anne Case and Angus Deaton on 'deaths of despair and the future of capitalism'. But such temptations must be resisted in order to make the simple point that individuals need, crave and are to a large degree *dependent* upon a sense of belonging within a broader social fabric. As that fabric becomes increasingly threadbare, then so people seek to either mend their sense of self or find new tribes to which they can belong.<sup>3</sup> The phenomenal growth in the popularity of tracing family trees, finding long-lost relatives and even DNA-based ancestry testing is therefore just the soft relation of more extreme brand of neo-tribalism and ethno-nationalism that has emerged in recent years. It is all about roots and anchorage.

In essence, what *The Upswing* really reveals is that a phenomenal *downswing* vis-à-vis roots, anchorage and communitarian sentiment has occurred in the United States during the last half-century. The more positive reading of that trend comes from stepping back still further in history in order to suggest that similar challenges have been navigated in the past and, by implication, can be similarly addressed in the future. It is this implication or implicit assumption that places me 'outside the whale', in the sense of not being quite as convinced about the core thesis of the book as other readers. '[W]e should take inspiration and perhaps instruction' Putnam (2019: 18) argues 'from *a period of despair much like our own*, on the heels of which Americans successfully – and measurably – bent history in a more promising direction [*italics added*]'.

Never before has the word 'measurably' been deployed with such constant and laser-like precision. The Putnam approach is unashamedly positivist and therefore 'what counts' is apparently what can be measured, quantified and presented in charts and graphs. While the statistical meta-analyses are undoubtedly impressive, after a while, the book develops a repetitive style whereby chart after chart reveals the same 'I'-'We'-'I' arc which is at one and the same time, the single contribution of the book and also possibly its biggest weakness. Weakness because I could not help that there was something so obviously Procrustean about fitting the vast complexity and inevitable messiness of American life and society – from Honolulu to Houston and from Dallas to Deadhorse – within a strangely neat and consistent curve. '[T]oo often' Idrees Kahloon suggests, 'Putnam and Garrett hammer these complex evolutions into a clean historic arc to better align with the argument of the rest of the book'.<sup>4</sup> The evidence for this curve-shaped thesis is also problematic in places. For all, Putnam's skills as a storyteller; there was also something somewhat deadening about the constant curves; an inability of the vast statistical-scraping and 'big-data' to quite convey the real world relevance of the sweeping lines in terms of deeper tones and texture. Strangely enough, the more I read into *The Upswing*, the more I thought about and appreciated Arlie Hochschild's (2016) *Strangers in Their Own Land* with its deep ethnographic insights and subtle emotional layering. (In many ways, the books are clearly complementary.)

A related point revolves around the scope of the argument. Although the historical sweep is as wide as it is ambitious, the territorial breadth of the book appears unnecessarily narrow. As has already been mentioned, the 'crisis of democracy' which has in recent decades formed the focus of a burgeoning literature is by no means limited to the United States. Many of the social and economic challenges captured in the vast body of data presented in this book are pressing issues in many parts of the world. As the work of

Gábor Scheiring et al. (2020) has revealed, for example, ‘deaths of despair’ represent a social pathology increasingly found across Europe (and which are also expected to increase in a post-COVID context). And yet, this book exists within a cocoon of implied American exceptionalism. It is as if the rest of the world does not exist. Putnam may well respond that all books have boundaries and that this is a book about the United States Period.

The deeper tension within this book, however, arguably stems less from its territorial boundaries, statistical sources or methodological approach but more from its core assumption that *history provides lessons for the future*. In many ways, there is a triple-dimension to this normative foundation. The first assumption is that the Progressive era impulses towards greater togetherness were really a solution to deep social challenges (rather than potentially simply sowing the seeds of later disruptive forces). The second assumption is that understanding the late-nineteenth, early twentieth-century upswing will provide insights that can be used to inform, promote and nurture a new upswing in the twenty-first century (i.e. an *information*-based assumption). The third assumption is that because the United States *has* lifted itself up before then it *can* do it again (i.e. an *action*-based assumption). This is feel good political science. At times, the text possesses an Obamaesque ‘Yes, we can!’ energy which arguably flounders and crashes on the shore of politics because it is based on the assumption that there are similarities between the challenges of the late-nineteenth century and those that the United States faces in the early-twenty-first century.

At face value, a thematic approach to the challenges – economics, politics, society, culture, race and gender as adopted in this book – will undoubtedly present a certain sense of similarity. And yet, I am less convinced that the insights from the past (particularly around ‘The Great Convergence’ of the mid-twentieth century) will actually offer as many useful lessons about thinking about the future as Putnam seems to suggest. Two explanations – the first historical, the second comparative – exist for this sense of concern, while also serving to dissect Putnam’s assumptions.

From a historical perspective, it is possible to suggest that Putnam adopts a rather rosy interpretation of American mid-twentieth century life. The ‘coming togetherness’ which is described in such a sweeping style possibly underplays the extent of racial separation and discrimination at the peak of the ‘we’, it arguably glosses over limited progress in relation to sexual orientation and gay rights, and might have highlighted more clearly how women were implicitly and explicitly assigned to ‘homemaker’ roles within a sharply defined family unit. Indeed, a sharper focus on how some of the Progressive era prescriptions served to fuel a subsequent social splintering would have deepened the level of analysis. The obvious reference point for this argument is Alan Abramowitz’s (2018) *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation and the Rise of Donald Trump* which suggests, with a similarly data-heavy approach, that some of the United States’ contemporary challenges may in fact have their roots in elements of the New Deal coalition. At a more basic and comparative level, it is also possible to ask whether comparing across the century from *t1* (trough/‘P’) to *t2* (peak/‘we’) through to *t3* (trough/‘P’) – as an economist might frame it – seems slightly too stretched, too simplistic. Just consider the scale of the scientific and technological transformations that have occurred in recent decades, not to mention the explosion in global flows when it comes to knowledge, money and people. The liquid modern here and now – to paraphrase Zygmunt Bauman – may in fact have little to learn from times that were far more solid and stable. It is railroads in a time of



information super highways. Pitchforks in the time of Twitter mobs. Air balloons in the time of space travel. Tea parties in the shadow of the Tea Party.

Even if the *information*-based assumptions were correct and a close reading of American history did provide insights and clues to forging a new blueprint for civic decline the *action*-orientated assumptions would still have to be proved correct. Opportunity is not action. What has past is not always prologue, as Putnam suggests, it might just be the past.

The great paradox of *The Upswing* is that it arguably manages to leave the reader with the impression that the author is himself unsure as to the extent to which history really matters.<sup>5</sup> Put slightly different, the *The Upswing* fulfils only half of its sub-title; it provides an unrivalled account of how the United States ‘came together a century ago’, but is far less developed or confident when it comes to explaining ‘how we can do it again’. This is reflected in both the structure and content of the book. The vast bulk of the content is problem-orientated with a data-driven focus on the up-and-down of the arc through six thematic lenses covering almost 300 pages. By the time the reader has ploughed through the statistical analyses and historical narrative, they are certainly well-versed in the scale and complexity of the challenge. They are also well primed to understand exactly what this understanding of the past has for plotting the future and achieving the eponymous *Upswing*.

‘Just how all Americans might work together to engineer another upswing is the final question this book takes on’ (p. 314). And yet, having outlined the arc of the twentieth century, the final prescriptive chapter on ‘Drift and Mastery’ is incredibly thin, almost porous. The gap between what was promised and what was arguably delivered is to some extent made physical by the manner in which the concluding notes and acknowledgements stretch across over 100 pages, while the future-focused conclusion limps to cover less than 30.<sup>6</sup>

Though their initial goals were not always clear or coherent, Progressives had two things in common – a compelling desire to repudiate the downward drift of our nation, and a galvanizing belief in the power of ordinary citizens to do so. In their diverse stories – more so than their specific politics, policies or programs – we may find a blueprint for how to create a similar turning point today. (p. 319)

The Progressives who raised the United States out of the trough of the Gilded Age may well have had two things in common (i.e. ‘a compelling desire’ and ‘a galvanizing belief’) and through studying them, we ‘may’ find a blueprint but a counter-thesis might adopt a less optimistic set of assumptions. What Putnam arguably identifies are a set of historically specific social trends that occurred *at* a very different historical point and *in* a very different socio-political context to the United States of today. A context, that is, in which the ‘YOYO economy’ (i.e. ‘You’re on your own’) is fuelled by the precarity of those who exist in a fragile hinterland of insecure employment, and who pay the price for ‘the great risk shift’ (see Hacker, 2019). As anyone who has watched *I, Daniel Blake* will know, there is a world of difference between individualism as a value preference and individualism because there is no alternative.<sup>7</sup> The final chapter’s sub-headings – ‘From Privilege to Passion’, ‘Isolation to Association’, ‘From Darkness to Light’, and so on – do little to veil what often appears as a somewhat quaint and nostalgic view of middle-class benevolence combined with an apple-pie account of the American dream. That is not to suggest that the social impact of the creation of Rotary Clubs or campaigning bodies like the

NAACP has not been significant, nor to dismiss the bravery of those ‘muckrakers’ (such as Upton Sinclair, Jacob Riis, Ida Wells, Ida Tarbell, Florence Kelley, Ray Stannard Baker, Lincoln Steffens and John Spargo) who during those decades that spanned the turn of the twentieth century used their journalism and risked their lives to expose the existence of exploitation. Nor is it to overlook the ‘rags to riches’ rise of some robber barons and their transition into great philanthropists. But it is to suggest that such historical insights were themselves embedded in a very different political culture when the social anchorage points were at least far more secure, the forces of globalisation less rapacious, the capacity of nation states to lever change far greater.

Putnam’s almost unbridled optimism may well fuel the book but can its belief that the early indicators of a powerful civic revival can be identified really be true, especially in the post-Trump era? The depths of the trough that the United States finds itself in have only deepened in the time since Putnam (2019: 328) delivered this book to the publisher and yet, he argues, ‘[T]oday we are seeing a similar drive to uncover corruption, expose exploitation, and lay bare the dark underbelly of the “I” society in which we now live’. It is almost impossible not to wonder what Putnam thought about the chances of an upswing as he watched the Trump-incited armed crowds storm the Capitol Building in January 2021, just as his book was rolling off the printer’s press. It is Putnam’s conviction that a positive civic resurgence is emerging in the United States which just seems to grate against the recent realities of American life. This is a book that finds cause for optimism in the unlikelyst of places. In the student gun control activism, for example, that arose in the aftermath of the 2018 Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Florida but is it really possible to identify any major progress in relation to gun control?<sup>8</sup>

Putnam (2019: 331) is not naïve. He acknowledges that ‘Certainly neither the proliferation of high schools nor the reinvigoration of fraternal organizations is the solution to today’s problems’. And yet, many of the elements that are identified from history as necessary to move from the dip of the ‘I’ to the peak of the ‘we’ – ‘a new narrative’, ‘a broader vision’, ‘local innovations bubbling up from below’, ‘young change-makers’, ‘a more fruitful national conversation’, ‘recognising the latent power of collective action’, ‘build the foundations of a reimagined America’ and ultimately, ‘a retraining and retooling of average Americans for active citizenship’ – are hardly novel. If anything, they are the political equivalent of apple-pie, motherhood, clean water and breastfeeding in the sense that at one level, they are pretty hard to argue against; a wish list in which idealism could be seen to be trumping realism. But where Putnam’s analysis really falls down is in relation to any detailed account of *how* to nurture the changes in civic life that so clearly need to happen, and to which he has dedicated his illustrious career to tracking.

## Inside the barrel

Robert Putnam is far more than an academic. He is an innovator, an activist and an adviser to presidents and publics alike. The *New York Times* (4 March 2015) was therefore correct when it wrote that ‘Robert D. Putnam is technically a Harvard social scientist, but a better description might be poet laureate of civil society’. His work speaks to a broad national audience in a language they can understand and often manages to capture the existence of a changing emotional landscape. Just as Putnam (2019: 1) acknowledges that de Tocqueville delivered insights and arguments ‘that only an outsider’s perspective could yield’, it might also be true that those based beyond the United States and looking at *The Upswing* from the outside will yield a very different account of both the strengths and

weakness of this book. In this regard, my position has been clear: *The Upswing* is a magnificent book but it tells readers far more about the past ('how [America] came together a century ago') than it does about the future ('how [it] can do it again'). This critique may well place me in an uncomfortable position 'outside the whale' when set against the rave reviews this book has so far engendered. And yet, it is exactly this position, this sense of distance and perspective, which may allow me to place this book within its own historical context in a way that dovetails with and deepens my critique of its information-based and action-orientated assumptions. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to move from being 'outside the whale' to understanding what it is like to be 'in the barrel'.

This shift in focus reveals the existence of two inter-related dimensions which each in their own ways are critical to comprehending, cultivating or criticising the potential for either an *upswing* or *downswing*. The first relates to the core explicit dimension that winds its way through Putnam's book – the balance between respect for the individual and concern for the community. The second is a dimension that lurks beneath and within every page and chapter, paragraph and sentence, and concerns the balance between idealism and realism.<sup>9</sup> It is this latter dimension that possibly explains my estrangement from Putnam's thesis: it is possibly too heavy on the idealism and too light on the realism. The book begins by acknowledging the scale of the challenge. 'Public debates are characterized not by deliberation but by demonization of those on the opposing side . . . [A] rising tide of populism has captured the enthusiasm of many, especially in rural areas. America's democratic institutions strain under the burden of polarization' (p. 6). But such gritty realism seems a distant land to the sweeping strokes concerning 'new narratives', 'sweeping visions' and 'local innovations' that are deployed to discuss the future in the concluding chapter.

Bringing the history back in, there is a sense that *The Upswing* might be a book that has missed its moment. If there was an opportunity when a constellation of factors – 'a compelling desire' and 'a galvanizing belief' – seemed aligned to deliver exactly the renewal of American civic life that Putnam promotes, then surely it came in 2008 with the election of Barack Obama on a veritable tidal wave of expectations. And yet, Obama's presidency is not discussed. The United States' first Black president receives just two fleeting mentions (pp. 55 and 86). The lack of even the most basic discussion about the successes and failure of the Obama presidency in terms if not of delivering an uplift then at least in possibly flattening-out the curve is a striking omission for a book based on an understanding of history. If Obama failed to stem the downwards decline, which notwithstanding his undoubted social policy success and economic interventions he did fail to do, then what does that tell us about democratic decline and the politics of the upswing?

The answers to this question could undoubtedly form the basis of several books but a close reading of Obama's memoirs sets Putnam's hopeful thesis within a dark shadow.<sup>10</sup> Obama promoted 'the audacity of hope', there was a compelling desire and a galvanising belief in the need for change across vast sections of American society but George Packer (2020) is correct to see *A Promised Land* as 'an exercise in ironic realism'; the scale of the challenges which Obama faced overwhelmed him. Getting things done. Making democracy work. Driving change was almost impossible. The White House was full of rubber-levers and levering change was a Herculean endeavour given the gridlocked and labyrinthine governmental machine. The magnitude, complexity and scale of the challenges facing American society – and therefore, fundamental to achieving an upswing – are set out in Obama's memoirs with an almost resentful viciousness that stands in stark contrast to Putman's prescriptions. Obama *was* an astute political entrepreneur who

sought to translate the popular uprising of anger and belief that carried him into office into policies and programmes. He leaned upon seasoned reformers and experienced operators to staff his administration. And yet, the tortuous and tangled machine politics on Capitol Hill ensured that any ambition and ‘get-up-and-go’ was gradually suffocated at every turn by the constant process of complex bargaining, back-slapping and brinkmanship needed to see proposals get turned into law. ‘At times, I felt like the fisherman in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*’ Obama notes ‘sharks gnawing at my catch as I tried to tow it to shore’ (Obama, 2020: 555).

For most of his early years in office, when he was closest to the groundswell of agitation and youth-driven energy that propelled him into office, it is possible to suggest that Obama, the outwardly confident Obama – Hawaiian cool complete with superman cape, immortalised in Shepard Fairey’s graphic art poster – was, in fact ‘not waving, but drowning’.<sup>11</sup> The demonisation he faced, the wave-after-wave of crises, the media intrusion, the unrealistic expectations, the amplification of failures, fever-pitched partisanship, the denial of success, embedded institution inertia, polarized politics, layered inequalities . . . left him describing presidential life as like being ‘inside the barrel’. ‘[L]ike the daredevils and fools of old at Niagara Falls – you find yourself trapped in the proverbial barrel and disorientated’ Obama (2020: 519) writes, ‘no longer sure which way is up, powerless to arrest your descent, waiting to hit bottom and hoping, without evidence, that you’ll survive the impact’. It is exactly this sense of the everyday lived experience of being *in* American politics that *The Upswing* seems too distant from. It is also this notion of being ‘in the barrel’ which leads me to suggest that the challenge of getting the United States out of its current trough bears little resemblance to similar historical periods. Recapturing the ‘we’ will be harder than Putnam suggests because the storm that currently embraces the United States is very different to anything it has ever weathered in the past.

I hope, however, that Putnam’s positivity proves me wrong.

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### Notes

1. See, for example, Keane J (2010); Runciman D (2019); de Chosal CB (2017); Levitsky S and Ziblatt D; Diamon L, Plattner MF and Rice C (2015); Goldberg J (2020); Corfe R (2018); Przeworski A (2018); Roberts A (2017); Mettler S and Lieberman R (2020); Applebaum A (2020).
2. A good example being Putnam’s *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* which is both a book and website published as an initiative of the Saguaro Seminar conducted at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. The initiative is aimed at facilitating rapid and extensive community development, particularly within the United States and uses a book with the same title by Robert Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein as its primary reference text. See <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/>
3. For a novel and quite exquisite analysis of this process, see Hendriks et al. (2020).
4. Kahloon op cit. 2000.

5. Colin Kidd notes that Putnam and Garrett 'try to be upbeat, but the dominant tone is wistful'. See 'The Upswing – can Biden heal America?' *The Guardian*, 12 November 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/12/the-upswing-review-can-biden-heal-america>
6. 'Putnam's last chapter, addressing lessons from the past on how we might reclaim a more trusting, community-minded America, is abbreviated, elevated and a little wishful' (Robert Kuttner, 2020).
7. *I, Daniel Blake* is a 2016 drama film directed by Ken Loach and written by his long-time collaborator Paul Laverty. It stars Dave Johns as Daniel Blake, who is denied Employment and Support Allowance despite his doctor finding him unfit to work. Blake struggles to navigate an on-line and alienating benefits system. The line 'I am not a blip on a computer screen or a national insurance number, I am a man' captures the social frustration and sense of anomie that many social studies have identified among sections of the public who feel forgotten or 'left behind'.
8. For a less positive but possibly more realistic analysis, see the second chapter of Dowding's (2020).
9. Eric Kaufman identifies a third trade-off dimension which he suggests is under-acknowledged within *The Upswing* – between diversity and solidarity, which chimes with Putnam's earlier work on 'bridging' and 'bonding'. See Kaufman (2020).
10. For a detailed review of Obama's memoirs, see Matthew Flinders (2021).
11. 'Not Waving, But Drowning' is the title of a well-known poem by Stevie Smith, first published in 1957, with a strong allegorical message about people who may on the outside appear to be happy on strong, while on the inside feeling weak, lost and in trouble. Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46479/not-waving-but-drowning>

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