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Who killed civic America?

Why was the generation born in the 1920s and 1930s the last of the joiners?

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For the last year or so I have been wrestling with a difficult mystery. It concerns the strange disappearance of social capital and civic engagement in the US. By "social capital" I mean features of social life-networks, norms, and trust-that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives.

Although I am not yet sure that I have solved the mystery, I have assembled evidence which clarifies what happened. An important clue involves differences among generations. Americans who came of age during the Depression and the second world war have been far more deeply engaged in the life of their communities than the generations which followed them. The passing of this "long civic generation" appears to be an important cause of the decline of our civic life. This discovery does not in itself crack the case, but when combined with other data it points to one suspect, against whom I shall presently bring an indictment.

Evidence for the decline of social capital and civic engagement comes from a number of independent sources. Surveys of average Americans in 1965, 1975 and 1985, in which they recorded every single activity during a day-so-called "time-budget" studies-indicate that since 1965 time spent on informal socialising and visiting has gone down (perhaps by one quarter) and time devoted to clubs and organisations is down even more sharply (by roughly half). Membership records of such diverse organisations as the PTA, the Elks club, the League of Women Voters, the Red Cross, labour unions, and even bowling leagues show that participation in many conventional voluntary associations has declined by about 25 per cent to 50 per cent over the last two to three decades. Surveys show sharp declines in many measures of collective political participation, including attending a rally or speech (down by 36 per cent between 1973 and 1993), attending a meeting about town or school affairs (down by 39 per cent), or working for a political party (down by 56 per cent). Some of the most reliable evidence about trends comes from the US national opinion research centre in Chicago, the General Social Survey (GSS), conducted nearly every year for more than two decades. The GSS shows, at all levels of education and among both men and women, a drop since 1974 of roughly one quarter in group membership and a drop

since 1972 of roughly one third in social trust. Slumping membership has afflicted all sorts of gatherings, from sports clubs to literary discussion groups. Only nationality groups, hobby and garden clubs, and the catch-all category of "other" have resisted the ebbing tide. Gallup polls report that church attendance fell by roughly 15 per cent during the 1960s and has remained at that lower level ever since, while other polls suggest the decline has continued.

Of course, American civil society is not moribund. Many people across the land work hard every day to keep their communities vital. Evidence suggests that the US still outranks many other countries in the degree of community involvement and social trust. But if we examine our lives, not our aspirations, and if we compare ourselves not with other countries but with our parents, the best available evidence suggests that we are less connected with one another.

the usual suspects

Reversing this trend depends, at least in part, on understanding the causes of the strange malady afflicting American civic life. Many possible answers have been suggested for this puzzle: busy-ness and time pressure; economic hard times (or, according to alternative theories, material affluence); residential mobility; suburbanisation; the movement of women into the paid labour force and the stresses of two-career families; disruption of marriage and family ties; changes in the structure of the American economy, such as the rise of chain stores, branch firms, and the service sector; the 1960s (most of which actually happened in the 1970s), including Vietnam, Watergate, and disillusion with public life, and the cultural revolt against authority; growth of the welfare state; the civil rights revolution; television, the electronic revolution, and other technological changes.

First, a complicating paradox. Well-educated people are much more likely to be joiners and trusters, partly because they are better off economically, but mostly because of the skills and inclinations which were imparted to them at home and in school. Since 1972 the proportion of adults with fewer than 12 years of education has been cut in half, to 18 per cent; the proportion with more than 12 years of education has nearly doubled, rising to 50 per cent.

By itself, the rise in educational levels should have increased social capital during the last 20 years by 15-20 per cent, even assuming that the effects of education were merely linear. By contrast, however, the actual GSS figures show a net decline, since the early 1970s, of roughly the same magnitude. The relative declines in social capital are similar within each educational category-roughly 25 per cent in group memberships and roughly 30 per cent in social trust since the early 1970s, and probably even more since the early 1960s. The mysterious disengagement of the last quarter century

seems to have afflicted all educational strata in our society, whether they have had graduate education or did not finish high school.

Mobility and Suburbanisation

Many studies have found that residential stability and home ownership are associated with greater civic engagement. At an earlier stage in this investigation I observed that "mobility, like frequent re-potting of plants, tends to disrupt root systems, and it takes time for an uprooted individual to put down new roots." I must now report, however, that further inquiry fully exonerates residential mobility from any responsibility for our fading civic engagement.

Data from the US Bureau of the Census 1995 (and earlier years) show that rates of residential mobility have been remarkably constant over the last half century. In fact, to the extent that there has been any change at all, both long distance and short distance mobility have declined over the last five decades. During the 1950s, 20 per cent of Americans changed residence each year and 6.9 per cent annually moved across county borders; during the 1990s the comparable figures are 17 per cent and 6.6 per cent.

But if moving itself has not eroded our social capital, what about the possibility that we have moved to places, especially suburbs, less congenial to social connectedness? In fact, social connectedness does differ by community type, but the differences turn out to be modest and in directions that are inconsistent with the theory. The downtrends in trusting and joining are virtually identical everywhere—in cities, in suburbs, in small towns, and in the countryside.

Pressures of Time and Money

Americans certainly feel busier now than a generation ago. The proportion of us who report feeling "always rushed" jumped by half between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s. Probably the most obvious suspect behind our tendency to drop out of community affairs is pervasive busy-ness. And lurking nearby in the shadows are the economic pressures so much discussed nowadays, from job insecurity to declining real wages.

Yet, however culpable busy-ness and economic insecurity may appear at first glance, it is hard to find incriminating evidence. First, time-budget studies do not confirm the thesis that Americans are, on average, working longer than a generation ago. On the contrary, a new study by John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey reports a five hour per week gain in free time for the average American between 1965 and 1985, partly as a result of reduced time spent on housework and partly earlier retirement. Their claim

that Americans have more leisure time now than several decades ago is, to be sure, contested by other observers, notably Juliet Schor; her 1991 book *The Overworked American* reports evidence that work hours are lengthening, especially for women.

But whatever the resolution of that controversy, other data call into question whether longer hours at work lead to reduced civic life and social trust. The GSS figures show that employed people belong to somewhat more groups than those outside the paid labour force. Even more striking is the evidence that among workers, longer hours are linked to more civic engagement.

What do workaholics sacrifice? Robinson reports that, unsurprisingly, people who spend more time at work do feel more rushed, and these harried souls spend less time eating, sleeping, reading books, on hobbies, and just doing nothing. Compared to the rest of the population they also spend a lot less time watching television-almost 30 per cent less. But they do not spend less time on organisational activity. Those who work longer forego Nightline but not the Kiwanis club; ER but not the Red Cross.

So hard work does not prevent civic engagement. Moreover, the nationwide fall-off in joining and trusting is perfectly mirrored among full time workers, among part time workers, and among those outside the paid labour force. So if people are dropping out of community life, long hours do not seem to be the reason.

What about financial pressures? It is true that people with lower incomes are somewhat less engaged in community life and somewhat less trusting than those who are better off (even holding education constant). On the other hand, the downtrends in social trust and civic engagement are visible among people of all incomes, with no sign whatever that they are concentrated among those who have borne the brunt of the economic distress of the last two decades. Quite the contrary: the declines in engagement and trust are actually somewhat greater among the more affluent segments of the American public than among the poor and middle income wage-earners. Poverty and economic inequality are dreadful growing problems for America, but they are not the villains of this piece.

The Changing Role of Women

Most of our mothers were housewives, and most of them invested heavily in social capital formation-a jargon way of referring to untold unpaid hours in church suppers, PTA meetings, neighbourhood coffee klatches, and visits to friends and relatives. The movement of women out of the home and into the paid labour force is probably the most portentous social change of the last 50 years. However welcome it may be, it is hard to believe that it has had no impact on social connectedness. Could this be the primary reason for the decline of social capital over the last generation?

Some patterns in the survey evidence seem to support this claim. All things considered, women belong to somewhat fewer voluntary associations than men do. On the other hand, time-budget studies suggest that women spend more time on those groups and more time in informal social connecting than men. Although the absolute declines in joining and trusting are roughly equivalent among men and women, the relative declines are somewhat greater among women. Controlling for education, memberships among men have declined at a rate of about 10-15 per cent a decade, compared to about 20-25 per cent a decade for women. The time-budget data, too, strongly suggest that the decline in organisational involvement in recent years is concentrated among women. These trends, coupled with the obvious transformation in the professional role of women over this same period, led me in previous work to suppose that the emergence of two-career families might be the most important single factor in the erosion of social capital.

As we saw earlier, however, work status itself seems to have little net impact on group membership. Indeed, the overall declines in civic engagement are somewhat greater among housewives than among employed women. Comparison of time-budget data between 1965 and 1985 seems to show that employed women as a group are actually spending more time on organisations than before, while housewives are spending less. This same study suggests that the main decline in informal socialising since 1965 has also been concentrated among housewives. The central fact is that the overall trends are down for all categories of women (and for men, too, even bachelors), but the figures suggest that women who work full time actually may have been more resistant to this slump than those who do not.

Thus, although women appear to be responsible for a disproportionate share of the decline in civic engagement over the last two decades, it is not easy to find any micro-level data to tie that directly to their entry into the labour force. Of course, women who have chosen to enter the workforce doubtless differ in many respects from women who have chosen to stay home. Perhaps one reason that community involvement appears to be rising among working women and declining among housewives is that precisely the sort of women who, in an earlier era, were most involved with their communities have been disproportionately more likely to enter the workforce.

Marriage and Family

Another widely discussed social trend that coincides with the downturn in civic engagement is the breakdown of the traditional family unit-mom, dad, and the kids. Since the family itself is, by some accounts, a key form of social capital, perhaps its eclipse is part of the explanation for the reduction in joining and trusting in the wider

community. What does the evidence show?

First, evidence of the loosening of family bonds is unequivocal. In addition to the century-long increase in divorce rates (which accelerated from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s and then levelled off), and the more recent increase in single parent families, the incidence of one person households has more than doubled since 1950, in part because of the rising number of widows living alone. The net effect of all these changes, as reflected in the GSS, is that the proportion of all American adults currently unmarried climbed from 28 per cent in 1974 to 48 per cent in 1994.

Second, married men and women do rank somewhat higher on both our measures of social capital. That is, controlling for education, age, race, and so on, single people-both men and women, divorced, separated, or never married-are significantly less trusting and less engaged civically than married people. Married men and women are about one third more trusting and belong to about 15-25 per cent more groups than comparable single men and women. Thus, some part of the decline in both trust and membership is tied to the decline in marriage. To be sure, the direction of causality behind this correlation may be complicated; it is conceivable that loners and paranoids are harder to live with. If so, divorce may in some degree be the consequence, not the cause, of lower social capital. Probably the most reasonable summary of these arrays of data, however, is that the decline in successful marriage is a significant, though modest part of the reason for declining trust and lower group membership. On the other hand, changes in family structure cannot be a major part of our story, because the overall declines in joining and trusting are substantial even among the happily married.

The Rise of the Welfare State

Circumstantial evidence, particularly the timing of the downturn in social connectedness, has suggested to some observers that an important cause-perhaps even the cause-is big government and the growth of the welfare state. By "crowding out" private initiative, it is argued, state intervention has subverted civil society.

Some government policies have almost certainly had the effect of destroying social capital. For example, the so-called "slum clearance" policies of the 1950s and 1960s replaced physical capital, but destroyed social capital, by disrupting existing community ties. It is also conceivable that certain social expenditures and tax policies may have created disincentives for civic-minded philanthropy. On the other hand, it is much harder to see which government policies might be responsible for the decline in bowling leagues and literary clubs. Some community institutions sponsored or subsidised by government, such as National Service in the forces, agricultural extension programmes, and Head Start for pre-school children, may enhance trust and social

capital. Which effect prevails needs to be resolved with evidence, not with ideology.

One empirical approach to this issue is to examine differences in civic engagement and public policy across different political jurisdictions to see whether enlarged government leads to shrivelled social capital. Among the US states, however, differences in social capital appear essentially uncorrelated with various measures of welfare spending or government size. Citizens in free-spending states are no less trusting or engaged than citizens in frugal ones.

Cross-national comparison can also shed light on this question. Among 19 member countries of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for which data on social trust and group membership are available from the 1990-1991 World Values Survey, these indicators of social capital are, if anything, positively correlated with the size of the state.

Race and the Civil Rights Revolution

Some observers have noted that the decline in social connectedness began just after the successes of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s. That coincidence has suggested the possibility of a "white flight," as legal desegregation of civic life led whites to withdraw from community associations.

The erosion of social capital, however, has affected all races. In trend, during the 1980s the downturns in both joining and trusting were even greater among African Americans (and other racial minorities) than among the white majority. This fact is inconsistent with the thesis that "white flight" is a significant cause of civic disengagement. Even more important, the pace of disengagement among whites has been uncorrelated with racial intolerance or support for segregation. Avowedly racist or segregationist whites have been no quicker to drop out of community organisations during this period than more tolerant whites.

the long civic Generation

Our efforts thus far to identify the major sources of civic disengagement have been singularly unfruitful. In all our statistical analyses, however, one factor, second only to education, stands out as a predictor of all forms of civic engagement and trust. That factor is age. Older people belong to more organisations than young people, and they are less misanthropic. Older Americans also vote more often and read newspapers more frequently—two other forms of civic engagement closely correlated with joining and trusting. Older people are consistently more engaged and trusting than younger people, yet we do not become more engaged and trusting as we age. What's going on here?

Controlling for educational disparities, members of the generation born in the 1920s belong to almost twice as many civic associations as those born in the late 1960s (roughly 1.9 memberships per capita, compared to roughly 1.1 memberships per capita). The grandparents are more than twice as likely to trust other people (50-60 per cent compared with 25 per cent among the grandchildren). They vote at nearly double the rate of the most recent cohorts (roughly 75 per cent compared with 40-45 per cent), and they read newspapers almost three times as often (70-80 per cent read a paper daily compared with 25-30 per cent). Bear in mind that we have found no evidence that the youngest generation will come to match their grandparents' higher levels of civic engagement as they grow older.

the last "suckers"

Thus-seen not as life cycle effects, but rather as generational effects-the age-related patterns in our data suggest a radically different interpretation of our basic puzzle. There has been a long "civic" generation, born roughly between 1910 and 1940, a broad group of people substantially more engaged in community affairs and substantially more trusting than those younger than they. (Members of the 1910-1940 generation also seem more civic than their elders, at least to judge by the outlooks of the few men and women born in the late 19th century who appeared in our samples.)

The culminating point of this civic generation is the cohort born in 1925-1930, who attended grade school during the Depression, spent the second world war in high school (or on the battlefield), first voted in 1948 or 1952, set up housekeeping in the 1950s, and watched their first television when they were in their late 20s. Since national surveying began, this cohort has been exceptionally civic: voting more, joining more, reading newspapers more, trusting more. As the distinguished sociologist Charles Tilly (born in 1928) said, commenting on this essay: "We are the last suckers."

The most parsimonious interpretation of the age-related differences in civic engagement is that they represent a powerful reduction in civic engagement among Americans who came of age in the decades after the second world war, as well as some modest additional disengagement that affected all cohorts during the 1980s. These patterns hint that growing up after the war was a quite different experience from growing up before that watershed. It is as though the postwar generations were exposed to some mysterious X-ray which permanently and increasingly rendered them less likely to connect with the community. Whatever that force may be, it accounts-rather than anything that happened during the 1970s and 1980s-for most of the civic disengagement at the core of our mystery.

But if this is correct, why did it take so long for the effects of that mysterious X-ray to become manifest? If the underlying causes of civic disengagement can be traced to the 1940s and 1950s, why did the effects become conspicuous in PTA meetings, in the volunteer lists of the Red Cross and the Boy Scouts, and in polling stations, church pews and bowling alleys across the US only during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s?

The visible effects of this generational disengagement were delayed by two factors. First, the postwar boom in college enrollments raised levels of civic engagement, offsetting the generational trends. As Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks observe in *The American Voter Reconsidered*, the postwar expansion of educational opportunities "forestalled a cataclysmic drop" in voting turnout, and it had a similar delaying effect on civic disengagement more generally.

Second, the full effects of generational developments generally appear several decades after their onset, because it takes that long for a given generation to become dominant in the adult population. Only after the mid-1960s did significant numbers of the "post-civic generation" reach adulthood, supplanting older, more civic cohorts. Although the long civic generation has enjoyed unprecedented life expectancy, allowing its members to contribute more than their share to American social capital in recent decades, they are now passing from the scene. Thus, a generational analysis leads to the conclusion that the national slump in trust and engagement is likely to continue, regardless of whether the more modest "period effect" depression in engagement recorded in the 1980s continues.

To say that civic disengagement in contemporary America is in large measure generational merely reformulates our central puzzle. We now know that much of the cause of lonely bowling probably dates to the 1940s and 1950s, rather than to the 1960s and 1970s. What could have been the mysterious anti-civic "X-ray" which affected Americans who came of age after the second world war and whose effects progressively deepened at least into the 1970s?

Our new formulation of the puzzle opens the possibility that the *Zeitgeist* of national unity, patriotism, and shared sacrifice which culminated in 1945 might have reinforced civic-mindedness. On the other hand, it is hard to assign any consistent role to the cold war and the Bomb; the anti-civic trend appears to have deepened steadily from the 1940s to the 1970s, in no obvious harmony with the rhythms of world affairs. Nor is it easy to construct an interpretation of the data on generational differences in which the cultural vicissitudes of the 1960s could play a significant role. Neither can economic adversity or affluence easily be tied to the generational decline in civic engagement, because the slump seems to have affected in equal measure those who came of age in the placid 1950s, the booming 1960s, and the busted 1970s.

Our Prime Suspect

I have discovered only one prominent suspect against whom circumstantial evidence can be mounted, and in this case, as it turns out, some directly incriminating evidence has also turned up. This is not the place to lay out the full case for the prosecution, nor to review rebuttal evidence for the defence, but I want to present evidence that justifies indictment. The culprit is television.

The timing fits. The long civic generation was the last cohort of Americans to grow up without television, which flashed into American society like lightning in the 1950s. In 1950 barely 10 per cent of American homes had sets, but by 1959, 90 per cent did—probably the fastest diffusion of a technological innovation ever recorded. The aftershocks from this lightning bolt continued for decades, as viewing hours grew by 17-20 per cent during the 1960s and by an additional 7-8 per cent during the 1970s. In the early years, viewing was concentrated among the less educated sectors of the population, but during the 1970s the viewing time of the more educated sectors of the population began to converge upward. Viewing increases with age, particularly upon retirement, but each generation since the introduction of television has begun its life cycle at a higher starting point. By 1995, viewing per set-owning household was more than 50 per cent higher than it had been in the 1950s.

Most studies estimate that the average American now watches roughly four hours per day (excluding periods in which the television set is merely playing in the background). Even a more conservative estimate of three hours means that it absorbs 40 per cent of the average American's free time, an increase of about one third since 1965. Moreover, multiple sets have proliferated: by the late 1980s three quarters of all US homes had more than one set, and these numbers, too, are rising steadily, allowing ever more private viewing. Robinson and Godbey are surely right to conclude that "television is the 800-pound gorilla of leisure time." This enormous change in the way Americans spend their days and nights occurred precisely during the years of generational civic disengagement.

Evidence of a link between the arrival of television and the erosion of social connections is not merely circumstantial. The links between civic engagement and television viewing can be instructively compared with the links between civic engagement and newspaper reading. The contrast is straightforward: newspaper reading is associated with high social capital, television viewing with low social capital.

Within every educational category, heavy newspaper readers are avid joiners, whereas heavy viewers are more likely to be loners. In fact, more detailed analysis suggests that heavy viewing is one important reason why less educated people are less engaged in the life of their communities. Controlling for differential television exposure

significantly reduces the correlation between education and engagement.

Viewing and reading are themselves uncorrelated-some people do lots of both, some do little of either-but "pure readers" (that is, people who view less television than average and read more newspapers than average) belong to 76 per cent more civic organisations than "pure viewers" (controlling for education, as always). The same pattern applies to other indicators of civic engagement, including social trust and voting. "Pure readers," for example, are 55 per cent more trusting than "pure viewers."

In other words, each hour spent viewing is associated with less social trust and less group membership, while each hour reading a newspaper is associated with more. An increase in viewing of the magnitude that the US has experienced in the last four decades might directly account for as much as one quarter to one half of the total drop in social capital, even without taking into account, for example, the indirect effects of viewing on newspaper readership or the cumulative effects of lifetime viewing hours. Newspaper circulation has dropped by more than half since its peak in 1947. To be sure, it is not clear which way the tie between newspaper reading and civic involvement works, because disengagement might itself dampen one's interest in community news. But the two trends are clearly linked.

How Might TV Destroy Social Capital

Even though there are only 24 hours in everyone's day, most forms of social and media participation are positively correlated. People who listen to lots of classical music are more likely, not less likely, than others to attend Cubs games. Television is the main exception to this generalisation-the only leisure activity that inhibits participation outside the home. Viewers are homebodies.

n Time displacement. Most studies that report a negative correlation between viewing and community involvement are ambiguous with respect to causality, because they merely compare different individuals at a single time. But one study of television's introduction in three Canadian towns found the same pattern at the aggregate level across time. A significant effect of its arrival was the reduction in participation in social, recreational and community activities among people of all ages. In short, television privatises leisure time.

n Effects on the outlooks of viewers. An impressive body of literature suggests that heavy viewers are unusually sceptical about the benevolence of other people-overestimating crime rates, for example. This body of literature has generated much debate about the underlying causal patterns, with sceptics suggesting that misanthropy may foster couch-potato behaviour rather than the reverse. While awaiting better experimental evidence, however, a reasonable interim judgement is

that heavy viewing may well increase pessimism about human nature. Perhaps, too, as social critics have long argued, both the medium and the message have more effect on our ways of interacting with the world and with one another. Television may induce passivity, as Neil Postman has claimed.

n Effects on children. Television consumes an extraordinary part of children's lives; about 40 hours per week on average. Viewing is especially high among pre-adolescents, but it remains high among younger adolescents: time-budget studies suggest that among youngsters aged 9-14 it consumes as much time as all other discretionary activities combined, including playing, hobbies, clubs, outdoor activities, informal visiting and just hanging out. The effects of television on childhood socialisation have been hotly debated for more than three decades. The most reasonable conclusion, from a welter of conflicting results, appears to be that heavy watching probably increases aggressiveness (although perhaps not actual violence); it probably reduces school achievement; and it is statistically associated with "psychosocial malfunctioning," although how much of this effect is self-selection and how much causal remains debatable.

Conclusion

More than two decades ago, just as the first signs of disengagement were beginning to surface, the political scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool observed that the central issue would be-it was then too soon to judge-whether the development represented a temporary change in the weather or a more enduring one in the climate. It now appears that much of the change whose initial signs he spotted did in fact reflect a climatic shift. Unless America experiences a dramatic upward boost in civic engagement (a favourable "period effect") in the next few years, Americans in 2010 will join, trust, and vote even less than we do today.

In an astonishingly prescient book, *Technologies without Borders*, published in 1991 after his death, Pool concluded that the electronic revolution in communications technology was the first big technological advance in centuries which would have a profoundly decentralising and fragmenting effect on society and culture. He hoped that the result might be "community without contiguity." As a classic liberal, he welcomed the benefits of technological change for individual freedom-and in part I share that enthusiasm. Those of us who bemoan the decline of community in contemporary America need to be sensitive to the liberating gains achieved during the same decades. We need to avoid an uncritical nostalgia for the 1950s.

On the other hand, some of the same freedom-friendly technologies whose rise Pool predicted may indeed be undermining our connections with one another and with our communities. Pool defended what he called "soft technological determinism" because he

recognised that social values can condition the effects of technology. This perspective invites us not merely to consider how technology is privatising our lives-if, as it seems to me, it is-but to ask whether we like the result, and if not, what we might do about it. Those are questions we should, of course, be asking together, not alone.