

UAA Book Club Issues Paper

Robert Putnam and Shaylym Romney Garrett: *The Upswing*

Prepared by: Richard N. Blue
March 10, 2021

All together now, sing: *Bye, Bye, Miss American Pie*
 Drove my Chevy to the Levee
 But the Levee was Dry
 Them good old boys
 Were Drinkin Whiskey and Rye
 Singing “This will be the Day that I Die!
 This will be the Day that I Die!

Don McLean, circa 1971

Background

I discovered Robert Putnam’s work after a friend suggested I read his book, *Making Democracy Work*, 1993. Putnam developed the concept of “Social Capital” as summarized by Italian authors Guido de Blasio:

“...This concept refers to trust, reciprocity, and habits of co-operation that are shared among members of a local community.” (*Putnam’s Social Capital and the Italian Regions: An Empirical Investigation*” (2004).

Social Capital was juxtaposed with more formal institutional arrangements that support economic, social and even cultural behavior...e.g. courts and other aspects of a legal system, institutions of

governance, and formal religious organizations such as the Catholic Church.

I admit that as a political scientist the idea of Social Capital captivated me, especially the relationship between it and other human activities, namely economic and political behaviors and government institutions. It seemed to offer an explanation about why some societies were more successful in fostering innovation, economic advancement, and robust democratic political arrangements.

My most substantive contribution to USAID's mission came in 1989 when Senior staffer Mike Van Dusen offered me a one year job working for Cong. Lee Hamilton and his effort to build a new, post-cold war Foreign Assistance Authorization law. I was lucky to work with George Ingram and others to help construct the draft bill, which included an effort to consolidate USAID's mission into four major objectives, Economic, Health, Education and a new one, Democracy and Government (DG). This section was my main responsibility. The bill failed to secure enough votes, but then Administrator Alan Woods, adopted the Four Pillars approach, including Democracy and Governance (DG).

There were many in USAID who believed supporting DG was not our job, that it would embroil us in developing country politics, and unlike economic or health system development, we did not have a clue about how to do this. But the cold war had ended, hopes were high for a new age of democracy, and many countries from the Baltics to the Balkans were committed to establishing democratic forms of government. How could we not help?

On returning to USAID as Deputy to Barbara Turner's Office of Technical Support for the very large Europe, Near East and Asia Bureau, Deputy Administrator Carol Adelman tasked me with developing a democracy strategy for the Bureau on which the sun almost never set! Working with Tom Nicastro, and later Jerry Hyman, we developed the

“Voice, Choice and Governance” policy which of course morphed into other titles as the DG movement expanded. Leaving USAID, working as Representative for The Asia Foundation, I attempted to build Social Capital in Thailand, Cambodia and to some degree, Laos and Vietnam.

Jerry Hyman spoke today, March 10, at DACAR/UAA about the need to conduct a “top to bottom, objective and non-ideological” assessment of thirty years of USAID efforts to build democratic institutions and the socio-economic and cultural value systems which undergird those systems. Jerry was pessimistic about how successful we have been. He wondered whether we need a dose of “physician, heal thyself” before we continue this effort.

Which brings me back to Putnam and Garrett. Putnam has always been an optimist. We will watch a previously video-taped interview of the authors responding to questions about their main thesis, built around the presentation of an inverted “U” shaped curve tracing the movement from an “I” society in the 1880s and 90s, to the apex of a “We” society around 1960-65. This curve heads south very rapidly back to an “I” society which is where we, according to the authors, now find ourselves.

INSERT VIDEO INTERVIEW

(Stu, there are a number of good YouTube or other video interviews with Putnam and Garrett. The one closest to home for many of our colleagues was done in November 2020 at the George Mason University Business for a Better World Center.

[http:// business.gmu.edu/business-for-a-better-world/our events/past events](http://business.gmu.edu/business-for-a-better-world/our%20events/past%20events)

After finding “past events”, scroll to Putnam/Garrett (PG) interview November 2020. The video intro is by George Mason U President, Dr. Gregory Washington, an African American. He has some views.

All of the interviews are too long for our group, but I could select some passages and perhaps I could work with Ven Suresh to identify some edited parts by the time line on the overall video to create a composite for our group?. I think the inclusion of video with maybe 30 minutes of Putnam and Garrett talking about the book would be well worth the effort))

Some Discussion Points

This is a very ambitious and provocative book, which uses a wide variety of data sources to convey a picture of tremendous change in America, starting with the “Gilded Age” in last quarter of the 19th century, through the progressive era, the roaring twenties, the depression, two World Wars, the New Deal and Fair Deal, up to the cultural revolutions of the late 1960s into the 1970s. PG characterize this as the movement from an “I” dominated society to one they call the “We” America. Starting with the mid-sixties, according to PG, stagnation and decline set in, and over the last fifty years, we have returned to a predominately “I” society, marked by high levels of economic, social inequality, political polarization, and cultural narcissism. PG provide copious and sometimes innovative hard data to support their basic I/WE/I proposition for each major dimension, economic, social, political and cultural.

The author’s Chapter’s 6 and 7 on Race and Gender provide some of the most surprising conclusions. Namely that in spite of “Jim Crow” on several material indices, Black Americans, improved their lot between 1910 and 1960. More surprising is that in spite of the Civil Rights movement and the de jure removal of discriminatory regimes and practices, Black American material progress has stagnated and even declined since 1970s. Similarly, progress in Gender Equality was significantly greater during this same period.

The authors conclude with an effort to “explore four broad dimensions of social change together, not one at a time”, followed by

a final chapter that explores the problem of “causation”, finding no single good answer to what causes these dramatic shifts in America’s story. Which raises the question of how do we, as individuals, find an answer to what PG ask: “What is the proper balance between guarding the interests, rights, and autonomy of the individual on the one hand, and maintaining a strong sense of unity, shared purpose, and common destiny on the other?” (p338)

Issues

- 1. How valid are the data used by PG to support their overall conclusions? The data on economic inequality has prompted much debate and rebuttal of Putnam’s data. Piketty, Saez and late Zachman have recalculated their findings on this, but there is a robust back and forth on this issue. On other measures, dealing with social, political and cultural changes, I’ve not found so much push back.**
- 2. To what extent was the shift to a “WE” America largely a white male phenomenon, built largely on racial and gender bias and a culture which enforced conformity? (I watched TV series like “All in the Family” and “Leave it to Beaver”).**
- 3. How do we explain the progress made by Black Americans as well as women during the first “Upswing” period? And how do we explain especially the apparent stagnation and decline since 1970s?**
- 4. What was going on in the 1965-1975 period that shifted the dynamic away from the WE America? (I was just finishing graduate school when the Free Speech Movement began at UC Berkley, along with the first anti-Vietnam War debates, all of which accelerated while I was still teaching at the U of Minnesota. The Civil Rights movement peaked in 1963-65.**

LBJ tried to address inequality issues in The Great Society effort.)

- 5. To what extent does social media sustain the “I” versus the “WE” construct in America?**
- 6. Has our response to the COVID pandemic had a fundamental impact on the way forward?**
- 7. What’s wrong with an America focused primarily on individual rights and accomplishments? Isn’t this “WE” thing just a disguised version of Socialism?**

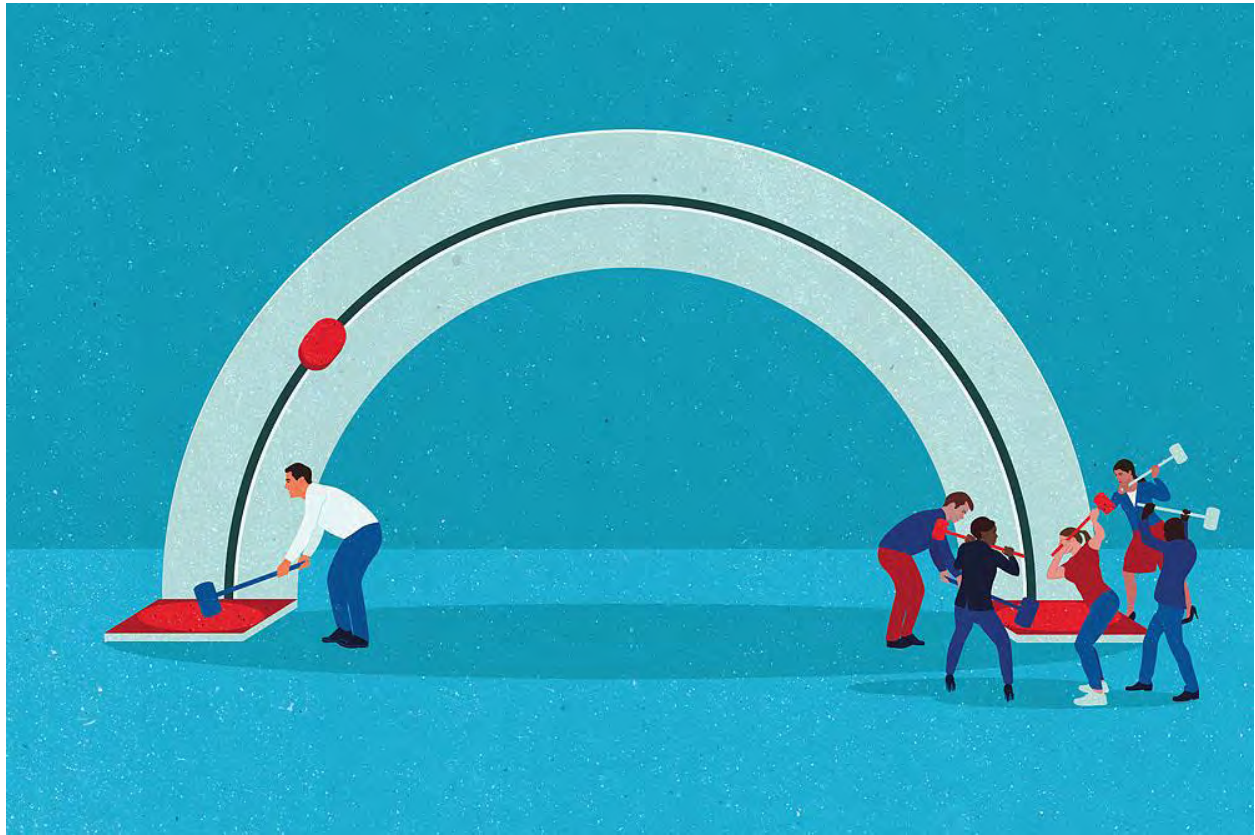
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Yearning for an Upswing

In search of optimism, a sweeping interpretation of American social history

by [Idrees Kahloon](#)

[November-December 2020](#)



[Illustration by Kotryna Zukauskaite](#)

The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again, by Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett (Simon & Schuster, \$32.50)

Rereading, while in self-imposed quarantine, the jittery *U.S.A.* trilogy by John Dos Passos about the America of 100 years ago—a cynical, fractious, increasingly extremist place disillusioned with the rich, the powerful, and the media—produces a jarring sense of recognition. It is always disturbing to realize that problems of a

different era have escaped their historical confines—as if one had just read a news headline about a resurgence of smallpox or bubonic plague. The alarming correspondences between the America of today and of 100 years ago are the subject of *The Upswing*, an ambitious book by Robert D. Putnam, research professor of government, and writer and entrepreneur Shaylyn Romney Garrett '02 that seeks to describe the century-long oscillation of an entire society.

Given the prominence of Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), the signature book on social capital and its erosion at the beginning of the millennium, his case for improvement now seems especially important. Rather than prescribing anxiety or despair, as so many accounts of the United States do, the new book optimistically suggests that the eventual reversal in fortunes then may augur one now.

To prove this somewhat quantitatively, Putnam and Garrett simplify the complex trajectory of American society since 1900 to four curves: economic inequality, political partisanship, social capital, and cultural narcissism. Using certain proxies for these complex phenomena and a few simplifications in curve-drawing, it is possible to get all the disparate trends to superimpose neatly on one another. Their observation of “an unexpected and remarkable synchronicity in trends in four very different spheres over the last 125 years” is the essence of the book. All of the indicators begin in the doldrums at the start of the twentieth century, before the titular upswing takes place. This happy trend extends until the 1960s, after which these indicators pivot and slowly trace a bell curve as they collapse back to their original nadirs: rancorous partisanship, deep inequality, and anomie.

For the authors, the synchronicity cannot be accidental. To the lay reader, this logic is compelling. To the social scientist forever spouting about the distinction between correlation and causation, however, it is merely suggestive. Putnam and Garrett caution repeatedly that they cannot discern causes from effects, and freely admit that their study is, for all its marshaling of statistical series, a narrative one firmly in the genre of macrohistory. The trap of such sweeping efforts is the temptation to discern out of all the noise a single master arc that is subtly bending all of history.

Capital and Ideology, Thomas Piketty's recent entry into the genre, places inequality as the ultimate driving force of politics, society, and religion. *The Upswing* proposes another, similar arc and presents it with the sort of ultra-causal verve that the authors elsewhere claim is impossible: this one is “a long arc of increasing solidarity and then increasing individualism” which “had implications for equality, for politics, for social

capital, and for culture. It led to an increasingly zero-sum, tribal view of society, and, eventually, to Trumpism.” These are strong claims. The evidence justifying the thesis, intriguing as it is, is not nearly so strong.

The authors assign ultimate importance to the route from individualism to communitarianism and back again, called the “I-we-I” curve in their shorthand. But, somewhat unsatisfyingly, they must concede that “the available evidence offers virtually no evidence of an uncaused first cause of the I-we-I syndrome.” Despite that, there is intermittent moralizing about the gyrations in this curve—a reversion from a period of “mutualism and solidarity” to a “descent into cultural narcissism.”

Unionization, voter turnout, and membership in churches and community clubs are all described as reflections of this dynamic. And despite the cautioning on causality, Putnam and Garrett nonetheless present a clear story. They propose that the communitarian ethos of the Progressive Era—of muckrakers like Ida B. Wells and Jacob Riis and social reformers like the suffragette Jane Addams and education evangelist John Dewey—is the generating impulse of the upswing. And the various traumas of the 1960s—assassinations, campus violence, the civil-rights struggle, urban riots, the Vietnamese debacle—are proposed as the instigators for the downswing.

Many concurrent transformations, of course, could also have driven these trends. The United States became the preeminent military force in the world, but also became a modern welfare state backed by a newly muscular federal government. Free trade wreaked havoc on some industries while a new economy, based on knowledge, services, and the Internet, delivered growing returns to the educated. The sexual revolution happened. God became a supporting character in American life. Racial animosities did not dissipate, but substantially declined. What evidence is there that, in the midst of all of these bewildering changes, it was really “most fundamentally the self-centeredness” that accounted for present-day malaise?

At this critical point, the quantitative evidence is unfortunately the weakest. Google’s ambition to digitize millions of books has yielded a database that the curious can use to check trends in English usage over decades with only a few keystrokes. Putnam and Garrett rely on this tool to track the rate of usage of “we” compared to “I”—and find that the resulting curve traces the familiar U-turn that recurs everywhere else in the book. These personal pronouns are presented as a window into the collective, steadily more self-obsessed national psyche (elsewhere derided as “selfie culture”).

Similar accounts of increasing selfishness fossilized in Google Books data have been offered before, most notably by the psychologist Jean Twenge, but they do not seem

to be taken that seriously by many linguists. For one, it seems easy to generate conclusions that would run in exactly the opposite direction: “we” might be losing out to “I,” but “community” has substantially gained in popularity relative to “individual.” My brief experimentation also showed that writers also discuss “you” more than “I” these days. From these analogies, one could conclude the exact opposite: a resurrected communitarianism after all. But of course that would be unfounded.

Other attempts at constructing a meta-narrative for American history, like the recent [*These Truths*](#) by Kemper professor of American history Jill Lepore, place at their center the crisis of race and the centuries-long inability of whites to accept blacks as equal. Was it possible for America to become a society of solidarity, a “we” society (as Putnam and Garrett term it), only because it was a *Mad Men* one, undergirded by the exclusion of blacks and women? These questions, thankfully, are addressed in the concluding chapters. But too often, Putnam and Garrett hammer these complex evolutions into a clean historic arc to better align with the argument of the rest of the book.

To keep the 1960s as the hinge point, their analysis shifts not to the trends in racial and gender equality themselves, but instead to the trend within the trends: the argument is that “America took its foot off the gas”—so the drive toward equality decelerated and stalled. “As that ‘we’ came apart, racial progress in many important realms came to a halt,” they claim. This is certainly true in some respects. But it does feel like a disservice to give the overriding impression that to be black in 2020 is only marginally better than it was in 1970. In fact, there has been substantial convergence in life expectancy, high-school graduation rates, and voter turnout between black and white Americans, for example. And the notion that the communitarian ethos of the “we” society reinforces the drive toward equality for the disadvantaged is difficult to square with the continuous progress of women, who now vote more and earn more college degrees than men, or that of gay Americans, who have secured legal protections and wider social acceptance astonishingly quickly in recent decades.

An overarching narrative for 100 years of change can easily become overreaching.

The difficulty in constructing an *overarching* narrative for 100 years of change is that it can easily become *overreaching*. But in Putnam’s case, the impulse is understandable. He has spent an illustrious academic career illuminating the ways in which American life has been steadily unraveling. In *Bowling Alone*, he documented the decline of social capital (for which he used membership in bowling leagues, Rotary Clubs, and churches as a proxy), bringing the concept into both academic and general popularity. (New data published here show that those downward trends have continued.) In *Our Kids* (2015), he revisited his hometown of Port Clinton, Ohio, to write vividly about growing inequality and the dimming of the American dream as it

passed from one generation to the next. For much of his career—and indeed the careers of many of the country’s most respected social scientists—the focus has been on exploring what went wrong, and why.

By reaching further back in time than most academics ever venture (because data are scant and require more care to interpret), he and Garrett are able to focus on a more positive period in which the United States was broadly improving, when children could expect almost surely to earn more than their parents, and Congress was not wrecked by partisanship. It cannot be wrong to yearn for a time when progress was palpable, when projects like the Great Society were being proposed and enacted. Even if we do not precisely know the reasons for the upswing all those years ago, one happened all the same. And it would not a bad time for another.

The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again, by Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett (Simon & Schuster, \$32.50)

[Idrees Kahloon '16](#) is U.S. policy correspondent for The Economist, based in Washington, D.C. His essay on political campaign finances, [“Does Money Matter?”](#) appeared in the July-August 2016 issue.

The Upswing review - can Biden heal America?

The US remains divided, but this study by Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett points out that it has emerged before from an era of inequality and partisanship. Can it again?

Colin Kidd

Thu 12 Nov 2020 02.30 EST Last modified on Wed 20 Jan 2021 22.18 EST

‘What can Joe Biden do to patch together a frayed nation?’ Supporters of the president-elect gather near the Texas capitol building to celebrate his victory. Photograph: Sergio Flores/AFP/Getty Images

So the Biden-Harris ticket has won, but by narrow margins in some of the battleground states. How did partisanship reach such a pitch that Donald Trump’s tribal appeal easily cancelled doubts about his manifest unfitness for office? And what can [Joe Biden](#) do to patch together a frayed nation? The political scientists Robert Putnam, author of the acclaimed *Bowling Alone*, and Shaylyn Romney Garrett provide a wealth of sociologically grounded answers in *The Upswing*. Although the title is reassuringly buoyant, this is a tale of two long-term trends, one benign, the other a dark descent. An unabashed centrism prevails: political stability, the authors recognise, is a dance that requires a measure of cooperation and disciplined deportment from both parties.

At the book’s core is a set of graphs describing the broad contours of American social, political, economic and cultural life over the past 125 years. All the graphs broadly conform to a common hump-like pattern: a growing swell over half a century or so of greater social trust, equality, bipartisanship and civic do-gooding peaking around the 1960s – followed by a marked and steady decline in all these criteria in the subsequent 50 years.

The bad news is that we are living through the worst of the downswing, amid gross inequalities, corporate exploitation of the vulnerable and uncompromising hyper-partisanship. The good news is that the US has been here before – in the late 19th-century [Gilded Age](#) – and successfully pulled itself out of the mire. An antidote emerged to the robber baron industrialists, social Darwinists and anti-corporate populists of the Gilded Age in the form of the Progressive movement, whose ideals attracted reformers from within both main parties. Indeed, the short-lived Progressive party of the 1910s was an offshoot from Theodore Roosevelt’s “Bull Moose” brand of reformist Republicanism.

Although Republican moderates managed to see off this third-party threat, Progressive ideals – the replacement of oligarchy, clientilism and corruption with modern, scientifically informed administration by middle-class professionals – endured as a

significant strand in Republican politics. Progressive sentiments informed the New Deal **of Roosevelt's distant Democrat cousin FDR**, but also the politics of mid 20th-century accommodationist Republicans such as Wendell Willkie and Thomas Dewey.

The finest exemplar of harmonious “Tweedledum-Tweedledee” politics was General Eisenhower who, declining the opportunity to run for president as a Democrat, campaigned as a non-partisan Republican and governed as a big-spending progressive. **The “low tide” of partisanship came in the mid-1960s when Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty**, the introduction of Medicare and implementation of black civil rights enjoyed support across the aisle from Republicans.

Putnam and Garrett perceive an upswing in the position of women and African Americans before the rights revolution of the 60s

In this age of “depolarisation”, the real ideological divisions lay within parties, between liberal Republicans and anti-New Deal conservative isolationists, between unionised northern blue-collar Democrats, many of them Catholic, and southern Democrats – predominantly Protestant segregationists whose cultural values belonged far to the right of liberal Republicans. The authors note that on issues of race and gender progressive Republicans were often to the left of Democrats, and that as late as the 1960s Democrats were more likely to be churchgoers.

Politics was, however, only **one strand in “the Great Convergence” described by Putnam and Garrett**. It was an age not only of growing income equalisation but of volunteering. Americans participated in huge numbers in chapter-based civic associations, such as the Elks and Rotarians, the Knights of Columbus and African American Prince Hall freemasonry. The mainstream Protestant churches themselves converged, favouring an ecumenical, theologically slender, all-American religion of social service and helping out.

Staggeringly hard as it is now to believe, the Southern Baptists initially welcomed the pro-choice result in the Roe v Wade abortion case of 1973. Indeed, Putnam and Garrett perceive a long unobtrusive upswing in the position of women and African Americans *before* the rights revolution of the 60s. The black-to-white income ratio improved 7.7% per decade between 1940 and 1970.

But the pendulum had already begun to swing in the other direction. Most of us might guess that it was the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 that initiated the turn to inequality and division. Not so, insist Putnam and Garrett, for the Reagan counter-**revolution turns out to be a “lagging indicator”**. **More ambiguous is the presidency of Richard Nixon**, who appears here in strongly contrasting tones: a liberal Keynesian Republican on the policy front, but hard-boiled and amoral when electioneering.

Adding a green tinge to progressive Republicanism, Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency and signed a clean air act. Yet ultimately ideals were a front for the harvesting of votes. Cynically alert to Southern Democrat disenchantment

with Johnson's civil rights legislation, Nixon embarked on a Southern strategy to woo the solidly Democratic South for the party of Abraham Lincoln. The process took decades, **and explains one of today's most glaring and historically illiterate ironies: the** flying of Confederate flags by rural Republican-supporting northerners.

However, as Putnam and Garrett demonstrate, the Great Divergence is about much more than political realignment. The great arc of modern American history concerns economic outcomes, social trends and a range of cultural transitions that the authors **describe as an "I-We-I" curve. Things started to go awry on a number of fronts from the** 1960s. Both the libertarian New Right and the countercultural New Left offered different routes to personal liberation. But individual fulfilment came at a cost in social capital.

Escape from the drab soulless conformity associated with the 1950s ended up all too often in lonely atomisation. A long road led from the straitjacket of early marriage in the 1950s via the freedom of cohabitation to the growing phenomenon of singleton households. Chapter-based voluntary organisations that involved turning up for meetings and activities gave way to impersonal professionally run non-profits whose Potemkin memberships existed only as mass mailing lists. Unions ceased to be focal points of worker camaraderie and sociability, and shrivelled to a core function of collective bargaining.

The authors believe that the new group loyalties of Republicans and Democrats are only weakly ideological, and are based rather on emotional allegiances of a tribal nature

What's more, the great mid-century levelling of incomes went into reverse. First, the gap grew between the middle and the bottom, then the incomes of the elite raced away from those of struggling middle-earners, and finally, as Putnam and Garrett show, the wealth of the top 0.1% vastly outgrew that of the top 1%.

The downswing America described in this book contains some surprising features. Partisan antipathy has risen to a high pitch as – seen over the long term – the intensity of religious and racial hostilities has mellowed. The authors believe that the new group loyalties of Republicans and Democrats are only weakly ideological, and are based rather on emotional allegiances of a tribal nature.

Today's partisans do not simply dislike their opponents: they loathe them, and assign character flaws to their rivals. This helps explain why Trump was able to usurp the Republican party and its followers, while to all intents and purposes jettisoning a whole **slew of traditional Republican policies like a new football manager who changes a team's** style of play without losing the allegiance of its hardcore fans. We might be tempted to **blame social media for this state of affairs, but Facebook and Twitter have an "ironclad** alibi". **The beginnings of the Great Divergence predate the internet by decades.**

A Biden presidency brings into focus the difficult job of healing and reconciliation. But here Putnam and Garrett run into trouble, for it is impossible to identify a single

decisive factor that caused the downswing. Rather the authors identify a range of “entwined” trends “braided together by reciprocal causality”. Just as diagnosis of ultimate causes is treacherous, so too is finding a compelling plan for throwing the Great Downswing into reverse. The authors look for the green shoots of a new Progressive movement in various forms of grassroots activism, but are worried that they have yet to see this take a “truly nonpartisan” form. They try to be upbeat, but the dominant note is wistful.

Yet even on their terms the election does present limited grounds for optimism. The energetic campaigning efforts of the Lincoln Project and other Biden-endorsing Republicans shows that the party – though long since abandoned by its liberal progressives – still contains several mansions. Consider the crossover potential of libertarians, Republican-inclined, who offer an unpredictable smorgasbord of options for jaded partisan palates: laissez-faire on morals as well as markets. In tight races in Arizona, Wisconsin and Georgia, [Jo Jorgensen](#), the third-party Libertarian candidate, drew small but significant numbers of disaffected Republicans away from Trump.

And what are we to make of the quiet Trump phenomenon, the huge numbers of voters who unostentatiously turned to him, largely, it seems, because of the economy? That electorate – however narrowly self-interested – is at least amenable to reason. Despite all the worrying auguries, the election was not a straightforward scrap between whites and minorities. Trump lost white males to Biden, but gained surprising proportions of Latinx and African-American voters, and won niche groups such as older Vietnamese-Americans. Today’s tribes have not, alas, dissolved, but tomorrow’s seem likely on both sides to be rainbow coalitions.

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Jon O'Rourke
April 21, 2021

Review of "The Upswing" by Robert D. Putnam

I. Overview —

For me "The Upswing" was engaging and compelling reading throughout - a political scientist's sweeping narrative story of the economic, political, social and cultural history of America over the past 120+ years. Quite an ambitious undertaking, and the author's thesis is quite provocative.

It was also obvious that in telling the story the author's political starting point is that of a passionate liberal Democrat. In one of his many book tour interviews Robert Putnam admits that he has lived for the past 40 years "in the most liberal town, in the most liberal county, and in the most liberal state of the nation." He also said that he is passionate about his message because he desperately wants "to change things"; the book was finished and sent to the publisher before the pandemic hit and one year before the end of the Trump administration. [The running joke is that the Harvard echo chamber is situated in The Peoples Republic of Cambridge, on the Left Bank of the Charles River.]

Putnam acknowledges up-front that social scientists prefer hard empirical supporting data rather than his historian's narrative, story-telling approach. Truth be told, I prefer, and have become accustomed to the social science approach, particularly when discussing current or recent economic trends. So when reading "The Upswing" I often became exasperated when Putnam would make a generalization and not back it up with hard, convincing data. [More on the unreliability of the story telling approach, and, indeed, of all of history, at the very end of this review.]

Putnam wisely eschews claims of definitive cause-and-effect relationships between his data and his generalizations, emphasizing instead looser "correlations". So it probably came as no surprise when some of his data and assertions were challenged by social scientists, particularly economists. For example, a central thesis of the book is that America is in the midst of "deep and accelerating inequality crisis" that must be reversed if it is to prosper again in a fair way. But the data he uses to this provocative argument have been questioned and seriously criticized.

But the book begins on an optimistic note, acknowledging that America's capitalist system has made remarkable progress during the past 120 years. Since the turn of the last century Americans have dramatically improved their standards of living *by almost every measure: we've become much healthier, much wealthier, more technologically advanced, much better educated, more diverse and tolerant, less racist ... and American's lifespans have increased by over 30 years during that 120 period.* [I wonder: Is that the fastest and largest life expectancy improvement in human history? Possibly. Maybe China, between 1980 and the year 2030, will surpass the US's remarkable life expectancy gains.]

Despite these very impressive advances in America, historian Putnam still sees the glass in 2019 as mostly empty. As he said in one of his many book promotion interviews just before the 2020 presidential election, America is now in “an unbelievably awful situation” ... “a real pickle”.

”Over the last 60 or 70-years, things have been getting worse in America. We’re in the worst shape we’ve almost ever been. And everyone agrees that we’re more polarized than we’ve almost ever been. And we’re more socially fragmented than we’ve almost ever been. And we’re more unequal economically than we’ve almost ever been. And we’re more focused on ourselves [rather than community] than we’ve almost ever been.” In the concluding Chapter 9 Putnam says that in today’s America there are “... vast disparities between rich and poor, gridlock in the public square, a fraying social fabric, and widespread atomization and narcissism reign today.” “This is the worst of times”

This last comment is a reference to the 1st sentence of Charles Dickens’, “A Tale of Two Cities” “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” Note this same reference was used by MIT professors Banerjee and Duflo in the January UAA book club selection, “Good Economics for Hard Times.” [NB: MIT is also on the left bank of the Charles River, only a few blocks down river from Harvard. The Harvard Business School, on the other hand, is on the right bank. :)]

In the same interview Putnam’s co-author, Shaylyn Romney Garrett, who is 47, shared a similarly pessimist take on America:

“Bob is really interested in the decline [of America]. And my whole life has been spent in this period of decline. We’re at a point in history when we’re in a deep hole, but we were there before in 1890, and we climbed out of it.”

That is the book’s central argument in a nutshell. We’re in a deep hole, but we’ve been there before, and we can emerge if we just do the things we did during the “progressive” era during the 1st half of the 20th century ... and up until the 1970s. While reading the book I was reminded of my parents’ stories about the ‘good old days’; stories that always began “Well, in *my* day ...” and concluded that if we’d only return to the good old days we’d be much better off. They were both born in the early 1900s.

I do not share Putnam’s pessimistic mindset at all, and his take is a far cry from fellow Harvard professor Steven Pinker’s much more optimistic view of America’s overall situation and trends. [See “The Better Angels of our Nature”, 2012; Bill Gates’ opinion: “The most inspiring book I’ve ever read.”] I much prefer Pinker’s more optimistic view that, after you assess objectively all the facts and trends over the past century [not just the political fads and opinions], it’s clear that the nation and the world are getting a lot better, faster — *even if it doesn’t always feel that way sometimes*.

I believe that Putnam’s negative predisposition leads him to use data that supports his world view, while downplaying, and often ignoring, important, more positive social & economic data

and trends. Also, Putnam's passionate desire to "change things", rather than just describe things as they are, compromises his objectivity and his choices of the facts he uses and the trends he chooses to observe.

To cite one example: According to the US Census Bureau, in 1959 the overall US poverty rate was 23%. By the beginning of 2020, just months before the pandemic hit and just before Putnam completed his book, the US poverty rate had declined steadily to only 10.5% ... which was *the lowest US poverty rate since records have been kept*. Over that 50 year period poverty rates in the U.S. declined during periods of fast economic growth and increased during recessions, but overall, there has been a steady, almost linear reduction in real poverty rates in the US over the last 60 years. In short, there was no inverted U curve of the sort that Putnam refers to numerous times throughout the book.

Also, in 2019, a year before "The Upswing" was published, the U.S. jobless rate hit historic lows, and the wages of those in the bottom 10% of the wage distribution rose by 5.7 %, the biggest increase in many years.

[Chart - "US Poverty Levels:1959-2019" - US Census Bureau]

Why does Putnam ignore these data and other more positive data and trends that are described below? He does mention that between 1960 and 1973 the U.S. reduced its poverty rate from about 23% to 11%, but says that after 1973 it was all downhill, and he fails to mention the further reduction in U.S. poverty between 2016 and the end of 2019 to its lowest levels ever..

More importantly, what explains the major differences between Putnam's data on economic inequality in America and that of many economists? And why focus of the top 1/10th of 1% and the top 1%, and not the top 10% or top 20%?

I believe that much of the discrepancy lies in Putnam's over-reliance on data that socialist economist Thomas Piketty published during the past 20 years — data that touched off the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 and that fueled left-leaning politicians' narratives that "... we are once again living in an era of extraordinary wealth concentrated in the hands of a few people ... and this concentration is growing." [Bernie Sanders]

[Note: Thomas Piketty is a member of the **Party of the European Left (PEL)**, which, according to Wikipedia, is "a [European political party](#) that operates as an association of [democratic socialist](#) and [communist](#)^[2] political parties in the [European Union](#) and other European countries."]

Piketty's very popular 2014 book, "Capital in the 21st Century", asserted that pernicious inequality dooms many capitalist economies, and these fears were repeated by the Washington Post, the NYTs, Paul Krugman, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and many other politicians.

But Piketty's data and theories have been criticized severely by many economists. For example, Harvard economist, Professor Martin Feldstein, found that ...

“... [Piketty's] thesis rests on a false theory of how wealth evolves in market economies, a flawed interpretation of US income tax data, and a misunderstanding of the current nature of household wealth.”

Another economist found Piketty's historical data on US wealth “unreliable” and “manufactured”, with some of it “heavily manipulated.” Harvard economist Alan Auerbach and Kevin Hassett, economic advisor to several presidents, found “flaws in the facts, logic and policy conclusions in Piketty's book”. Richard Sutch, Professor Emeritus at UC Berkeley, called Piketty's historical data on wealth “unreliable” and “manufactured”, with some of it “heavily manipulated”. The UK's Financial Times found “errors of transcription; suboptimal averaging techniques; multiple unexplained adjustments to the numbers; data entries with no sourcing; unexplained use of different time periods; and inconsistent uses of source data.” In a 2018 study, economist James K. Galbraith reviewed Piketty's World Inequality Database and concluded that the data were “not consistent with other reputable sources and used assumptions in creating the data that were “beyond heroic”. [Ouch!]

But in “The Upswing”, Putnam accepts and adopts Piketty's inequality data whole cloth. In the key, 46-page Chapter 2, “The Rise and Fall of Equality”, Putnam refers to Piketty's inequality data as accepted truth and conventional wisdom which it clearly is not. Indeed, Putnam places a picture of the Piketty's inverted U curve of economic inequality on the front cover of the book, and uses Piketty data throughout to support other related assertions.

For example, Putnam links the downturn in U.S. economic inequality with (a) the decline of unionization in America; (b) the abandonment of a minimum wage; and even (c) with changing family formation patterns. [See Chapter 4, “Society - Between Isolation and Solidarity”.] He implies strongly that if unionization had continued to flourish, and if the minimum wage had not been abandoned, the trend over the past half century toward inequality in the U.S. might have been stemmed. This Putnam generalization implies causation [even though he denies it elsewhere], and his generalizations seems like a gross oversimplifications. It's a “story” and “narrative” that he clearly believes himself, but it's hardly convincing to me. To me it's more like a WAGs, as we used to say at USAID. [a wild ass guess.]

For example, the inequality inverted U curves that Putnam presents in Chapter #2, Figure 2.8 and Figure 2.9, on pages 34 and 36, indicate that both income and wealth inequality [as measured by the top1%] were in bad shape in the U.S. around 1900, but both steadily improved [thru ‘progressive’ actions], until the mid-1970s, after which inequality worsened and dramatically “accelerated”, until today it is truly awful and has driven America into an inequality “crisis” and “hole”.

The income inequality chart indicates that in 1910 about 18% of national income was received by the top 1%, and by 1965 that percent had dropped 10%, to about 8%. But then 55 years later, in 2019, that percent had risen back to about 18%. So really all that even Putnam is presenting is an 8% “swing” up and an 8% “swing” down over the 110 year period, between 1910 and 2020. But Putnam’s graph visualizes a very steep and dramatic swing up and a very steep plunge down the mountainside to the “hole” that the suggests we’re in now. The graphs make it *seem* as if there were monster swings of at least 50% up, and 50% down, and I believe that this was exactly the impression the author intended to convey. Trouble is, that story and narrative is untrue.

The last chart in Chapter 2 [page 68, Figure 2.19] illustrates a similar trend, but it is a mysterious and unexplained “composite” graph, entitled “*Economic Inequality-1913 to 2016*”. Putnam does not make clear what data he used used to construct this “composite” visualization of America’s economic inequality trends. He says that this inequality chart “... *combines all the relevant charts in this chapter into a single curve, which illustrates the inverted you shape we saw all over and over again in the various measures here examined.*” There are 19 charts in the chapter, and he does not explain which charts or which data he used to construct this “composite” “Inequality” graph, nor how he used the data to do so. Even the chart’s long footnote, which is an entire page of very fine print, is unrevealing and incomprehensible. Try reading it. It basically says that 4 Texas A&M statisticians used various obscure, sophisticated statistical techniques to construct the graph. Sorry. That’s just not good enough for any scholarship anywhere, Harvard notwithstanding.

If you look carefully, *this chart/graph doesn’t even have a lefthand Y axis at all!* Yet it mysteriously looks almost exactly like the income and wealth inequality charts earlier in the chapter. It is not at all clear what this most important visualization/graph means. Because this graph is incomprehensible, it should not only be ignored but used as evidence that Putnam’s central thesis about inequality trends is false or, at best, on very shaky ground. In one interview Putnam said that it’s too complicated for him to explain how the graph was constructed. Indeed. But the graph requires a clear explanation since he uses it to great effect throughout the book ... and on its front cover of his book, framing the title.

So it is important to understand the specific challenges to Piketty’s inequality data that Putnam uses to support his central theme: that America’s political economy has become increasingly unfair for America’s poor and middle class ... and, unless this trend is reversed, this inequality dooms the nation.

II. The Challenge from “The Economist” —

A little more than a year ago [in the same month that Putnam finished his book and submitted it for publication] the Left-of-Center weekly magazine, The Economist, published a special report and literature survey on a series of new papers that severely criticized and refuted much of the Piketty data that Putnam relies on to bolster his story. The Economist announced its principal finding and conclusion in bold letters on the front cover of that week’s issue:

“Inequality Illusions - Why wealth and income gaps are not what they appear”

1 — The Economist cites a recent paper by economists at the US Treasury and Congress’s Joint Committee on Taxation [Auten & Splinter] that reached a strikingly different conclusion from that of Piketty. *They found that, after adjusting for taxes and transfers, the income share of America's top 1% has barely changed at all since the 1960s.* In contrast, Piketty found that the top 1% share of US income increased 6%, from 10% to 16% between 1960 and 2015.

2— The Economist also questioned a second *Piketty argument [adopted by Putnam] that the rising share of the top 1% has come at the expense of the bottom 50%, and that there had been a fall of real median income growth in the US in recent years.* The Economist cited an Urban Institute survey by Stephen Rose that found that, whereas Piketty found a decline of 8% in real median household income in the US during the 35 year, 1979-2014 period, they found *increases of up to 51% [!!] in median household income over the same period. This is a massive discrepancy.*

3 — A third Piketty argument is that the top 1% “rentier” class makes most money from investing or inheriting wealth rather than actually working. Piketty’s evidence is that capital has become a larger share of U.S. GDP in recent decades, compared to the share of GDP attributed to workers’ wages/income. Most economists agree with Piketty about the GDP percentages; i.e., that capital’s share of US GDP has increased. But economists point out that *much of the increase in capital’s share of America’s GDP has come from the rising value of middle class homes, rather than from the rising value of stocks and bonds which are held disproportionately by the top 1%.* This too dramatically changes the Piketty inequality estimates.

4 — Everyone agrees that it is much harder to measure and identify coherent trends for wealth than for income. The Economist found that only 4 nations of about 200 nations have wealth distribution data that are adequate for even rudimentary analysis. The U.S. is 1 of those 4, but even U.S. data is shaky and subject to interpretation. Piketty found that during the 34 years between 1978 and 2012, the U.S. *wealth* owned by the top 1% rose 16% — from 7% in 1978 to 22% in 2012, which is almost as high as it was in 1929. But another 2019 estimate [Treasury’s Smith, UC-Berkeley’s Zidar, and Princeton’s Zwick] found that U.S. wealth owned by the top 1% *rose by only half that much. This too is a major difference with Piketty/Putnam and amounts to a difference of trillions of dollars.* [In his most recent book Piketty calls for a progressive tax on US wealth, escalating to 90%.]

The Economist survey added an interesting footnote:

“ ... Sweden is surely one of the world’s most unequal countries in terms of distribution of wealth. Sweden has 1 billionaire for every 250,000 people, one of the highest rates in the world. Only in tax havens such as Cyprus or Monaco, or in captured economies such as Russia or Georgia, are plutocrats more dominant. Yet among ordinary Swedes, billionaires are surprisingly popular ... due to the perception that they have made their money *not* by ex-

exploiting ordinary Swedes, but by creating multinational corporations, like Volvo and Spotify. If surprisingly few Swedes hanker for punitive taxes on the rich, that is also because [Sweden has] concluded that those taxes do not work.” [Sweden introduced wealth taxes long ago, but abolished the inheritance tax in 2005 and the wealth tax in 2007.]

Jealousy, envy and distrust of the 1% are not prominent in Swedish political speeches, but they are prominent in U.S. politics. Why is that?

III. — The Cato Institute Challenge to Piketty Data —

The Economist magazine is not the only institution that criticized Piketty’s [and therefore Putnam’s] data on inequality in America. In the same month that The Economist published its critique of Piketty, the Washington D.C. Cato Institute published a 40-page study entitled “Exploring Wealth Inequality”. Contrary to the Piketty/Putnam finding that there has been a catastrophic increase in wealth inequality in America during the past 60 years, the team of economists at the Cato Institute found ...

“only a modest increase, and less than is often asserted in the media. Indeed wealth inequality has changed surprisingly little given the large economic changes in recent decades from technology and globalization. This modest change occurred mainly because there has been significant economic growth over that same period, and entrepreneurs [like Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, etc.] have created technical innovations that were broadly beneficial to the rest of society and the national economy.”

Using U.S. Federal Reserve data, the Cato Institute found that *the top 1% share of U.S. income increased only slightly, from 7% in 1910 to 9% in 2015, 105 years later ...* and from 8% in 1960 to only 9% in 2015, 65 years later, during the period when Putnam says there was a sharp downturn. This is a far cry from the dramatic inequality swing that Piketty reports and that Putnam repeats in “The Upswing” and pictures on his books front cover throughout the book.

The Cato Institute also found that, while US wealth inequality has edged up “modestly” in recent years, *the US poverty rate has declined steadily.*

“Wages are up and unemployment is low. Federal Reserve Board data indicate that the top 1% share of *wealth* increased slightly between 2013 and 2016, but the wealth of the median household actually *increased* by 16% over that same period, with particularly strong gains by less-educated households.”

Just as The Economist had found, *recent gains by the top 1% have not come at the expense of other Americans.* The Cato Institute found similar patterns in other growing economies, contrary to Piketty’s findings.

Cato also found that in 1910 the top 1% held about 40% of US *wealth*, and since 1910 that percentage has *decreased*, to about 30% in 2015. *And between the 40 year, 1975-2015 period*

[the downward slope in Putnam's inverted U curve] it increased only modestly [7%] from 23% to 30%. But that was far from the catastrophic trend suggested by Putnam.

In short, using mostly U.S. Federal Reserve data, the Cato Institute concluded politely that Piketty/Putnam data, are “off base”.

But Cato economists went further than just criticizing Piketty's inequality *numbers*. They assert, with very good reason I believe, that *a government policy that focuses solely, or primarily on income and wealth redistribution is misplaced and very harmful to all in the long run. Policy should more properly focus on reducing poverty, NOT on redistributing incomes and wealth.* Their view is that sustainable job creation through fast economic growth lifts all boats — the dinghies as well the super tankers — , and they point to China's recent spectacular record of accomplishment when using this approach.

“After China adopted [free] market reforms in the 1970s, its economic growth boomed and hundreds of millions of Chinese people lifted themselves out of poverty. China's GDP per capita in constant US dollars was more than 10 times higher in 2018 than it was in 1990.”

China's remarkable achievement is arguably the fastest economic [and aggregate income] growth in human history, and, not surprisingly, this fast economic growth in China led directly to even more spectacular reductions in poverty.

“The share of the Chinese population living in severe poverty [as measured by the World Bank as income of less than \$3.20 per day] *fell from 47% in 1990 to just 1% in 2019.* [India has achieved similar poverty reduction results in the last 3 decades with their free-market growth strategy adopted after fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet.]

Yet the rise in general prosperity may have also coincided with increased wealth inequality in China. The top 10% wealth share is estimated to have jumped from 41% to 67% today.”

I seriously doubt that those 500 million Chinese citizens [i.e., the 47% of 1.2 Billion] who were lifted out of poverty within just one generation are worried that much about China's super rich 1%, like Jack Ma, founder of Ali Baba. And, like the Chinese and Swedes, I too am not worried about the wealth of Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates or Elon Musk ... they have each generated massive technological advances, along with hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The Cato Institute concludes that

“... wealth statistics such as the top 1% share have little relevance to U.S. households' standards of living. While many politicians and political pundits seem obsessed with wealth inequality, such measurements do not reveal anything about the levels of poverty or the prosperity of Americans. Poverty may fall when inequality rises, such as when entrepreneurs build fortunes by generating economic growth. Or poverty may rise when inequality rises,

such as when crony capitalists gain government preferences that distort the economy and reduce growth. Poverty and inequality are different things, but they are often conflated in political discussions. Wealth inequality ... cannot be judged good or bad by itself because it may reflect a growing economy that is lifting all boats ...”

“Martin Feldstein was right when he wrote that economists “ ... start with the *"Pareto principle that a change is good if it makes someone better off without making anyone else worse off."* “ Jason Furman, the former chair of President Obama's Council of Economic Advisers and now at the Harvard's JFK School of Government [where Putnam served as Dean] was right to praise Walmart and the rich Walton family as a "progressive success story" for its role in reducing prices and generating employment.”

IV. Positive Trends in Past 60 Years Not Mentioned or Emphasized by “The Upswing” —

1 - Better Education — Putnam acknowledges that the U.S. made very positive improvements in education until about the mid-1970s, after which, he asserts, we “took our foot off the gas pedal” ... and progress stopped and then reversed. But Census Bureau and other data suggest otherwise.

Around 1900 only 1 in 10 Americans had graduated from high school. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, by 1975 still only 40% had graduated from high school, after which progress actually *accelerated* — from 40% with high school degrees in 1975 to over 90% in 2019. Hardly a decelerating “foot-off-the-gas” trend.

There were similar spectacular gains in college education, especially since the mid-1970s when Putnam asserts progress stopped and reversed. In 1900 only 2% of Americans had college degrees or higher; by 1975 14% had college degrees or higher; and then between 1975 and 2019 *that 14% had more than doubled to 36%*. Again, hardly a “foot-off-the-gas” phenomenon.

Steady gains have also been made in college education by African Americans. Yet in Chapter 6, Page 208, Putnam asserts that after 1970 the rate at which blacks were completing college began to drop. True or not true? Not according to the U.S. Census Bureau which records that in 1960 only 4% of 25-year-old African Americans had a college degree, but by 2019 that number had grown to 26%. Census Bureau data also record that the progression through these past 60 years has been straight/linear, with no flat-lining, reversals or inverted U curve bumps. Surely Black Americans can and should do much better than 26%, but there has been very impressive steady progress, not a deceleration as Putnam asserts.

[Chart — “Black College Degrees — 1959-2019” — Census Bureau]

In 2010 33% of whites age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher, and just 9 years later, in 2019 as Putnam finished his book, *that 33% had increased sharply to 40%*. Again, hardly the reversal or downturn suggested by Putnam. During the same 9 year period, the percentage of

blacks age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher rose from 20% to 26%; Asians from 52% to 58%; and Hispanics from 14% to 19%. And almost half (47%) of the foreign-born population who arrived in the United States over the past decade had a college degree — a higher rate than both earlier foreign-born and native-born Americans.

The college education *gains for women* have been even more impressive. In 1940 3% of U.S. women [and about 5% of men] had a college degree. Those percentages have risen steadily for the past 80 years until 2020 when approximately 40% of U.S. women had college degrees, and since 2015 more U.S. women have earned college degrees than men. Again the progression upwards has been steady and linear with no perceptible dips as Putnam asserts.

[Chart - “US Men and Women’s College Degrees — 1940 to 2019” - National Center for Education Statistics.]

Finally, in just the last 30 years education has become more available to almost every American, and, indeed, everyone around the world. Approximately **87% of American households now have high speed internet connections** [a number that astounded me when I found it]. This has brought virtually the entire body of world knowledge to the laptops of anyone, young or old, willing and able to access it. Learning to read, learning a foreign language or learning STEM subjects no longer requires a physical classroom.

[When I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in the 1960s the literacy rates in much of Africa and Asia were in the single digits. Now, only 60 years later, according to UNESCO Wikipedia report, the worldwide literacy rate for those over 15 years of age has risen to **over 90%!** A truly astonishing human achievement. Maybe there is no longer a need for USAID Education programs.]

2 - Taxes & Social Welfare Expenditures —

Taxes - Putnam does not stress just how progressive the U.S federal income tax has become. The top 1% of Americans pay very roughly 30% of all federal income taxes; the top 10% pay roughly 50%; the bottom 45% pay virtually none. And it has been estimated that in 2020 the top 1% will have paid a greater share of individual income taxes (39%) than the bottom 90% (30%). [Source: taxfoundation.org]

Social Welfare Spending - Putnam *implies* that inequality and hard times have become dramatically worse, in part because progressive government spending on social programs for lower income citizens tapered off after the New Deal, the War of Poverty and the 1970s. But nothing could be further from the truth. Expenditures on social welfare programs have actually increased dramatically since the 1970s. The truly astonishing increases in social welfare spending, which are in effect income transfers to the bottom 50% of the U.S. income strata, can hardly be missed. Between 1979 and 2016 Medicaid and CHIP [Children’s Health Insurance Program] account for over 80% of the growth in means-tested transfers to poor households. [The Economist]

The U.S. now spends 12 times more on means-tested welfare expenditures than it did when the War on Poverty began in the 1960s, and, in fact, they have become the fastest-growing governments expenditures. After Bill Clinton promised in 1992 to “end welfare as we know it”, means-tested welfare spending has *nearly tripled in real terms* [i.e., after adjusting for inflation], and this spending reached over a Trillion dollars in 2016. Again, the progression upward has been sharp and steady, and one OMB chart, based on federal and state data, illustrates this point and seems to contradict Putnam’s general notion that the poor have been unfairly treated by the rich. The real issue is not inequality, but why, after all these dramatic increases in federal and state income transfer, poverty-reduction government programs, there isn’t less poverty and inequality.

[Chart — “History of Total Welfare Spending -1950 to 2016’ - OMB federal and state data, Heritage Foundation.]

V. Is a Capitalist Economy “Systemically Unequal”? —

According to the Occupy Wall Street movement, radical left socialists, Karl Marx, and others, free market capitalism literally *causes* escalating inequality. But is that true? I think the facts prove otherwise.

Inequality is a far deeper problem than just capitalism. There is strong evidence that income and wealth inequality has been around for at least 10-15,000 years — many thousands of years before capitalism arrived on the scene. The Egyptian Pharoehs lived in an unequal economy and society; the great pyramids were surrounded by the graves of poor, low-income laborers who built them; the Old Testament story of Cain and Able is an inequality and jealousy fable; there is strong evidence from graves that wealth inequality was prevalent in the Neolithic Age; and likely income and wealth inequality existed in hunter gatherer societies hundreds of thousands of years ago. Even randomness seems to lead mathematically to unequal outcomes; the game of Monopoly is essentially a random game with the winner ending up with all the money and all real estate.

Further, mathematical rules do apply to some inequality distributions, and these rules apply not only to money and human economic systems, but to *all flora and fauna* systems in which there is creative competition. Physicists and economists have developed Pareto Distribution and Price’s Laws, that appear to drive all competitive systems toward unequal outcomes ... from bean plants and trees, to all social systems and even including systems that govern the formation of stars and galaxies.

But this broad issue of inequality is well beyond the scope of this comment on “The Upswing”. Perhaps a focus on the broader issue of ‘inequality’ can be saved for another book club discussion.

VI. A Final Comment of the Reliability of Historians Stories, Narratives and Memes

In COVID lockdown and sequestration I've been reading more and listening to podcasts. Sean Carroll is a Cal Tech theoretical physicist who holds the Richard Feynman Chair, who has authored many books and who has for several years now broadcast a podcast with 1 1/2 hour discussions with a very wide range of intellectuals. The day before our Zoom UAA book club discussion on "Upswing" I listened to one podcast with Duke University philosophy Professor Alex Rosenberg who recently published a book entitled "The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories — How History Gets Things Wrong".

His thesis, which is similar in many respects to a) Daniel Kahneman's System 1 and System 2 model [our UAA book discussion 3 months ago]; and b) Stanford University's Dr. Robert Sapolsky's work along the same lines. Sean Carroll's summary of philosopher Rosenberg's idea about history:

"Human's love of storytelling has been hardwired into our brains over more than a million of years of evolution during the Pleistocene era. Our brains today are not really capable of sustained, higher-level cognition. But, humans do have a long list of *heuristics* and stories that we developed while evolving on the African savannahs to survive and get us through the day, and, to a large extent, we're still using these same heuristics to get us through today."

"Today history [and political science] is no better at describing past behavior in history than Homer was 3,000 years ago."

I'm pretty sure this is a thought worth considering; it certainly occurred to me throughout our book club discussion today.