



# Where Has My Neighbor Gone?

## *A Review Article*

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While other articles in this issue deal with the weighty theological question of *Who is my neighbor?* this article explores the more practical question of: *Where has my neighbor gone?* There is a sense of change and of loss in America that has spurred an entire genre of books examining the decline of relationships, cohesiveness, consensus, and yes, neighborliness. What follows is a review of six different books that try to answer the question of what has happened to American society.

### *BOWLING ALONE*

Robert Putnam's 1995 article, followed by his full-length book of the same name, *Bowling Alone* (Simon & Schuster, 2000) was a groundbreaking work that launched a multitude of books examining social capital, social engagement, and relationships in America. Putnam, a professor of public policy, was propelled into fame with reviews and articles featured in publications such as *People* magazine<sup>1</sup> and the *New York Times*. He was even invited to meet with President Bill Clinton.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Nancy Day, "Our Separate Ways," *People*, September 25, 1995, at <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20101680,00.html> (accessed September 5, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>Margaret Talbot, "Who Wants to be a Legionnaire?" *The New York Times*, June 25, 2000, at <https://www.nytimes.com/books/00/06/25/reviews/000625.25talbot.html> (accessed September 5, 2016).

*There has been a flood of books lately on the changing societal contexts in America, and how these changes have an impact on our communal lives together in our neighborhoods. Not all these books examine the religious or moral aspects of these changes, but there is a great deal of thoughtful writing that is well worth reading.*

Based on the argument that *social capital* in America has fallen steadily since the 1960s (simply put, “social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them”<sup>3</sup>), the book goes on to give an incredible number of statistics on American life, shown in a multitude of charts and graphs. Americans go to church less, socialize with neighbors less, join fewer civil clubs and organizations. They are less likely to be involved in their children’s schools, less likely to volunteer, and they give less money (if adjusted for inflation). Americans do, however, speed on the highway more and run through more stop signs. Putnam does point out that the decline is not uniform, and individuals who attend church, for example, are also more likely to volunteer, donate money, and be all around more engaged in the community.

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Putnam goes on to offer possible explanations for such a decline of social capital in America. He looks at eleven factors he thinks may contribute: busyness and time pressure, economic hard times, two-career families, residential mobility, suburbanization, television and other media, changes and structure in the economy, disruption of marriage and family ties, growth of the welfare state, the civil rights movement, and the 1960s. The strength of his book, though, is not his analysis of factors, but the sheer volume of data he was able to collect and present in easy to understand prose and graphics.

While the amount of information given in the book is impressive, and the book was influential when it was released, it is starting to show its age. Fifteen years is a long time, especially when discussing social movements. The book was released before 9/11, before the Great Recession, before Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. The young and promising Millennials Putnam briefly discusses are now fast approaching middle age (at least the oldest of us). There are newer books that may be a better choice as far as current data is concerned; however, the book remains interesting and offers a good history of decline prior to 2000.

Putnam does have a follow-up book, written with Lewis Feldstein, entitled *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2003). The basic assumption that social capital has steadily declined in America since the 1960s is the same in this book as in *Bowling Alone*. However, in *Better Together*, Putnam and Feldstein describe twelve promising examples of social engagement around the United States. Through a series of case studies, they create a feeling of hope that American society may be on the cusp once again of becoming more connected.

<sup>3</sup>Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) 19.

### THE VANISHING NEIGHBOR

*The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), by Marc J. Dunkelman, is a relatively new book that has certain similarities to *Bowling Alone*; in fact, Dunkelman often cites *Bowling Alone* in order to put forth his own arguments. However, while Putnam's general argument in *Bowling Alone* was straightforward, Dunkelman's is complicated and sometimes hard to follow. Dunkelman describes his main argument: "It involves connecting changes in the average American's routine to a broad transformation of American community, and then exploring how that shift has undermined our faith in American exceptionalism....But the argument is grounded in a modest desire....Why is it that so many elements across the wide spectrum of American life seem to be failing?"<sup>4</sup> In order to do this, he examines how American life has changed since the Second World War in the first section. Then Dunkelman looks at how changes to daily routines have destroyed the basic building blocks of American community—this is built on the idea of "townships," which he claims defined American life until recently. The third and final section focuses on how the transformations in the first two sections have begun to play out.<sup>5</sup>

Central to his thesis is what Dunkelman describes as "rings," based on Saturn's rings—thus inner rings are the things in our life that are dearest to us, the middle and outer rings are more casual acquaintances. Dunkelman argues that Americans tend to now focus on the inner and outer rings (Facebook and Twitter would be good examples of outer-ring relationships), and ignore the middle rings, which in the past would have made up much of a person's casual network. Dunkelman argues that Americans are less connected now than ever before. Americans themselves believe that as a society they have taken a step back. The median income for the middle class has declined substantially. Americans are poorer, fatter, unhappier, and pessimistic about the future.

While there is quite a bit of good and relevant information in *The Vanishing Neighbor*, the book meanders from topic to topic and is often difficult to follow. He relies too heavily on TV shows and movies to paint a picture of the American past, and he proposes a bleak future.

### THE FRACTURED REPUBLIC

Yuval Levin begins his new book, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism*, with a rather insightful assertion: "Life in America is always getting better and worse at the same time. Progress comes at a cost, even if it is often worth the cost."<sup>6</sup> Therefore there are no simple

<sup>4</sup>Marc J. Dunkelman, *The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014) xviii.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., xix.

<sup>6</sup>Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016) 1.

descriptions of a society, and either upbeat or downcast social analyses are just partial descriptions of a whole story.<sup>7</sup> This opening quotation gives the reader hope that the book will be a more balanced analysis of what is currently happening in America.

This is a book about the breakdown of a unified American society. Of all the books examined, this is by far the most political. It is included because there is a clear frustration in America over the ugliness and polarization of American politics. People want to see a renewal of the civic-minded neighbor, but everyone seems to be at a loss on how to get there. Levin does a good job of explaining the polarization, which perhaps gives a starting place for Americans to move towards reconciliation and community instead of dysfunction.

Levin is an editor of a journal of public affairs and also a scholar at a think tank. He is a social conservative, even having worked for the senior President Bush. He discloses this information in an attempt to put forth his own bias up front. He does believe conservatives are better positioned to address the needs of the future (and the essential problem that most Americans believe that Washington simply is no longer working), but he offers critical looks at both the Right and Left of American politics. Central to the book's argument is the idea that the America that emerged from the Great Depression and Second World War was unified and cohesive. Since that time, "the culture liberalized, the economy deregulated, and an exceptional mid-century consensus in politics gave way to renewed division. In time, this fracturing of consensus grew from diffusion into polarization—of political views, of incomes, of family patterns and ways of life." Americans are now living in a fractured republic, as the title so aptly points out. Americans tend to look back at an idyllic past that is part of the national consciousness; however, this view of the past is not particularly accurate. Both major political parties are stuck in the past and unable to truly offer solutions. He amusingly argues that the Democrats are stuck in 1965 and the Republicans in 1981.

The book is split into two parts, which roughly breaks down to looking at the past in section one and looking toward the future in section two. Section one explores the past by breaking it into ages of conformity, frenzy, and anxiety. The chapter on the Age of Anxiety is particularly relevant and interesting. Levin looks at how disparate the lives of people in different socioeconomic classes are. Today, for example, individuals with college degrees are substantially more likely to have a job, stay married, and to attend church. Americans at the top are living far more stable lives than those at the bottom, and there is less and less of a middle.<sup>8</sup>

The book is well written and easy to follow. His arguments are coherent, and offer a thoughtful critique of the current situation in America. As a culture, we don't act neighborly. National discourse is ugly and divided. Levin's analysis of the past and current political conflicts is sound. He does not, however, give many sug-

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 90–91.

gestions for improvement in the future. All in all, though, *The Fractured Republic* is a good book that gives a great analysis of the breakdown of the American political system.

### THE NEXT AMERICA

A general theme of all the books examined in this essay is that they are trying to analyze the breakdown of relationships in America. While the previous books look at how people either have become polarized or less connected, Paul Taylor's *The Next America* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016) examines this breakdown of relationships by examining the four generations in America. Specifically, Taylor focuses on the tense relationship between the two largest generations, the Baby Boomers and Millennials. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam barely mentions Millennials, who at that time were still in high school and younger. In *The Next America*, which was published fifteen years later, Millennials are grown up, and struggling to find work in the worst economy since the Great Depression.

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*The Next America* is authored by both Paul Taylor and the Pew Research Center. Not surprisingly, the book is filled with an incredible amount of data. There is information on what percentage of each generation has tattoos, how they each feel about marriage, religion, politics, technology, the list goes on and on. It carefully details the ethnic, racial, and financial makeup of each generation. So what does this glut of information actually tell the reader about relationships in America? What does this have to do with the idea of the neighbor? As it turns out, a lot. Each generation is actually quite different; which, Taylor argues, adds to the conflict.

Each generation has a rather different racial and ethnic makeup. Eighty percent of the silent generation is white, about seventy-five percent of Baby Boomers are white, sixty percent of Millennials are white, and just about half of children are now white.<sup>9</sup> Each generation votes differently—Millennials are substantially more liberal than older generations. Financial situations are the area that Taylor identifies as one of the major root causes of generational antipathy.<sup>10</sup> Baby Boomers are retiring and less financially secure than they expected. Social Security and Medicare cannot actually afford to fulfill all the promises made to the Boomer generation, which leaves the underemployed and underpaid younger generations to pick up the tab. Taylor argues that America has a disaster on its hands, and this situation is causing substantial animosity between generations.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

Despite the differences and despite the conflicts, Taylor argues that each generation's future is intertwined with the others. Something needs to happen; something needs to change. The country cannot continue on its current path. However, that is where the book leaves the reader. While *The Next America* does not offer solutions, it does offer an amazing amount of up-to-date information on the makeup of America. Taylor offers both critique and explanation of each generation's situation. He is a Boomer, but he is equally critical of his own generation as the other three. It's worth reading just to enhance understanding of American society today. It also gives clues to how society will change as the younger generations get older.

#### *MORE HUMAN: DESIGNING A WORLD WHERE PEOPLE COME FIRST*

Steve Hilton, the author of *More Human: Designing a World Where People Come First* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), is not a typical American. In fact, he is not American at all. He is the English son of Hungarian immigrants, who currently lives in Silicon Valley. He was once active in the British government, but now works as a CEO of a tech firm. His politics do not fit into any particular American box. He describes himself as a mixture of Bernie Sanders meets John Kasich meets Paul Rand. He also wants a revolution—a revolution to bring in an age that is more human. He believes human beings have lost their sense of humanity. He wants to change hearts—a desire familiar to Christians. Central to his thesis is the idea: Where did basic human decency go? Hilton attacks just about every area of life from government to politics to farming. Like so many of the other books examined, he is big on criticism but comes up short on any sort of solutions. Critique of his book has been particularly strong in the UK, where he is much better known than in the United States. He was once a senior adviser to David Cameron, which seems to be the root of many of the criticisms flung at him.<sup>11</sup> Hilton also tends to be an avid self-promoter. He is happy to write about how his own company, Crowdpack, is helping to improve the world.

In the final analysis, there is some good critique of some failing institutions. He examines areas the other books in this essay don't touch on, such as the inhumane system of factory farming. However, some of his solutions are bizarre and out of touch. At one point, for example, he says we need to discourage donations to local schools (K-12) because it's the government's job to fund them, not the general population's. It does not take much effort to imagine the dire results if everyone actually agreed to do this. The book is brand-new, so information is up-to-date. Hilton is enthusiastic and represents an interesting perspective. Encouraging people to act with more humanity and compassion is certainly an admirable goal. In the final analysis, though, if a reader is looking for a productive book on American culture and community, there are better places to look.

<sup>11</sup>For a particularly scathing article from the British publication the *Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/01/steve-hilton-more-human-review-david-cameron>.

## THE BIG SORT

Chapter one of Bill Bishop's book, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), begins with a quote from playwright Arthur Miller: "How can the polls be neck and neck when I don't know one Bush supporter?"<sup>12</sup> As with America's recent election, many Americans probably feel the exact same way—it seems Clinton and Trump supporters rarely socialize with each other. While most of the other books examined in this article analyze the breakdown of community in America, *The Big Sort* examines how Americans have sorted themselves into like-minded communities over the past forty years. "Freed from want and worry, people were reordering their lives around their values, their tastes, and their beliefs. They were clustering in communities of like-mindedness."<sup>13</sup> He argues that community is alive and well, but it is now a segregated community. What is the problem with this segregation? Isn't this what people are subconsciously wanting? This sorting into like-minded communities has led to the polarization of politics so many other authors have bemoaned. "It doesn't seem to matter if you are a frat boy, a French high school student, a petty criminal, or a federal appeals judge. Mixed company moderates; like-minded company polarizes."<sup>14</sup>

As a result of this segregation and polarization, "political leaders were growing more extreme during this period, as Democrats and Republicans in Congress became more ideological, less moderate, and more partisan."<sup>15</sup> This makes sense. If a politician is representing a homogenous group, he or she is going to be more extreme and less likely to compromise. After all, they are representing their constituents.

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Bishop's chapter on religion is particularly fascinating, if discouraging. Instead of trying to examine why many churches are declining, Bishop looks at why certain churches (primarily conservative megachurches) are indeed growing. Using Rick Warren's Saddleback Church as a case study, and the story of a particularly successful Indian missionary named Ditt, Bishop argues that the churches that are truly growing right now are homogeneous. Americans are even more divided

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<sup>12</sup>Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008) 1 (referring to the 2004 presidential election).

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 13.



on Sunday morning than any other times. Interestingly, Bishop also talks of the new emergent church movement, which, in 2008 when the book was written, was a hot topic—and described as the opposite of the megachurch. That movement has all but disappeared, but his discussion on megachurches has remained relevant.

So what is one supposed to do? It seems doubtful that Americans are going to return to more diverse communities, churches, and clubs. In fact, in the eight years since Bishop wrote the book, his argument that Americans are divided seems stronger than ever.

One of the things all these books have in common is the doom and gloom statistics about American society. However, as Mark Twain once said, “There are three types of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.”<sup>16</sup> It always behooves a reader to keep that quote in mind when reading books with a multitude of statistical facts. After all, a book claiming that the sky is falling will sell more copies than one claiming that things might be different, but we will probably be okay. That being said, American society has changed. People do not join clubs like they used to. There is a polarization of politics that cannot be denied. The younger generations are more diverse and liberal than older generations, and this can lead to conflict, and it will, without doubt, lead to substantial changes, if not now, then in the near future.

The American neighbor is far from dead though. You can glance out the window and see neighbors talking on the sidewalk. Parents still socialize while their children play together at the park. People go to coffee dates and happy hours. Americans have dinner parties, birthday parties, and New Year’s parties. They still go to church, synagogue, and mosque. Perhaps Americans have opted for more informal methods of socialization than before, and perhaps socialization is more segregated. Technology, which many bemoan as the destruction of society, allows someone to commutate with a friend on the other side of the country, or even the world—thus enabling people to maintain relationships that would have surely been lost. Humans are relational beings and that has not changed. American society has changed and the concept of the American neighbor may be different. However, the neighbor has not disappeared altogether. As Americans, it may be time for us all to spend some time trying to reconnect. Remember, Jesus’s definition of neighbor is much larger than just people living within proximity to your own community. Perhaps it’s time to start treating the other as our neighbor and see what happens. ☩

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<sup>16</sup>Twain actually attributed the saying to Benjamin Disraeli.