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A Dream In Crisis

Ben Berger

Swarthmore College, bberger1@swarthmore.edu

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BOOKS

A DREAM IN CRISIS

Nation's growing income gap movingly depicted in political scientist's new work

by Ben Berger

ROBERT PUTNAM '63 KNOWS DEMOCRACY, and contemporary democracy has problems. So do all forms of government, but democracy is a special breed—a political entity so complex that even its problems have problems. Democracy's citizens can easily identify societal troubles, but we struggle to locate all of the relevant causes. Prescribing solutions can be even more difficult. And those challenges seem trifling compared with the most daunting hurdles: persuading the citizenry to agree on solutions—and marshaling the political will and energy to enact them.

Consider economic inequality, one of the hottest topics in contemporary politics and a main subject of *Our Kids*, by Putnam, Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University. For more than a decade, scholars have drawn attention to the United States' growing income gap. Public awareness has grown apace. Yet according to public opinion polls, even though citizens worry about the trends, they show little agreement on causes and treatments. Without a public mandate, political solutions seem unlikely.

Enter Putnam. *Bowling Alone* (2000), probably the best-known work of his storied career, explains the importance of informal social ties and voluntary associations—social capital—for individual and community flourishing and illustrates their long-term decline.

Our Kids pairs beautifully with *Bowling Alone*, connecting the decline of social capital and community institutions with the ominous shrinkage of social and economic mobility. It also is a masterpiece of persuasion, employing all of Aristotle's argumentative modes: appeals to *logos* (logic), *pathos* (emotion), and *ethos* (character).

Our Kids brims with data and graphs that demonstrate the “statistically significant divergence in trends between upper- and lower-class parents and children.” To a much greater extent than was true during Putnam's youth, children's life prospects depend on their starting economic status.

But Putnam goes beyond logic and graphs with a series of moving, individual narratives that start in his hometown of Port Clinton, Ohio, and continue across America. We meet people who personalize the data: baby boomers who enjoyed socioeconomic mobility regardless of their origins as well as younger people, whose fortunes seem dependent on accidents of birth. *Our Kids* packs a punch of pathos seldom found in academic analyses.

For a more complete picture of American inequality, one should read *Our Kids* alongside works by scholars such as Schlozman, Verba, and Brady; Hacker and Pierson; and Gilens and Page. But Putnam might reach and persuade the broadest



OUR KIDS

The American Dream
in Crisis

ROBERT D. PUTNAM

author of *Bowling Alone*

► **ROBERT PUTNAM '63**, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, Simon & Schuster, 2015, 400 PP.

audience. In addition to his *pathos* and *logos* appeals, Putnam strengthens his credibility among more conservative readers—an appeal to *ethos*—by declining to blame “upper-class villains,” as many other scholars do. When my honors seminar read *Our Kids*, two extremely bright students who disagreed about politics throughout the semester emerged hopeful and energized. Expect more of that.

Putnam closes with a host of practical proposals to reverse the troubling trends. But proposals require motivation for enactment. Why should readers care enough to act? Good rhetoricians know that a single argument won't persuade all audiences. Throughout *Our Kids*, Putnam provides several.

Entrenched inequality violates democracy's core tenets, so morally we should regard all children as “our kids.” For those who regard the underprivileged as morally undeserving—hopefully a minority of readers—Putnam's individual narratives demonstrate that many in that category are essentially like the “lucky” few, but the victims of bad circumstances. Social immobility could happen to any of us. For those less motivated by moral suasion than self-interest, Putnam cites economic arguments that Alexis de Tocqueville would call “self-interest rightly understood”: Everyone will lose if future citizens cannot keep the economy afloat.

Get and read *Our Kids*, and be proud that Swarthmoreans can call its author “ours.” ⑤

—BEN BERGER is an associate professor of political science and interim director of the Lang Center for Social Change.