

## **ROBERT D. PUTNAM: OUR KIDS. THE AMERICAN DREAM IN CRISIS** (SIMON & SCHUSTER, NEW YORK, 2015)

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During the Gilded Ages of the United States from the 1950s-1970s, economic and educational expansion, income equality, civic engagement and social solidarity were high, whereas class segregation in neighborhoods and schools, class barriers to intermarriage and social intercourse were low, and opportunities for kids born in the lower echelons to scale the socioeconomic ladder were profuse. From the early 1970s onwards, however, this equalizing trend began to reverse, at first slowly, but then with accelerating harshness. Behind this ever-growing social distance between the upper and lower classes and shrinking upward mobility were complex and hidden social and economic phenomena, such as globalization, technological change and a consequent increase in “returns to education”, de-unionization, superstar compensation, changing social norms, and post-Reagan public policy – the author of this book argues.

In *Our Kids*, Robert D. Putnam, a Harvard political scientist, presents a series of portraits of the contrasting lives of young Americans from more and less privileged backgrounds, putting considerable emphasis on the issues of marriage, families and parenting, the school system and educational segregation, neighborhood separation and delinquency. Through doing this, he illustrates the constantly growing social inequality between rich and poor kids. By recalling his own adolescence, exploring and interviewing his high school classmates, and considering the opportunity for their and other’s social advancement, Putnam and his colleagues compare the social and economic conditions and the potential for upward mobility of poor kids in the Gilded Ages of the United States along with the contemporary socioeconomic circumstances and future prospects.

Following Douglas Massey, Putnam operationalizes social classes using education, stemming from the positive correlation between good jobs and higher

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incomes. He reports on class breakdown either by using education alone – the proportion of those who possess a college degree or higher qualification, versus those who complete high school, or less – or by using a composite measure of socioeconomic status that includes income, education, and occupational status.

*Our Kids* is based on a mixed research design, complemented with extensive quantitative and qualitative data. As the author declares, the investigation includes an examination of concentric circles of influence; namely the families, schools, and communities in which today's kids are growing up. The book consists of rigorous and robust aggregated data – national surveys, censuses, and other surveys, for instance, about the increasing opportunity gap among American young adults – and is comprised of narratives and stories that clearly illustrate the living conditions, opportunities, and problems that rich and poor kids face on a daily basis.

At the beginning of each chapter, the reader can get a glimpse into the everyday life and problems of needy and affluent kids and their family members throughout the narratives of families. According to the researchers, quantitative data can tell us what is happening with the children of America, and why people should be concerned with such data. Nonetheless, they cannot demonstrate the 'hows' of everyday life; in other words, quantitative data cannot tell us much about the experience of growing up in a world where improving the opportunities that children have is increasingly a private responsibility.

Jen Silva, Putnam's co-researcher, spent two years traveling across the country and conducted interviews in ten cities in the United States. Silva visited prosperous and underprivileged states and interviewed 107 people, including young adults aged 18-22 and their parents, about what it was like to be growing up during that time. The co-researcher's first stop was Port Clinton, the birthplace of Putnam, who thought of his hometown as a place where people independent of their position in the hierarchy of society had the same opportunities in life. Upon Silva's return to Port Clinton, however, Putnam was disappointed to see that his hometown had gone through a dramatic transformation. Approximately one half century later, Silva found a bipolar social structure in Port Clinton and sent back a tale of two Port Clintons that represents two different Americas. The first is the tale of an upper middle class whose children grow up in harmonious, well-balanced families, surrounded with provider family members, relatives, and contacts who guarantee their admission to colleges and universities. The second is the tale of their lower class counterparts who are confronted by abusive parents, unplanned pregnancies, and the risk of dropping out of high school.

The central thesis of the book, as the above-illustrated example of Port Clinton demonstrates, is the ever-growing opportunity gap for children in the United States. For Putnam, the widening gap between the resources and challenges that

that the well-to-do and needy kids have access to is the issue; Putnam seeks to investigate how things are getting better for kids who come from the households of college-educated parents, as opposed to children from households of parents with only high school degrees.

The book contains six chapters, during which Putnam examines the role of the family (Chapter 2), parenting (Chapter 3), schooling (Chapter 4), and community (Chapter 5) in relation to the decreasing opportunities of underprivileged kids, and an epilogue in which the author describes the methodological framework of the book. By investigating the concentric circles of influence, Putnam and his colleagues highlight the fact that, in all four domains of everyday life (i.e. family, parenting, schooling, and community), the gap between wealthy and impoverished young adults is opening dramatically.

In the prelude to the book (Chapter 1), the reader gets to know the stories of Putnam's contemporaries and the social background that characterized Port Clinton in the 1950s by becoming familiar with the idea that affluent and needy kids lived alongside one another, went to school together, played together, and even dated one another. Nowadays, however, more and more kids in the author's hometown – and elsewhere in the country – are surrounded by people almost entirely of the same social class. Through these dimensions of neighborhood separation, educational segregation and marriage, Putnam illustrates that during the past half century American society has become divided along class lines.

Here, however, the awareness of the reader should be drawn to the fact that – as Nicholas Lemann remarks in his review of this book, released in the *New York Review of Books* – Putnam says almost nothing about the effects of absolute mobility, thereby disregarding the fact that the upward mobility of American society in the 1950s was the result of social re-stratification; that is to say, a result of economic growth which triggered the rise of social classes, rather than the outcome of the expansion of equal opportunities.

Through the example of a small town in California, Putnam discusses the disparities that exist in reference to the primary scene of socialization: *the family*. Using data about the birth age of mothers, unintended births, non-marital births, divorce and cohabitation, the author points out that the negative trends among working-class people and those two-tier family patterns which characterize the United States have had an unmistakable influence on the life of impoverished kids.

Related to *parenting*, the reader is lead to understand that childcare and child rearing, particularly in the early years of childhood, are essential for decreasing the opportunity gap. These days in America, parents are seeking to stimulate the cognitive and social skills of their children from an early age, thus “good parenting” has become time-consuming and expensive: “good mothers” are now

expected to make immense investments in their children and “good fathers” face greater expectations about their involvement in family life and day-to-day childcare. College-educated families can provide their kids with the sort of support that is critical for the early development of their children, while the same may not be true of less well-educated parents. Consequently, American society is also characterized by class-based differences in terms of family and parenting. Class-based disparities in cognitive, emotional, and social capabilities emerge at very early ages and remain stable over an individual’s life course, which may imply that whatever the causal factors are, they operate most strongly during preschool years.

Going beyond the family and parenting, and putting the emphasis on the education system, Putnam investigates the role of *schooling* in connection with the ever-growing opportunity gap. By citing numerous studies, the author underlines the fact that schools themselves are not creating the opportunity gap, as this is already large by the time children enter kindergarten, and does not rise appreciably as children progress through school. There can be no denial, however, of the fact that affluent and needy kids attend vastly different schools – as shown by an example of two high schools –, and that the daughters and sons of highly educated parents receive a higher standard of education, thereby maintaining and reproducing prevailing social inequality. This gap, nonetheless, is created by what happens to kids before going to school. These days the American public school system is similar to an “echo chamber” in which the advantages or disadvantages that kids bring with them to school affect other students, Putnam argues. The increasing class segregation of neighborhoods, and thereby of schools – viz. highly educated parents of all ethnic backgrounds go to extraordinary efforts to find the best schools for their kids and move into the relevant districts – means that middle-class kids hear mostly encouraging and beneficial echoes at school, whereas their lower-class counterparts receive mostly discouraging and harmful ones. Further, the author also emphasizes that school-related extracurricular activity, which has decreased in recent decades, could have narrowed the opportunity gap by providing important opportunities for kids from low-income backgrounds to build the soft skills that are increasingly important for economic and professional success.

Throughout the investigation of *community* settings Putnam reveals that social capital is distributed unequally between wealthy and poor kids, contributing to the widening opportunity gap. Putnam has been involved in the examination of social capital from the mid-1990s. In his first bestseller, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) – which is the book-length version of his former essay, *Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital* (1995) – he highlighted the erosion of social capital through the example

of bowling. Though the proportion of people who bowl increased between 1983 and 1990, the fraction of people who bowl in leagues decreased. However, people who bowl alone do not participate in the civic discussion that occurs in a league environment. This decreases social interaction.

The same issue comes up in *Our Kids* as well, completed with the recognition that affluent kids have greater opportunities to increase their social capital than their needy counterparts do. Better-educated Americans have wider and deeper social networks (both weak and strong ties), whereas less well educated Americans have sparser, more redundant social networks, concentrated on their own families. From the book, the reader is led to understand that a richness and diversity of social ties is essential for social mobility and educational and economic advancement. Connections are crucial for getting into top schools and top jobs, but can also protect kids from the ordinary risks of adolescence. Studies from recent decades have shown that drug use and alcohol consumption are higher among privileged teenagers than among their less affluent peers, but in the former case, family and community can minimize the negative consequences of such bad habits.

Going beyond “the concentric circles of influence,” Chapter 6 discusses the issues of unequal opportunities and economic growth, unequal opportunity and democracy, as well as unequal opportunity and moral obligation. Besides describing these aforementioned subjects, Putnam provides social policy solutions to the ever-growing opportunity gap. The purpose of *Our Kids*, therefore, is twofold: to give the reader a clear picture and a profound description of the causes of growing social inequality, on the one hand, and to present potential solutions on the other.

Nonetheless, Putnam is much less assured when it comes to social policy solutions. Although he draws a very dramatic picture of American society and talks about the structural change that is creating a class-based society, he nonetheless only focuses on the processes which potentially could increase the social capital of individuals, disregarding the fact that social inequalities are not remediable without macro-structural reforms, such as making taxes more progressive and raising the minimum wage, as Stiglitz (2012) and Piketty (2014) recommend.

To sum up, in this book Robert Putnam highlights the underlying causes of the social inequality between affluent and impoverished kids by drawing the reader’s attention to the increasingly growing opportunity gap. Children from working-class families – who live in poorer neighborhoods, receive a poorer quality education, and affiliate with kids from disadvantaged family backgrounds – have no chance of social advancement. As income inequality increases, kids from privileged backgrounds both start and finish further and further ahead of their less

privileged peers, even if the rate of socioeconomic mobility remains unchanged. Despite the above-described controversies, however, Putnam is quite optimistic, since throughout the history of the United States widening socioeconomic gaps have threatened the fundamental values of the United States many times, but American society has always mastered these social issues. However, underlying these successes has been a commitment to investing in other people's children, and underlying this commitment was a deeper sense that 'those kids' were, in fact, "*our kids*".

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