

pend on government and that does not lend itself easily to government tracking and supervision? (The novel's short answer is large-scale money laundering, among other things—no wonder the international criminal underworld evinces a deep interest in Randy Waterhouse's "data haven" project.)

For these reasons, our real-world government has been fighting a war against the spread of cryptographic tools. That war has been largely unpublicized, in part because the general public has yet to deem cryptography policy a matter of central concern. There is no groundswell of public support for keeping encryption technologies available to everybody, nor any anti-encryption-control group the equivalent of the National Rifle Association. Civil-liberties groups like the Electronic Privacy Information Center and the ACLU are fighting the Department of Justice and the National Security Agency over this issue, but it's a pretty lonely fight. The U.S. government has been sufficiently successful in suppressing the spread of encryption technologies both at home and abroad that the kinds of protections we should have—such as transparent encoding and decoding of e-mail in transmission or truly secure cell phones—are still in the future for most of us.

Why have civil libertarians so often found cryptography issues a tough sell? The problem is that for most people the subject seems awfully esoteric—codes and ciphers are what spies do, and are out of the range of concerns for ordinary people. *Cryptonomicon* challenges that notion by demonstrating in countless contexts not only how good human beings are at decoding and encoding their environments but also how *instinctive* that process is. We can't help functioning as cryptographers and cryptoanalysts because, at bottom, that is what we as human beings *do*. Which means that our government's current obsession with suppressing the spread of cryptographic information and tools is really a kind of suppression of human nature—and history tells us that any such effort at suppressing something that *everybody* does is invariably futile over the long run.

Will *Cryptonomicon* turn the tide of public opinion about cryptography or

inform the political will to challenge the government's anti-cryptography policies? On the one hand, it's hard to believe that a 900-page novel of any sort could change the political landscape in an era in which the novel is an increasingly marginal mass-media form. Still, this book is compulsively readable, and word of how good it is has flooded throughout the Internet and into our literary culture. *Cryptonomicon* has already found its way onto *The New York*

Times bestseller list (it made it to Amazon's top 100 even before publication). Whether the book will help trigger a sea change in the cultural dialogue about cryptological issues remains to be seen, but I for one am pretty hopeful about the prospect. ♦

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Polling Alone

By Jesse Walker

The Ladd Report, by Everett Carll Ladd, New York: The Free Press, 210 pages, \$25.00

In 1995, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam unleashed an unfortunate phrase on the country: "bowling alone." Writing in the *Journal of Democracy*, Putnam noted the thinning ranks of the Elks, the PTA, the League of Women Voters, and the like; from that evidence he concluded that America's civic sector had started to atrophy. Among the groups withering were the nation's bowling leagues, even as the total number of bowlers was going up. From this he conjured his famous phrase, with its faint connotations of onanism and Oswald.

Thus began the civil society mania of the mid-'90s, led by pundits and politicians apparently convinced that because they didn't know their neighbors' names, the unwashed masses must be in even worse shape. In a follow-up article, published in the Winter 1996 *American Prospect*, Putnam declared that the "strange disappearance of social capital and civic engagement in America" was a "difficult mystery." Social capital, he explained, was those "features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue



Better Than Bowling?: U.S. Youth Soccer engages more than 2 million boys and girls, plus an army of adult volunteers.

shared objectives." Civic engagement meant "people's connections with the life of their communities, not only with politics."

Not one to shy from a mystery, Putnam gathered the suspects together, Poirot-style, and considered each potential culprit in turn. Was the welfare state to blame? Rootlessness? Work? Putnam's essay had no Agatha Christie climax; he could not with certainty lay all the guilt at one evildoer's shoes. But he had a theory. Americans were less engaged with their communities, he suggested, because they were befogged by TV.

Now Everett Carll Ladd, the executive director of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, has offered a different answer. In *The Ladd Report*, a thoroughgoing collection of data on American life, he argues that social capital and civic engagement never really withered at all. They may have disappeared from the clumsy maps with which Putnam and the punditry examine the country, but they never disappeared from the country itself.

Ladd stresses that his book is not a direct response to Putnam's essays, that Putnam is simply "one among many voices making similar claims." But all those voices make the same mistake: They all assume that, because one set of institutions is declining, no other groups are picking up the slack. Bad assumption. "In case after case where a group that's been important in the past now finds itself losing ground, or at least struggling to maintain its place, investigation shows that the main cause is simply strong competition," writes Ladd. For example: "The Elks and the Boy Scouts are less prominent and active now than they were half a century ago, but the Sierra Club is much more so. Bowling leagues are down, but U.S. Youth Soccer has emerged *de novo* and engages more than two million boys and girls, together with an army of adult volunteers."

Those might not be the best examples in the world, at least for those of us who often differ with the Sierra Club and prefer bowling to soccer. But then, property-rights groups are also growing (a trend Ladd ignores), and it's not as though soccer has supplanted bowling. More people are bowling than ever before, and if they aren't doing it in leagues, that

hardly means, contra Putnam, that they're "alone." They bowl in informal groups, with family and friends, and there's no reason to assume they're any less engaged for it.

Nor are we exchanging our concrete attachments for membership in "paper" organizations. Here too, Ladd breaks with Putnam, who claimed that groups like the Sierra Club may have long membership rolls but offer few opportunities for face-to-face contact. "For the vast majority of their members," Putnam wrote, "the only act of membership consists in writing checks for dues or perhaps occasionally reading a newsletter.... The bond between any two members of the Sierra Club is less like the bond between two members of a

"In case after case where a group that's been important in the past now finds itself losing ground, or at least struggling to maintain its place, investigation shows that the main cause is simply strong competition," writes pollster Everett Carll Ladd.

gardening club and more like the bond between any two Red Sox fans (or perhaps any two devoted Honda owners)."

Against this, Ladd offers the words of survey analyst George Pettinico: "In fact, a closer examination of the green movement in the United States reveals a vibrant, grassroots culture involving countless individuals who are actively engaged in their communities. On almost a daily basis, a plethora of meetings, social gatherings, hikes, bike trips, clean-up projects, rallies, nature workshops and the like are held in communities across the nation by local chapters of national environmental organizations, as well as ad hoc community groups." That's more than can be said for most American labor unions, yet the decline in union membership is, for Putnam, evidence of social disengagement.

Often, the new groups are more tightly rooted in their communities. The PTA's membership has indeed fallen since its

early-'60s high (though it has actually been increasing, albeit slowly, since 1982). But membership in *local* parent-teacher groups has sharply increased. Some of the new groups were once chapters of the national PTA but seceded, usually so they might keep a greater portion of their dues for local use.

Not only are more people joining groups, but they're joining more groups per person: The "density" of association is increasing. Face-to-face interaction is still strong, with a record proportion of the country volunteering. But people are opening their wallets and signing their names as well: Even adjusted for inflation, charitable giving nearly tripled from 1960 to 1995.

The churches, too, are thriving. The mainline faiths are losing members—a result, one suspects, of excessive bureaucracy and changing times. But new institutions, from tiny worship centers to "megachurches," have more than filled the gaps. Not everyone is enamored with the superchurches' shopping-mall/rock-show ethos; as Ladd admits, "some of it is undoubtedly both crass and superficial." But even if you hate everything about the new temples, or the old ones for that matter, you must admit that they're a telling argument against Putnamism: "little of it fits a picture of Americans retreating into more solitary pursuits, finding their cultural substance primarily through the tube."

On one level, the very idea of measuring civic engagement is ridiculous. There is no simple index of sociability. There isn't even a complex one. Community spirit is intangible, and therefore unmeasurable in any but the most indirect, unsatisfying ways. Metrics can be misleading: Some numbers obscure more than they illuminate.

In Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I went to college, it was a cliché to complain that campus life was more active and interesting at some point in the past, usually whichever year the complainer was 20. I was often told that in the good old 1970s, there were eight local film co-ops to choose from, each showing its own series of old or obscure movies. In the late '80s, by contrast, there were only two.

It never occurred to those nostalgic

cinephiles that the diversity of movies available had actually increased, thanks to home video. Putnam might object that the video generation is *watching alone*, but that's not necessarily true: My housemates and I held a public movie night every week, in which our friends (and their friends, and a few folks no one recognized) could enjoy our weird film tastes in an environment far more sociable and interactive than that offered by the co-ops. Many other households did the same thing. And when we preferred to see a picture on a big screen—well, there were always those two remaining film societies.

On a national scale, the measurement problem gets worse: Neither anecdotal nor statistical evidence seems capable of creating a complete map of community life, especially since the civil society that really counts takes place on a level so local as to be almost invisible to outsiders. Changes, too, can be hard to observe; when an institution fades, it's not always obvious where to look for its successors. The best Ladd can do is gather all the relevant evidence he can: telephone surveys, membership rolls, census reports, government files. The result is a wall of data, and if it's patchier than one might prefer, it's still pretty overwhelming—not a knock-down argument, but an impressive stack of counterevidence nonetheless.

There are, however, a few holes in Ladd's analysis—places where, unmoored from the data, he starts to get a little too speculative for his own good. I'm not nearly as sure as he is that it's "easier to be an engaged citizen in the Information Economy than in an Industrial Economy," partly because I'm suspicious of such sweeping categories and partly because his basic argument—that industrial jobs leave less time for civic life—forgets that routine, labor-intensive work is hardly limited to rust-belt factories. Nor is his defense of American exceptionalism very convincing, mostly because he essentially redefines it as the belief that there is anything at all distinctive about American history and culture.

Ladd's section on "social trust" is especially disappointing. Against Putnam's citation of a survey showing that Americans have less faith in each other, Ladd simply posits a poll that came to different conclusions. And he buries that datum in

a chapter on Americans' trust in social institutions, swamping us with information that may be interesting but doesn't really address the issue.

Despite all that, *The Ladd Report* is enough to change the terms of the debate, to force the civil socialites to consider more than the declining fortunes of a few fetishized institutions. The issue now is not why civil society is dissolving, but why it's changing—and why so many people have been so quick to assume it's simply fading away.

In some libertarian quarters, the alleged decline of community was read as a sign that the state was crowding out voluntary associations. Why, the argument went, would people affiliate for mutual gain if the same advantages could be had through the state? Ladd's reply is that democratic governments are different from totalitarian states. The latter have to make war on independent institutions. The former, he claims, do not.

This isn't much of a reply, if only because so many democratic governments *have* made war on any association that stands in the way of public policy. "Urban renewal" and "redevelopment" schemes, for instance, have wiped out entire neighborhoods, and with them the little civic ties that kept those places alive. Cops and principals across America have targeted teenage subcultures, harassing kids in goth makeup or trench coats out of misplaced fear that their chosen means of mutual engagement will lead them to mass murder.

Hear Her Roar

by Cathy Young

Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand, edited by Mimi Reisel Gladstein and Chris Matthew Sciabarra, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 413 pages, \$60.00, \$19.95 (paper)

In Ayn Rand's lifetime, university professors regarded their students' interest in her writings with a mixture of scorn and dismay. Seventeen years after her death, the iconoclastic novelist-philosopher is becoming a respectable subject of scholarship. Most recently, a collection of essays on Rand has appeared in the "Re-

And anyone who thinks it takes a totalitarian to crush a community group hasn't paid much attention to the nation's zoning boards, whose inflexible rules have often made it impossible for neighborhood churches, among other groups, to set down roots.

The mechanistic argument against the welfare state—the idea that every dollar the government spends reduces Americans' ability to cooperate on their own—is insulting and wrong. But it's also true, as Ladd admits, that when nonprofit groups get hooked on government grants, they tend to lose both their independence and their roots in the communities they're supposed to serve, adopting a more centralized and "professional" style. This has happened to charities, to art centers, to community radio stations; it may be a reason why several of the groups Putnam tracks are in decline. (The same fate, of course, can befall groups that depend on private foundations. Conversely, many civic groups have enjoyed close relations with ultra-local levels of government without losing their civic base.)

A better answer is simply that people are creative and sociable, that affiliation is in our nature, and—thank goodness—that we don't take our cues from Washington. Who'd have guessed it? It turns out that we don't need any brow-furling pundit-talk about "civil society" to keep civil society alive. ♦

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Reading the Canon" series featuring feminist analyses of philosophers from Aristotle to Foucault.

That work, *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand*, edited by Mimi Reisel Gladstein and Chris Matthew Sciabarra (the authors, respectively, of *The Ayn Rand Companion* and *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*), could