CHAPTER 13

Making Social Science Work Across Space and Time: A Critical Reflection on Robert Putnam’s Making Democracy Work*

Sidney Tarrow

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READING INTRODUCTION

Tarrow initially provides a synopsis of Putnam’s widely heralded Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy (1993 and with Leonardi and Nanetti). He is encouraging about Putnam’s early narrower project (see Putnam with Leonardi and Nanetti 1988), which shows how a 1970s central political reform was realized quite differently in the distinctive political cultures of northern and southern Italy. Tarrow agrees that this part of Putnam’s study demonstrates that distinctive political cultures are apt to shape initially similar institutions quite differently over time. So in this regard culture shapes political institutions. However, Putnam extended the initial scope of his analysis to inquire into the origins of these distinctive regional cultures, concluding that these regional peculiarities are long-standing, stemming from differences in civic republicanism (social capital or civil society) in the late medieval period that persist into the present. Thus, once again, Putnam portrays culture as shaping political institutions: Civic republicanism produces more thorough democracy. Tarrow disagrees with the causal flow Putnam suggests in his expanded project. Tarrow argues instead that, across this lengthy period, institutional differences shaped distinctive political cultures. Tarrow also thinks that Putnam’s operationalization of democracy has limitations, and we might add that Putnam’s indices of culture lack a theoretical superstructure.

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Political scientists are becoming more self-conscious about how they connect quantitative and qualitative data in social science and about the role of systematic country studies in comparative research. As the most striking examples of both practices in recent years, Robert Putnam and collaborators’ *Making Democracy Work* deserves more serious criticism than it has received. While Putnam’s original project aimed at a precise goal—studying how a new administrative reform is institutionalized—his ultimate project aimed at nothing less than examining how differently democracy works in different sociopolitical contexts, operationalized cross-sectionally in southern and northern Italy. The sources for these differences he found in the two regions’ histories, which led him to employ the quantitative interregional data he had collected for one purpose to support a model of historical development North and South. This historical reconstruction rests largely on qualitative data; but it also rests on a set of comparative inferences about individual values and community cohesiveness in the two regions that is of questionable historical validity and innocent of structural grounding. This article applauds Putnam’s joining qualitative and quantitative data but attacks his reconstruction of Italian history to fit his model of social capital.

All self-respecting political scientists like to think of themselves as intrigued with what makes democracy work. But what brings a reviewer to risk a critical reflection on one of the most acclaimed recent works in the field? That author and reviewer learned their trade in the same school and have both carried out research in Italy is part of the explanation, but only a small part. A second reason is that we are becoming more self-conscious about the use of quantitative and qualitative data in social science and about the role of systematic country studies in comparative research. And the third is the fact that the study on which Robert Putnam’s book was based, which has caused a sensation outside academic circles, was first reported in this *Review* (Putnam and others 1983), a rare linkage between scientific effort and popular success. Moreover, while Putnam’s *American Political Science Review* article made modest claims, defining the problem as “institutional success,” *Making Democracy Work* aims at a broader target—nothing less than the correlates of democracy.

In his book, Putnam (1993a) attacks two enduring problems in social science: how to marry directly collected quantitative data with historical information from external sources, and how to connect political culture to democracy. The first problem is particularly thorny when the logic of inference from primary data is cross-sectional while the external data are historical; the second is even tougher when political culture is specified and operationalized through past political traditions, while the indicators of democracy are lodged in the present. Since Putnam attempts both of these things, examining *Making Democracy Work* will help understand the problems we face both in joining history to systematic empirical data and in linking political culture to democracy.