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"Putting Together Is America Breaking Apart?"

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On the face of it, writing a book about the United States seems an unlikely task for me, since I have spent most of my career as an anthropologist studying the Pukhtun, a tribal people who live in the Northwest Frontier of Pakistan, a region very remote from the United States. However, like Americans, the Pukhtun are egalitarian individualists who struggle to reconcile their beliefs about human equality with the actualities of hierarchy and distinction that exist in their society. In the last decade, I had written some articles outlining the quandaries, contradictions and implications of egalitarian individualism among the Pukhtun; I then used the theme to tie together my book entitled The Islamic Middle East: An Historical Anthropology. Pursuing the topic further, I had then written a long piece specifically comparing and contrasting the egalitarian individualism of the Pukhtun with the egalitarian individualism of Americans; unfortunately, anthropological journals were singularly unimpressed by my efforts, and for some time this paper languished in my computer, waiting for a sympathetic publisher.

Meanwhile, my friend John Hall, who is a professor of Sociology at McGill University in Montreal, had been asked to contribute an article about America to a special issue of
prestigious journal *Daedalus.* John knows a lot about nationalism and civil society, but felt he needed some help on the cultural material, and asked me if I wanted to collaborate with him. Of course, I immediately agreed, extremely pleased that my recent ideas about America might at last find a home, albeit divorced from the unwieldy comparison with the Pukhtun.

The specific impetus of our *Daedalus* article was the work of the well-known Harvard political theorist, Robert Putnam, who in 1995 had published a much-discussed paper entitled "Bowling Alone" in which he argued that Americans no longer co-operate in voluntary associations - they don't even join bowling leagues. This, Putnam said, did not bode well for the United States, which he pictured as seriously under threat from a lack of civic trust. The economy and even political stability of America were, Putnam implied, in imminent danger of collapse.

Both John and I have actually lived in societies that were on the verge of breakdown; the United States was patently not such a society, and we thought Putnam's argument was alarmist and inaccurate. Our *Daedalus* article would show instead that, despite deep internal tensions, America actually had a remarkably coherent and stable social system based on shared values of egalitarian individualism and a solid institutional structure built up over the generations. Our claim would be that pervasive anxiety about decline and disintegration was a consequence of a characteristic American belief that community does not exist in itself, but is only built up by the actions of autonomous equals, who might at any time withdraw their
cooperation, leading to social disintegration. But this fear is misplaced. In reality, Americans' individualistic values do not prevent them from participating widely in voluntary associations and from having a high degree of trust and faith in one another and in their society.

We got together over the phone to discuss the outline of the project, and then wrote a number of drafts, passing the material back and forth and editing each other freely. It was a pleasure to collaborate with John, who has intellectual interests that dovetail with mine, and whose strong sense of structure and framework helped to rein in my own tendency toward improvisation. The article came out in the Spring 1997 issue of Daedalus. I added it to my resume and forgot about it, engrossed in my plans to spend my sabbatical fall semester in the sunny French West Indies.

At this point another player entered into the game. Peter Dougherty, whom I had met many years ago when we were both in New York, read our article. Pete was now a senior editor at Princeton University Press, and he asked John and me if we would consider expanding the article into a book. The topic, he thought, was extremely "hot", since Putnam had just gotten an enormous advance to write up "Bowling Alone", and Pete thought our book could ride Putnam's publicity coattails. John and I signed a contract to deliver a manuscript by April 1, 1998. In October of 1997, I left for the Caribbean carrying some recent articles and books about America to read, while John began improving the historical section and organizing an outline.
When I got back in January, we started working together, using the e-mail to send sections back and forth. Despite our shared computer illiteracy, that went fairly well, though John occasionally had serious difficulties translating the attachments I had forwarded to him. We also met a few times in person, brainstorming about the direction the book ought to take. Our idea was to write a jargon-free synthetic essay that could be read in one sitting and that would appeal to a wide audience; the book also would unite sociological, historical and anthropological perspectives too often kept separate in other accounts of American culture.

In our first drafts, we spent a lot of time responding specifically to Putnam, and to other recent nervous accounts of American cultural wars, alienation, atomism, and conformity. But we soon realized that focusing on these debates obscured our own more positive argument, and we concentrated instead on outlining the formative crises in American history, and on describing the fundamental values that undergird the culture. Although we were showing that America is in truth far more united and secure than it often imagines itself to be, we also did not want to ignore the truly fundamental problems of America such as racial injustice and gross inequities of class; problems that may not lead to social disintegration, but that are an ugly stain on the national conscience.

By working hard, we finished the manuscript on schedule, and turned it in to Princeton for review. Unlike commercial presses, academic publishers must solicit the opinions of areal
experts before printing a text, and they also have to convince a University committee of academics that the book is a worthwhile contribution to knowledge. This can sometimes be a lengthy process, with many revisions demanded. But Pete found readers who liked the book as it stood, and the manuscript was approved by the Princeton syndics quickly. It was now en route to publication. We decided to call it *Is America Breaking Apart?* - following advice that a book with a positive title would never sell to Americans who enjoy brooding about themselves.

A final worry occurred as the book was in press. The Lewinsky scandal moved the House of Representatives to undertake impeachment proceedings against President Clinton. We were particularly anxious about this because we had predicted that a generally tolerant American public would probably perceive Clinton's misconduct not as a threat to core values, but as mere human weakness, potentially shared by everyone. If Clinton were to be thrown out of office, the rest of our work would be very much undermined. Happily for us, our prediction was accurate, and we felt more confident that perhaps our analysis of American culture was accurate as well.

In conclusion, I anticipate that many of the readers of this article in *Bostonia* may assume that, in stressing shared cultural values and institutions, our book probably does not give enough credit to the actual distinctions that divide Americans; distinctions that have long been very evident in the heterogeneous population of Boston University. As one of my BU students once told me with great pride, "We Americans don't have
a culture. We are all different." In response to this attitude, our argument is that nothing could be more quintessentially American than the creed of the sacredness of individual difference. Paradoxically, the common faith in personal uniqueness is a major part of what ties Americans together.

By the way, Putnam's book - which was the impetus for ours - is as yet nowhere to be seen.

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