

Measuring the Impact of Brotherhood: Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work* and Confraternal Studies¹

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Since the founding of the Society for Confraternity Studies over a decade ago, confraternity studies has become well-established as an academic sub-discipline in European history. Despite their significance in medieval and early modern European society, however, confraternities have not yet been accorded a central role in the historical narrative. As Konrad Eisenbichler points out in his study *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael*, confraternities “are ... invisible history to us today. ... Although they gathered or touched a large segment of the population, they have not yet found a place in the standard histories of the period.”² While confraternities are sometimes seen as useful indicators of underlying historical processes, outside the field of confraternity studies itself they are not often portrayed as shaping these processes. In other words, confraternities are seen as the effects or symptoms of more fundamental developments, rather than one of their causes. Despite many years of excellent scholarship, scholars of confraternities are still working on convincing the broader historical community that confraternities were, in fact, an important causal factor in European history.

Part of the challenge in pursuing this goal is that confraternities were a diverse and diffuse community movement. Yet there was a specific, identifiable goal that was consistent across the wide range of forms in which this movement was embodied, a goal described in the very name of the phenomenon: brotherhood. Difficult to define exactly, this concept included elements of cooperation, trust, mutual aid, the ability to resolve disputes and work together, and shared religious values, beliefs and devotions.

Measuring the impact of the confraternal movement on its society starts with the question of the degree to which it succeeded in implementing its goal: creating a sense of brotherhood between Christians. Confraternal brothers in the past certainly believed that it did. Numerous scholars in the present have also analyzed

1 This review article takes its cue from Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993). I would like to thank Nicholas Terpstra, Konrad Eisenbichler and Sheila Das, as well as the audience members at presentations of these ideas at the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies at the University of Toronto and at the Renaissance Society of America conference, Toronto 2003, for their valuable insights into this material.

2 Konrad Eisenbichler, *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael : A Youth Confraternity in Florence, 1411–1785* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 6.

the way that confraternities developed the sense of brotherhood within their society and by doing so played a fundamental role in their society's development. Because such a diffuse notion is difficult to quantify, however, it has been a challenge to convince scholars who do not deal with confraternities that this development of a sense of brotherhood among fellow-citizens had a significant causal impact on historical societies, and needs to be considered at the heart of general discussions of the economic, social, political, cultural or religious developments of European history.

It is at this point that confraternal scholars can find support in the work on modern civic society – the connections between people through formal associations and informal gatherings – by political scientists, sociologists and other scholars. These scholars have coined the term “social capital” to describe the benefits of the phenomenon they are studying. This term uses the modern conceptual framework of economics as a metaphor to describe what is, in its essence, the same phenomenon that medieval and early modern Europeans, using their own metaphors of kinship and Christianity, described as brotherhood.³ These contemporary scholars are discovering that the values embodied by the historical concept of brotherhood, and the forms of social organization enacted by Europeans to develop these values, are fundamental in the social, economic and political success of modern societies. In some ways, appropriately enough, this movement is a revival of the belief in “civic virtue” propounded by Renaissance civic humanists but eclipsed by later, more individualistic thinkers.⁴

One of the touchstone texts for this modern study of civic society is Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. A relatively slim volume (less than 200 pages of text, not including appendices and notes) written for a broad informed audience, it has had a significant impact not only on scholars, but also on those who work and practice in contemporary civic society in areas such as charities or development work. Putnam, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard and former Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government, later took the ideas developed in this study of Italy and applied them to the current state of American society in his longer and more populist book *Bowling Alone*.⁵

3 The first use of the phrase “social capital”, in 1916, described it as “goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit” (L. Judson Hanifan, quoted in Robert D. Putnam and Kristin A. Goss, introduction, in Robert D. Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.) The term has been re-invented several times, usually with a similar general meaning, and is now in common use in the modern social sciences.

4 Suggested by Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, 87.

5 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

In 1970 Putnam, then a young American political scientist studying Italian politics, spotted a unique opportunity. The Italian government had just instituted a whole new layer of regional governments, roughly based on the traditional regions of Italy (Tuscany, Lombardy, Calabria, etc.). These governments, all founded at the same time, had exactly the same institutional framework and funding arrangements. The situation was as close as one can get in the social sciences to a controlled scientific experiment in the success and evolution of governments. It was an ideal test case to find out if there are any underlying factors which affect a government's relative success or failure.

With American and Italian colleagues, Putnam embarked on a longitudinal study of these regional governments from their foundation in 1970 to 1989. The study included not only statistical information about the performance of these governments, but also regular surveys of impressions and attitudes towards these governments and towards their society on the part of elected representatives in these regional assemblies, bureaucrats who worked for these governments, and especially citizens of these regions.

Putnam and his colleagues then evaluated the success of these governments. This evaluation was based on a range of factors. The first set of factors were twelve politically neutral indicators of government effectiveness, such as the speed with which regional legislatures passed legislation once it had been proposed and the speed of response to citizen inquiries (based on reports by researchers posing as real citizens).⁶ The second set of factors were more general impressions by politicians, bureaucrats and especially citizens about the effectiveness of their regional government (surveys which also took into account political opinions towards the governing party).

To no-one's great surprise, northern Italian regional governments proved to be considerably more effective than southern ones. The difference between north and south was significant and cut across all of the various indicators. Northern governments scored consistently better across all the twelve measures of government effectiveness. At the same time, their citizens expressed far more satisfaction with their government. In fact, the difference in satisfaction was so great that people who opposed the party governing their region in the north were more satisfied with their regional government than people who supported the governing party in southern regions.

The key question of Putnam's project was: why did this disparity exist? The most obvious explanation was simply economic development. The north was significantly more modern economically – in other words, industrialized – and

6 One caveat to these factors is that it could be argued that some of them are not entirely neutral – they tend to favour activist governments, which could be seen as a more left-wing approach. The consistency of the findings across all twelve factors and across governments of differing political persuasions, however, mitigates this problem.

this modernization was a likely explanation for the greater effectiveness of its regional governments. Within the two sets of regions, however, there was no correlation between economic modernity and government effectiveness. For instance, two of the most effective southern regions were also the least industrialized, whereas the far more industrialized Campania had one of the worst governments. The same lack of correlation held true in the north, where the most efficient governments were found in the relatively less industrial regions of Emilia-Romagna and Umbria. Economic modernity did not provide a convincing explanation for the differences in the effectiveness of regional governments. Rather, it was more likely a by-product of the same factors which led to these differences.

Other common explanations for the differences in the effectiveness of regional governments also proved unsatisfactory. There was no association between the degree of urbanism and the success or failure of regional governments. Nor was there any association between levels of education and regional success – the percentage of students continuing education past the minimum school-leaving age in the best-performing region, Emilia-Romagna, and the worst, Calabria, were almost identical.

The factor that did correlate, very strongly, with the success or failure of regional governments was civic engagement – the degree to which citizens participated in their community. There was a strong correlation, for instance, between effective government and the number of people who read newspapers, and equally with the way that voters participated in elections. The most significant correlation, however, and the one most relevant to scholars of confraternities, was the one between the success of regional governments and the depth of “associative life” in the region – participation in community organizations, associations and clubs, especially sports clubs, but also leisure, cultural, scientific and other kinds of groups. Not only were northerners twice as likely to belong to such groups as southerners, but the degree of community activity was also a good predictor of the relative performance of individual regions within the two broad groupings of north and south. An interesting aspect of this finding was that a significant majority of these associations were sports clubs, with no obvious connection to political life.

This difference also held true for membership in unions, which was studied separately. More significantly for confraternal scholars, there was also a historical correlation with membership in lay religious organizations. Although lay movements such as Catholic Action had largely died out in the face of rising secularism by the time the project began, there was a strong correlation between the strength of Catholic Action in the two decades after World War II and the success of individual regions during the study. At its peak, Catholic Action had been two or three times more active in the north than in the south. By contrast, there was greater respect for the official Church hierarchy and teachings in the south, which

went hand-in-hand with failing regional governments. While lay Catholic activity was a sign of social strength, obedience to the official Church was correlated with social weakness.

The way this difference in civic engagement worked in practice was sometimes counter-intuitive. For instance, civic engagement was not at all the same thing as social cohesion or political consensus. Regions with significant ideological divisions within the population and legislature could still show high levels of civic community and effective government, while some regions that showed a high degree of political consensus had passive citizens and ineffective governments. In other words, while it is important that citizens talk to each other and work together, it is not important that they agree. This finding was reinforced by the discovery that simply by working together in a legislature, elected representatives gradually increased the respect and trust they accorded to members of opposing parties and moderated their own political positions, while still remaining fundamentally partisan in their beliefs and attitudes.

Equally counter-intuitive was the fact that elected representatives in northern regions tended to have less contact with their constituents while those in the south had greater contact. The explanation was simple – in the south, elected representatives acted as patrons whom citizens had to approach in order to receive jobs or favours from the government.

This tendency points to the underlying mechanism through which greater civic engagement leads to more effective governments and prosperous societies. Social and economic interaction in the south was characterized by vertical, patron-client relationships. Because they were competing with each other for favour from patrons, citizens in the south tended not to trust each other and were less able to act together. Indeed, surveys of attitudes towards others in the south showed that people were less likely to trust other people and were more likely to believe that other people would break the law. As a result, they had a much greater desire for strong law enforcement and for authority figures to guide society. At the same time, the lack of faith in others was reflected in a general lack of faith in public institutions and a greater likelihood that citizens would ignore the law themselves. The only people who were accorded any degree of trust were other family members.

By contrast, in the north the experience of working together in associations and clubs built trust between people who were not otherwise connected, thus creating horizontal bonds within a society. Indeed, in the surveys of attitudes, northerners were far more likely to trust other citizens of their region, work with them, and believe that they would obey the law. In a kind of virtuous circle, these horizontal bonds in turn enabled a broader range of joint, effective action. This joint action within the community in turn affected the performance of the community's leaders. The presence of organized citizens – even if those organizations were not overtly political – encouraged a greater sense of responsibility in community

leaders. Exploring these ideas, Putnam provides a useful summary of past theory and current thinking on how social capital and collective action benefit their society, which will interest anyone studying a situation where groups of humans try to work together, as they did in confraternities.⁷

In other words, Putnam demonstrates empirically that working together in organizations and associations does, indeed, build a sense of trust within a society – a sense that might be characterized as “social capital” in modern terms, but was historically described as “brotherhood.” Furthermore, he demonstrates statistically that this “social capital” or “brotherhood” has a direct positive impact on a society’s success, in terms of its society, politics and economics. The implications for confraternity studies are obvious and significant. Putnam’s study provides quantified and comparative evidence, using opinion surveys and statistical sources unavailable in the early modern period, to support the argument that confraternal scholars have made for many years that community organizations such as confraternities really do increase the sense of brotherhood within a society. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the degree of brotherhood within a society does indeed have a direct and measurable impact on a society’s success, which supports the contention that confraternities were not merely an epiphenomenon in historical development, but rather a fundamental factor in the success or failure of different regions of Europe. Following Putnam, the denser a society’s confraternal life, the more likely that society is to succeed both politically and economically.

The implications of Putnam’s book for confraternal studies are both strengthened and broadened by the historical explanation he provides for the disparity in civic engagement between northern and southern Italy. To account for this disparity, Putnam reaches back to medieval Italy, where the establishment of the centralized, feudal Kingdom of Sicily in the south contrasted with development of communal governments in the north. In the south, Frederick II’s autocratic state formalized a system of vertical relations based on royal bureaucrats and feudal allegiance culminating in the person of the King himself, which hindered the development of local, horizontal initiatives. The northern communes by contrast not only developed complex systems of horizontal self-government that involved a significant proportion of the city’s males, but they also developed a wide range of other active, self-governed community organizations – guilds, parish councils, neighbourhood groups, self-defence associations, and of course confraternities. The building of trust enabled by this flourishing associative life in turn encouraged a flourishing of commerce and the development of new commercial techniques that required the existence of such trust in order to be successful.

7 Putnam and Goss’ introduction to Robert D. Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux*, is a good introduction to the concept of social capital, its varieties and potential drawbacks, which are not discussed in as much detail in *Making Democracy Work*. Putnam later paraphrased this introduction in a more populist tone in Chapter 1 of *Bowling Alone*.

The communes were not entirely successful as governments, of course. By the sixteenth century, most of them had given way to autocracies. Putnam argues, however, that the belief in and techniques of associative life had been sufficiently ingrained in northern society by the time the communes failed that these beliefs survived until the re-opening of Italian society in the nineteenth century, when the north experienced a remarkable rebirth of associative life. Putnam's argument is strengthened by the curious fact that those regions of Italy that retained communal forms of government the longest – Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany – are still those today which show the most active degree of civic engagement among their citizens.

The fact that Putnam sees the roots of northern Italy's current prosperity and southern Italy's current difficulties in the development of associative life in medieval Italy strengthens the case for the importance of confraternities. Not only did their development have a significant impact on their own society, it suggests, but it also had a fundamental long-term impact which still shapes the modern world. On the other hand, his historical explanation also suggests that confraternities were part of a broader development of associative life, and that there is much to be gained by studying their impact in conjunction with the development of other forms of associative life, including guilds, parish councils, and municipal government.

Putnam's historical explanation is obviously broad and schematic, based on a few secondary sources. Its broad framework would benefit from being filled out and nuanced by the considerable base of scholarship on confraternities that is already available or is currently underway. Putnam does not discuss confraternities in particular in any great detail, but there are a number of ways in which this scholarship suggests that confraternities might play a distinct and important role in his historical schema.

First, it can be argued that confraternities played a role as a first step in the development of the associative life of northern Italy that forms the genesis of Putnam's historical explanation. Putnam describes how family is the first and most basic unit of associative life, the one group within which people trust each other even in a predominantly vertical patron-client society such as the south. The difficulty in beginning the building of civic community is transferring that basic trust in kinship onto non-kin relations. Confraternities – a form of artificial horizontal kinship backed by a common set of beliefs from the Christian church – can be seen as a form of training ground in the extension of kin-type trust beyond the family, thus playing an essential role in creating the associative mentality described by Putnam. In a long-term view, this idea of confraternities as a "first step" in the development of associative life is supported by the way in which, as many confraternities declined or were abolished in the eighteenth century, they were often replaced by other, secular forms of associative life.

Confraternities' role in building brotherhood is particularly important where there is an absence of other pre-existing linkages between members of an asso-

ciation. Social scientists make distinctions between strong and weak, and bridging versus bonding forms of social capital. Strong or bonding social capital happens between people who have pre-existing similarities or connections – family, ethnicity, neighbourhood, occupation, social class. While these bonds are important, they can also cause division and factionalism if these clusters of strong social bonds are not linked together by weak or bridging bonds – linkages which may not be as intense, but which cross over between strongly bonded groups within a society. Historically speaking, many forms of associative life described by Putnam as the basis for the development of the associative mentality were strong or bonding formats, linking together people who lived in the same community or worked in the same trade. The fear that these clusters of strong bonds might cause factionalism and strife within communities was constant and often justified. In this context, confraternities played a role as one of the few forms of associative life that provided this necessary bridging function, bringing together citizens who did not share any other form of linkage. While many confraternities simply reinforced parish or guild bonds, confraternities could also bridge different trades, social classes, or neighbourhoods. As well, they could serve to bridge pre-existing divisions within a definable group, such as a town's elite. Such linkages are necessary if associative life is to have the positive impact described by Putnam. It is in this vital role, linking together people who are not otherwise connected, that the role of the confraternity as a training ground in brotherhood could be particularly important.

Confraternities may also have played an important role in keeping the memory and practice of associative life alive in the centuries after the collapse of communal governments. One of the gaps in Putnam's historical schema is how, exactly, the memory and practices of associative life survived almost three centuries of abeyance before reviving in the nineteenth century. Confraternities may provide part of the explanation. Although it is generally believed that confraternities became more "vertical" over the course of the seventeenth century, often falling under the control of the church hierarchy or a small group of elite members, they continued to govern themselves and bring together citizens who were not otherwise connected, providing an ongoing experience of associative life, however attenuated.

Putnam's historical explanation also opens up the related question of whether there was indeed a significant disparity in confraternal life between north and south. Certainly, in medieval terms, there is less evidence of confraternal life in the south than in the north. However, during the period of the Catholic Reformation many confraternities were founded in the south. As such, they appear to be the first step towards building a sense of brotherhood within southern society, but this step seems to have been abortive, given Putnam's findings about modern southern Italy. If Putnam's theories are correct, should these new confraternities not have created at least the beginning of an associative life? One possible

explanation is that southern confraternities were founded as a top-down initiative, as part of a missionary campaign, and were often dominated by the parish priest.⁸ As such, they were not the result of a horizontal, local initiative that might have built a sense of trust, but instead simply reinforced the patron-client structures already prevalent in southern society. This possibility is reinforced by the fact that there was not an accompanying development of other forms of association, as there was in the north. It may be that confraternities were a necessary, but not sufficient factor in the development of a viable associative life. The questions raised by the comparison of northern and southern Italy also point to the potential for other comparative studies, both within and between nations, and also between different periods of history and the present.

Making Democracy Work is one among many recent studies of social capital, studies which use a wide variety of approaches, definitions and theories.⁹ Many of these studies seek to quantify social capital in some way, in a sense measure brotherhood, to demonstrate that an active associative life does indeed lead to increased trust within a society. Two factors are particular to *Making Democracy Work*, however, and make it especially relevant for confraternal scholars. The first is the opportunity to perform a controlled experiment which provides a quantified proof of the idea that an active associative life, and the trust it builds, will measurably and significantly improve the society, politics and economics of a region. The second is the way Putnam reaches back to medieval Italy, in particular to the explosion of associative life in northern Italy in which confraternities played such a prominent role, for an explanation as to why contemporary northern Italy is more successful than the south.

Together, these two factors place confraternal studies at the very centre of historical development. Not only does the active development of confraternities and other forms of associative life have a profound positive impact on a society, but this impact can have continuing repercussions hundreds of years later.

At the same time, Putnam's study suggests that in their impact on their society confraternities were part of a broader development of associative life. Confraternity studies have sometimes been concerned with establishing the distinctions between, for instance, confraternities and guilds. Putnam's approach emphasizes the importance of also studying these phenomena together, and in connection with whatever other forms of association were developing in concert with the confraternal movement. There is good reason to suggest that there was a remarkable

8 This hypothesis was suggested by Nicholas Terpstra in a discussion after a presentation on this topic. This analysis of confraternities in the north and south is deeply indebted to the discussions by audience members after presentations of this topic.

9 Frustratingly, *Making Democracy Work* does not have a bibliography, but several relevant works are cited in the notes to Chapter 6. The introduction to Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux* is also useful in this regard.

expansion of associative life right across late medieval Europe, one in which confraternities played a fundamental role. Putnam's findings imply that this movement may have had a significant effect on the course of European history.

Studying confraternities in conjunction with other forms of association would be all the more useful because the experience of southern Italy suggests that confraternities were not a sufficient factor by themselves in building brotherhood, and that different kinds of confraternities might have had different kinds of impacts within a society. Putnam's historical explanation, in its necessarily schematic brevity, would benefit from being deepened and contrasted with the more detailed and more nuanced work provided by current scholarship on confraternities. By reaching back to the past for explanations, Putnam's book creates the possibility of a mutually constructive dialogue between scholars of modern social capital and scholars of historical brotherhood. In the process, he has provided useful support in the ongoing task of demonstrating that the confraternal movement was a fundamental causal factor in medieval and early modern Europe, one that deserves a place at the heart of the historical narrative.

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