

Civic Capitalism and the Leisure of the Theory Class

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Abstract: This essay deals with *civic capitalism*, which has something to do with the way people combine acquisitiveness and being civic minded, Boston, a city where I discovered lots of people like that, and the *theory class*, which is composed of people who think and write for a living and whose disdain for capitalism extends to virtually everything except the stocks in their retirement funds.

The essay develops along two main argumentative lines: the theme of social integration, of social and “civic” capital, and the subjects of it all: businesses, to discover the way to be a good community; the theme of “common sense”, of “regular folks” and their everyday life and experience as much more “normal” and integrated, and much less frantic and fragmented, than one could expect.

So, these subjects and these everyday practices explain how very diverse people get along together, and indeed insist diverse people are not really as diverse as we are driven to expect of them, independently of their respective wealth or income. They are “more alike than equal”, which points both to the relatively minor role equality in a sheer economic sense plays in integrating a complex society, and to the “behavioural” approach, an approach grounded on everyday social practices rather than on “cultural differences” in an abstract sense.

Keywords: social integration, social capital, civic capital, civic capitalism, leisure, theory class.

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This essay deals with *civic capitalism*, which has something to do with the way people combine acquisitiveness and being civic minded, Boston, a city where I discovered lots of people like that, and the *theory class*, which is composed of people who think and write for a living and whose disdain for capitalism extends to virtually everything except the stocks in their retirement funds.

Boston, the focus of my study of civic-minded capitalists, has gone through some big changes in the last half century. The whole of the United States has. Some of the changes have been agreeable. Others have been decidedly less so. All have left their mark.

Virtually anyone who took a hard look at the city after World War II could have concluded that Boston's best days were behind it. The city was worn out and tired. Other cities looked much the same way, of course, and their leaders and experts were making the same dolorous pronouncements about those places, too.²

Hard as the first half of the 20th century may have been for Boston, ending as it did with the Depression and World War II, the second half was the real shocker. The city's economic gears were stripping. Its population was hemorrhaging. Boston really was in trouble.

At the same time, Boston was never bereft of talent, money, connections, and many good institutions and eager helpers. The city bounced back. Indeed, in many ways Boston was transformed. Its economy was re-focused and energized. The city became the center of thriving professional, technical, and service industries. Its population, owing to the arrival of so many newcomers from all over the world, became decidedly more colorful, too.

² Rae, 2003, and Jacob, 2004 are only two of the more recent books to chronicle the collapse of urban economies and civic life, the failure of political institutions and economic leaders to turn the situation around, and exasperation with the prospects that anything can be done to right what's gone so very wrong in American cities. Ideas contained in these and many other books and articles stretching back decades (and, indeed, back to the mid-19th century) build on a tradition of scholarship that finds much that is problematic in Western cities and the way of life followed by those who live and work in them.

Looking back at the last half century, one can construct a story that makes Boston's comeback look all but pre-ordained. The truth, however, is that none of these positive changes needed to happen. Other cities bigger and more prosperous than Boston tumbled further and haven't come back yet. We have to look elsewhere for an explanation for why the city came back.

Whatever that explanation is certainly had nothing to do with people becoming prosperous or nice overnight. The city's facelift didn't lift everyone. A great many people were inconvenienced and upset by all the changes, often to the point of behaving poorly, treating each other shabbily, or turning their back on the place and heading for the suburbs. For those who stuck it out, the gap between Bostonians with some economic clout and those who would be happy if they were just more secure grew a little wider. The edges on each side of the divide became a little rougher. Many people who would like to stay can't even afford to live here anymore.

The long-term effects of all these changes – many we have already seen and some we can't even begin to imagine – have yet to be played out. Nevertheless, while a final accounting of the winners and losers from the last half century hasn't been made, this much we do know. Despite what many experts said about places like Boston, this particular city never stopped working. Many of its neighborhoods were rocked, but they didn't roll over and die. People may have felt they'd been ridden hard and put up wet; but they still crossed the line at the end of the race, just like all the tired marathoners we admire every year.

The private and sometimes very public ways in which people bring about change or resist it are best described and understood using the language of "culture." The way of life that people inherit and then go on to embrace and amend over the course of their lives is their culture. Like the city itself, the way of life that people in Boston practice is a mix of what they found upon their arrival and how they fidgeted and tweaked it over the course of their lives. Like anything else that human beings do, some of their tweaking and fidgeting worked out well, and some of it not so well. All of their experimenting left its mark, too, however.

The problem with how culture was made and amended in Boston in the last few decades is that some of the people you would have expected to step up and

lead haven't been living up to their own expectations, much less ours. Or, they've been more concerned about currying favor with other local notables than in taking on new civic chores. Important institutions like the Catholic Church and the Boston Public Schools lost many of their supporters and a great deal of their moral standing. And neighborhoods where much good civic homework had been accomplished over the years and many civic-minded entrepreneurs got their start were not keeping up their end of the deal, either. Human beings, institutions, and places that for generations had contributed a sense of permanence and strength to Boston lost a lot of their luster and energy; and, importantly, they did so pretty much at the same time, too.

By most accounts all the under performing and conspicuous failing should have led to some kind of cultural meltdown inside the city. At the very least, life in Boston should have grown short-tempered and meaner. With so many people moving around and new ones showing up all the time, for instance, you might have expected more of them to become lost and stay that way. With disparities in wealth becoming more apparent, you could have predicted that all sorts of crimes against persons and property would increase, perhaps sharply. And, if people didn't take their gripes and grievances out against each other, then surely we should have seen some broad-based social movements to get at the root of all the real and imagined problems dividing us. We might have seen such things happening; but we didn't. In this essay, we'll begin to consider some of the reasons why.

Boston's real edge was always its people, the hardworking and often cranky ones that were already here and all the new multi-colored ones that would soon arrive. Some of them obviously had great advantages over their neighbors. This wouldn't surprise anyone, least of all the people who started and ended better off or the ones that are still less well off today. At the same time, it is precisely because the game of how to make it in Boston is not fair, rarely ever ends up in a tie, *and* the players understand this that we know they were hanging around for more than the final box score. Why else would the ones who consistently lose or get less stick around or the people that usually win bother worrying about what anyone else, especially the losers, think? More to the point of the

story I want to tell here, why should the winners and losers keep trying to do more or better?

The best answer, I think, has something to do with the way the city engages the people that live and work here. Grumpy as the up-and-coming members of Boston's new Brahmin class may be and fixed on the idea that they aren't admired enough, the reason they will keep trying to do more or better is that the place matters to them. It also matters to the people they would lead. To be sure, the new Brahmins may own more of the city than other residents do; but they all have an interest in what happens here. For all its sharp and untidy edges and disappointments, Boston's way of life is its people's biggest accomplishment. It may not be the reason newcomers show up; but it's the single most important reason why they stay.

Put simply, Boston is far more than the sum of its many disjointed parts. It is more whole than critics of contemporary American manners and morals would have us believe. The people living and working in Boston pay attention to each other and look out for each other more than we think. Bostonians fret about their city's shortcomings, and they probably take too little comfort and joy from their own accomplishments. They constantly talk about doing the right thing, even when they aren't sure what the best thing to do is.³

If Boston weren't important to the people that live and work here, they'd act more like the self-absorbed and civically-lazy individuals many intellectuals expect to see when they look at Americans these days. For one thing, people around here wouldn't spend nearly so much time fretting about what to put in all the holes that have been dug in their city. For another, they wouldn't argue so much about what to call all the new and rebuilt structures and spaces being worked on.⁴ Fixing a name to something fixes the person doing the naming in the city, too.

You might expect people to care about their own little corner of town; and you'd be right. Many people in Boston still care a great deal about what happens on the blocks where they live. Indeed, they can be downright pushy

³ Paulsen, 2004.

⁴ *The Boston Globe*, January 16 and 30, 2007; February 20 and 28, 2007; April 12 and 14, 2007; July 3 and 22, 2007. *Boston Herald*, August 3, 2007. *Boston Globe*, August 17, 2007.

when it comes to looking after their neighborhoods, even the ones that still don't look very good and whose people sometimes don't act very well.

It's not just crime that riles them. There are parking spaces to be protected with lawn chairs and garbage cans and speed bumps that appear miraculously overnight so that cars won't speed down streets where children play. There are parks that need to be cleared of litter and sloppy neighbors to be picked up after. People throw potluck dinners and block parties, hold a "time" or fundraising event for a needy neighbor, and tend to their community gardens. They will march in front of businesses that offend them and hold wakes for a favorite grocery or shoe store when it closes.

Many of the locals are big on keeping door stoops nice so they have a place to sit and chat. They'll beat up on their councilman who didn't move fast enough to get a rundown house repaired. They've been known to start their own public school or raise money to keep their old school open. Neighborhood residents hold tours of their homes and gardens. They will set up impromptu shrines for someone who's been killed on their street. People will sell caps and shirts with their neighborhood's name on them so they can raise money for a project or a party.

Here's some additional and perhaps unexpected good news. As important as their neighborhoods are, the proprietary attitude of many Bostonians extends to the whole city. Sure, Boston's bigwigs may lead that charge. They're certainly working overtime these days to attract a new generation of younger donors by throwing them parties in the grand halls of major cultural institutions.⁵ But people without wigs pay attention, too, and they are active. That's why young black and Hispanic adults are doing their best to find other people like them just so they can fit in and feel better about being here.⁶

Bostonians prattle on endlessly about whether the next new scheme to give the city a makeover makes better sense than their last best idea. Maybe most surprising of all, they worry a lot and out loud about whether whatever they

⁵ *The Boston Globe*, August 14, 2005.

⁶ *The Boston Globe*, August 17, 2005.

think is the best thing to do today is the right thing to do in the long term.⁷ You can get away with a lot in Boston. But whatever you do, you won't want to propose building another runway at the airport.⁸ And you don't want to ask the residents of East Boston what they think about the one that just opened up.

I have a stack of newspaper clippings in front of me. If I sit on them, I may be able to squish them down to two, maybe two and one-half inches. They represent only a couple of year's worth of stories. The reports they contain deal with everything from the Big Dig's tunnels and new parklands, to historical monuments and crumbling sidewalks, to what the new arena that replaced the Boston Garden will be named and what to call a new neighborhood that's emerging along the waterfront. They feature stories about clocks, information kiosks, and church steeples that hold prominent spots in neighborhood squares and how to get all the city's fountains spouting and flowing again.

There are stories about a skateboarder's paradise being constructed under a highway and whether new cherry trees should be planted along the Esplanade that parallels the Charles River. They detail efforts to save an old theater, ways to stop people from dumping garbage near a bird sanctuary, and how people sweep up a winter's worth of sand that city workers spread over the streets. They also talk about roof-top decks overlooking the city and artifacts from our colonial past found buried in long forgotten pits.

⁷ *The Boston Globe*, July 25 and 26, 2003; August 6, 8, 18, 22 - 24, 2003; September 4 and 27, 2003; October 1, 12, 26, 28 and 31, 2003; November 25 and 27, 2003; December 2, 4, 13, 17, 19, 20, 23, 27 and 31, 2003; January 2, 4, 14, 17, 26 and 29, 2004; February 21, 2004.

⁸ *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 28, 1997. *The Boston Globe Magazine*, November 15, 1998. *The Boston Globe*, October 19, 1991; October 23, 1992; February 9, 1993; March 24, 1996; February 25, 1997; March 30, 1997; August 5 and 6, 1997; May 23, 1998; June 22, 1998; August 23, 1998; May 8, 1999; June 3, 1999; November 17, 1999; January 8 and 30, 2000; February 21, 2000; April 15, 2000; May 29, 2000; July 22 and 27, 2000; December 31, 2000; May 31, 2001; June 16, 2001; July 8, 2001; September 13 and 28, 2001; October 28, 2001; December 5 and 18, 2001; January 4, 2002; April 6, 2002; May 3, 2002; June 15, 2002; June 18 and 29, 2002; July 14 and 17, 2002; August 4, 5, 11, 26 and 31, 2002; October 13, 17 and 19, 2002; November 21 and 23, 2002; January 3, 8, 17 and 27, 2003; February 4 and 9, 2003; March 13, 2002; May 1, 2, 6 and 26, 2003; June 21, 2003; July 3, 5, 9, 14 and 16, 2003.

The stories tell us about falcons that are roosting on the tops of tall buildings and what to do with the big cast iron teddy bear that used to sit in front of the FAO Schwarz toy store now that the business closed. (A hospital for children got the bear.) There are reports about neighborhood people playing bingo and socializing at donut shops, fast food restaurants, and lunch counters. You learn how one long-time business owner, Nobel Garcia, was helped by his Cuban customers after someone set fire to his restaurant. You'll hear all about street performers who ply their trade in front of large department stores in Downtown Crossing or along the walls of Fenway Park in order to capture the attention and spare change of people passing by.

How city parks and new green spaces will be treated, what kind of statuary should be displayed in public, where the street people will go once a neighborhood shopping district is improved, and whether the public will still be allowed to walk and bike along the waterfront once undeveloped dockland has fancy buildings on it, all of these concern people in Boston. These and many other questions like them are raised all the time by different people about what is to be done with Boston's out-of-the-way and common places.⁹

People don't just occupy Boston. They fill it with their lives. It's not just the corner bar that's a good place for people to congregate and to become reconnected. People use bigger places like Fenway Park that way, too.¹⁰ That's only part of the reason why team owners asked for the park to be designated a

⁹ *The Boston Globe*, March 27 and 31, 2004; April 4, 18, 22-24, and 27, 2004; May 3, 11, 19, 21, and 22, 2004; June 3, 5, 10, 12-15, 22, and 25-27, 2004; July 1, 4-6, 11-13, and 17, 2004; August 7, 8, 11, 19, 23, and 27, 2004; September 2, 8, 11, 15, 16, 19, 25, 28, and 30, 2004; October 5, 13, and 18, 2004; November 2, 10, 19, 24, and 28, 2004; December 3-5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14, 15, 19, 22, 24, and 25, 2004; January 5-7 and 18, 2005; February 11, 16, 21 and 23, 2005; March 1, 3, and 4, 2005; April 1, 2005; May 8, 22 and 29, 2005; June 12 and 27, 2005; July 10, 19, 20, 24 and 31, 2005; August 5, 10, 24, 30 and 31, 2005; September 5, 8, 18, 25, and 29, 2005; October 7, 21, and 30, 2005; November 6, 12, 17, 24, and 29, 2005. *Boston Herald*, November 23, 2005. *The Boston Globe*, December 4, 5, 21, and 24, 2005. *Boston Herald*, February 7, 2006. *The Boston Globe*, January 15 and 29, 2006; February 6, 11, 17-19, 26, and 27, 2006; March 1, 3, 18, 19, 23, 25, and 28, 2006; April 30, 2006; May 30, 2006; June 6, 12-14, and 16, 2006; July 19 and 28, 2006; August 5, 9, 13, 27, and 28, 2006; September 2, 6, 8, 15, and 24, 2006; March 13 and 14, 2007.

¹⁰ Borer, 2008.

historic landmark. The other, perhaps bigger, part of the reason is that such a designation would carry tax credits that could be applied to the cost of rehabilitating the park.¹¹ A self-serving corporate play, to be sure, but all the players cross at the same intersection where one group's private interests are made to stand next to the public's greater good. More often than you'd think, they figure out how to cross the street together.

The debate over what to do with the old ballpark is actually rather revealing and important. Economists and political scientists who write disapprovingly about the way public subsidies are thrown at stadium owners say that the numbers simply don't add up. Yet, city officials continue to provide public dollars for stadiums to be constructed or, in the case of Fenway Park, perhaps to be rehabilitated. The experts can't figure out why.¹²

The answer, as Michael Borer points out, isn't about economics. It's about culture. These places are part of our personal biographies and help us remember who we are and that we're part of something bigger and longer lasting than we are. Something like Fenway Park matters even to those of us who don't attend the games played there. Yes, the decision to build or re-build something important in a place like Boston is all about money. But it's not *just* about money.¹³

None of this should surprise us, because this is just what reformers in late-19th century cities were hoping would happen when they revamped public schools, built lovely parks, and founded many civic institutions. They wanted everyone to work on behalf of the whole city, not just their little corner of it.¹⁴ The sense that everyday people had a stake and way in what happened here, not just the wealthy and well-born, was something the reforming classes back then wanted to leave as part of their legacy.

Well, it worked. People in Boston, certainly not all of them but a good number and variety of them, perhaps most especially the newcomers, pay

¹¹ *The Boston Globe*, August 24, 2005.

¹² *The Boston Globe*, December 4, 2005; March 19, 2006.

¹³ Monti, 1999, pp. 240-278.

¹⁴ Boyer, 1978.

attention to what's going on all over the city. They care about the place. It is a shrine of sorts. More importantly, it's sort of their shrine.

It's hard to see how big thinkers that write about contemporary America miss the commitment small people have to places like Boston. But somehow they do. Actually, I know why they miss as much as they do. They don't see any of it, because they aren't looking for signs of how people get along. They are more accomplished at looking for and finding signs of people doing their own thing and being unable to get along and work together.

I've already suggested that the kind of life that people in Boston practice is distinctly civic-minded. I also believe they do enough good work together to say that they have their civic act together. Well-known social scientists have had a lot to say about how Americans *don't* have their civic act together and why. One of them, Robert Putnam, finds much significance in the fact that not as many people belong to bowling leagues and other traditional civic organizations these days. A second, Richard Florida, believes that more creative, independent, and exotic people will lead us out of the civic thicket we are stuck in and into a bright new day. We're not really ill. We're evolving.¹⁵

There's another school of thought (i.e., "post-modernism") that holds that all this doing-your-own-thing stuff and splintering off into separate little social universes isn't something we really need to worry about. It's not a problem that Americans need to overcome. We aren't declining or evolving. We're coming to grips with our real civic selves.

In fact, all the retreating to separate social corners that Americans allegedly do today reflects an important cultural truth. Namely, if we ever had one "way of life" or set of values that most of us embraced and let constrain us, we don't anymore. Today, our culture is supposed to be fragmented along different religious, ethnic, and racial lines. The best we can do under these circumstances is accept and celebrate all the ways we are culturally different from each other, leave other people alone, and forget about putting our culture back together again. The way to beat the disease of civic divisiveness is to embrace it.

¹⁵ Putnam, 2000, and Florida, 2002.

What we have, then, are three seemingly irreconcilable views of the contemporary American scene and three different ways of curing Boston (and most everywhere else in the Western world, too, I would hazard to guess) of its declining civic fortunes. Each has its supporters and detractors. And, if I were pretending to be completely open-minded, I'd probably add that each has something to contribute to the debate over where American civic life is headed. For reasons I've laid out elsewhere and don't need to repeat here, however, I think they've been wrong a lot more than they've been right.¹⁶

I think Putnam and Florida are right about this much. Americans are changing the kind of associations they make and use. But they're also wrong in thinking that any of this is new. Americans have been tweaking the way they organize themselves and use groups since before there was a United States. Some associations have always been inclusive and reached out to different kinds of people. Other groups have been more exclusive and helped to insulate us from people and ways of thinking that made us uncomfortable. There are organizations whose only purpose is to give their members a chance to enjoy each other's company and groups that act more like work horses.

Yes, the average number of associations to which Americans belong has dropped and some kinds of organizations like lodges have experienced substantial decreases in membership. (The fact that one of the more esteemed male service organizations, the Masons, has been working hard in Boston to attract new, younger members and succeeding doesn't change this.¹⁷) But commentators like Richard Florida have argued that newer kinds of organizations and volunteering, which aren't counted in most social surveys, are making up for drop-offs in the older and better established groups. He's probably right.

Whether the numbers are growing or shrinking, however, changes in organizational affiliation and our civic life simply aren't as great as social scientists make them out to be. Individual organizations come and go, just like the people who join and use them. But the overall array of associations in our

¹⁶ Monti, 2007, pp. 21-40.

¹⁷ *The Boston Globe*, October 15, 2006.

society isn't constructed like a building that can wear out and may have to be knocked down or substantially overhauled. It's more like a balloon that expands, contracts, and can change shape without popping or losing much air. Such changes we observe in our civic habits and affiliations happen slowly. We are able to adjust to them.

One of the ways many Americans have learned to adjust their civic lives is through the places where they work. Surprisingly, perhaps, it's here that I think Professors Putnam and Florida actually have something important to say, because both saw a growing connection between the way people earn a living and how they engage in civic-minded acts. Basically, some jobs or careers promote civic engagement more than other jobs and careers do.

To be sure, all our jobs serve a broader public good by making everyone's life at least a little easier and by showing how much can be accomplished when we work as part of a group. But Florida and Putnam see other and bigger things coming from the workplace, too. Florida would say that work itself is an expression of civic engagement for members of the so-called "creative class." The connection between doing well and doing good for an artist, for instance, is easier to imagine than it is for a machinist. Putnam's take on work-site do-gooding is different but not at odds with Florida's idea. For Putnam, the office or factory can become a venue for organizing good deeds that are accomplished away from work. Doing good is an extension of what one does at work, but letting people count their job as a good deed would be stretching a good idea too far.

As much as I like what Putnam and Florida have to say on this point, I don't think they have come up with anything particularly novel. The fact is that "workers" have been involved in all manner of workplace "philanthropy" for more than a century. Business owners, especially the owners of "big business" like Carnegie and Rockefeller, succeeded in planting the seed of workplace charity into their employees long before today.

These efforts may be organized differently in some cities from the way they were in the early 20th century. Specifically, more groups with different "interests" may be receiving support for their programs than they did in the past. As Emily Barman points out, however, these organizations (or ones very

much like them) have been operating in cities like Boston for a long time.¹⁸ All those 20th-century companies that pushed their employees to donate money to the United Way and other foundations showed that capitalism could be civic-minded.

Granted, not all businessmen and women are as good at giving back as they are at taking. Furthermore, when they do help, it isn't always for the purest of motives. The problem with focusing too hard on the grayer side of business, however, is that it lets us draw too thick a line between a businessman's private interest and the public's well being. This line is rather fuzzier and easier to move than we think. Indeed, there's never been a period in American history when being greedy and attending to one's broader social obligations weren't running on parallel tracks.¹⁹

Business people and politicians have always had their hands in each other's pockets. It wasn't hard or at all uncomfortable at first because they often wore the same pants. One's private interests as a businessman were easily tied to the public good he could do as a political figure. Later on, when the people wearing the business pants were different from the ones wearing politician pants, they remembered that having somebody's hand in their pocket sometimes felt really good. It was how things got done. They just had to remember not to make it look too easy or like they were enjoying it too much.

How well or poorly commercially-minded people took care of our civic business as well as their own has been the subject of considerable speculation for a long time. Exactly when our answer became that business people were different from the rest of us, I really couldn't say. All I know is that at some point businesses were taken off the side of the civic ledger that churches, clubs, labor unions and bowling teams were listed. They were put on an entirely different list, one that focused exclusively on bottom lines.²⁰

¹⁸ Barman, 2006.

¹⁹ Monti, *op. cit.*, pp. 240-278.

²⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville didn't completely box businesses out of civil society. That happened afterward. Today, most scholars that wrap themselves in Tocqueville's robe take the view that civil society is something lying outside of government and business. This essay is dedicated to the proposition that this is a mistake, a really big mistake. See, for example, Eberly, ed., 2000;

The moral of the story we like to tell about businesses today is that they are necessary but not to be admired. This may be especially true when they rebuild cities in their own likeness and make money on the deal at the same time.²¹ Why anyone would be surprised that a businessman would want to make money is beyond me. But all critics can think about is the way businesses have become ever larger and better connected, made giants out of some cities, backwaters out of others, and left the rest of us squashed in their wake.²²

The truth, as is often the case, is a bit more complex. Businessmen and women have long been community boosters and are accustomed to doing a disproportionate amount of everybody else's civic homework. Stories abound of successful merchants and manufacturers pooling their resources and undertaking ambitious and expensive projects like building a library or

Edwards, Foley and Diani, 2001. Skocpol, 2003. Also check the website: www.scotland.gov.uk/cru/kdo1/orange/rocs-o5.asp. Scholars don't deny that the public, private and civil sectors of society aren't closely tied, just that they're very different kinds of social creations. I argue that businesses in the United States are among our first and most important agents of civil society.

²¹ Warner, 1987; Fainstein, Fainstein, Hill, Judd and Smith, 1983; Cummings, 1988; Gottdiener, 1987; Feagin, 1988; Feagin, Parker, 1990; Squires, 1989; Monti, 1990; Sorkin, 1992; Squires, 1994; O'Connor, 1993; Watson and Gibson, 1995; Soja, 1996; Kofman and Lebas, 1996; Judd and Fainstein, 1999; Susser, 2002; Dear, 2002; Merrifield, 2002.

²² I'm not even going to pretend to provide a comprehensive list of academic writing on economic sociology or the role of business plays in modern society. As the preceding note clearly shows, my personal library is heavily skewed toward writing about the ways businesses relate to cities and especially to the way that cities have been rebuilt in the last half-century or so. What I will do here is simply offer a sample of some other publications that I consulted in preparing this book and earlier books or articles that I have written over the years. I hope that the reader will understand that I know just how pathetically small and narrowly focused a list it is. Henderson and Parsons, 1969; Chamberlain, 1973; Cavanagh, 1976; Chandler, 1977; Zelizer, 1978; Buono and Nichols, 1985; Ontiveros, 1986; Etzioni, 1988; Boswell, 1990; Monti, 1990; Smelser and Swedberg, 1994; Pava and Krausz, 1995; Hoffman, 1997; Tolbert, Lyson and Irwin, 1998; Powell and Clemens, 1998; Kirsch, 1998; O'Connell, 1999; Carroll, 1999; Rosentraub, 1999; Jones and Wilson, 1999; Nevarez, 2000; Rowley and Berman, 2000; Davenport, 2000; Mossberger and Stoker, 2001; Humphrey, 2001; Biggart, 2001; Biggart and Castanias, 2001; Reese and Rosenfeld, 2002; Logan, Alba, and Zhang, 2002; Portes, Haller and Guarnizo, 2002; Post, Lawrence and Weber, 2002; Austin and McCaffrey, 2002.

donating large sums of money to a “good cause.” Less well known and openly admired, however, are many mundane chores and smaller acts of “giving back” to their community that businessmen and women do all the time.²³

Such activities were once the special province of conspicuously wealthy persons or the highest born and regarded people in a community. That changed with the rise of small businessmen in medieval towns and cities and the claims they made to rights and duties once reserved for the community’s most prominent men and women. Tradesmen – the people we call entrepreneurs today – became bigger and more important not just by managing exchanges of goods and services or “spreading the wealth” by hiring local people, important as such things were and still are to a community’s well-being. They also tithed to earn public regard – by paying taxes and donating their time and money to different public-spirited activities – and demanded more than the protection afforded by periodic stays inside castle walls whenever the bad guys showed up. Business people wanted to be “incorporated” into the ongoing life of the places they now lived and worked hard to get there.

These tradesmen could not have known how much the world would change because of their well-earned intrusion into the rest of our daily lives. To be sure, in the process of negotiating their way into town they became the backbone of local economies. Just as important, perhaps more importantly, they also became some of the community’s most committed leaders and engaged civic actors.

The idea advanced here is that businesses always were more than employers and profit makers. They were also civic associations.²⁴ As such, they could be every bit as committed to the well-being of the communities they served as were institutions like churches and philanthropic groups that spent other people’s money so “the right thing” could be done in the community.

Successful business people are not required to give back to the community; and some embrace the idea and practice more readily than others. Nevertheless, while Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream may be the best known business to build a

²³ Borer and Monti, 2006.

²⁴ Borer and Monti, *op. cit.*; Monti, Ryan, Brush, and Gannon, 2007a; Monti, Brush, Ryan, and Gannon, 2007b.

social mission into its business model, it is hardly an anomaly. These days, smaller and more local business ventures are following it, too.

The possibility that more business people today make an explicit connection between their economic and social interests might have been anticipated with the emergence of “social entrepreneurs.” These are men and women that add a for-profit component to their non-profit organization in order to accomplish their larger social mission. By and large, the new hybrid businessman and woman are first and foremost *businessmen* or women. If they don’t make a profit, they can’t write a grant proposal or wait for a donor to step up and fund their social program. They disappear.

Whether the social entrepreneur or socially-minded business person arrived on the scene first shouldn’t concern us. What *is* interesting is that both hybrid types emerged only recently. We shall have to wait and see if their arrival foretells a convergence in the way Americans try to make more money and be socially mindful at the same time.

The convergence of self-seeking capitalism and civic-minded do-gooding I am pointing at here is not yet widely practiced. What is especially well articulated in the hybrid business person, however, is an impulse that is already well rooted in our culture. Men (and eventually women, too) allowed the freedom to acquire wealth just like persons of higher birth acquired a corresponding set of obligations to one’s fellow townsmen. The right to amass more money and power than other people carried with it a duty to do good community works. Entrepreneurs had to give something back.

I readily concede that the commitment and habit to do good works is not evenly spread among all potential tradesmen and newly wealthy people. But the idea of giving something back and the custom of doing so are sufficiently widespread among them so as to produce a body of stewards that watches out for the larger community. This is the animating spirit behind the practice of *civic capitalism*.

America has an abundance of these people. There’s something about the way of life practiced here that makes it possible to grow even more. Boston, like most American cities, has managed to attract and otherwise make its own homegrown crop for many generations. More recently, we’ve begun to grow

entrepreneurs that embrace a double bottom line. Businessmen and women want to make a profit; but doing some good in the world is also an explicit part of their business plan. It isn't something they do "on the side" or only after they've become successful. They are a kind of hybrid: a business person who's also a self-conscious social activist.²⁵

The idea of giving something back to the community certainly isn't new, even if the way some businesses are assuming this kind of obligation is. Its origins go back a lot further than Alexis de Tocqueville's writings on American

²⁵ I am hardly the first person to recognize that entrepreneurs are important community builders. Only recently, however, have social scientists been paying systematic attention to what local entrepreneurs do and why what they do has so much cultural significance. See: Cornwall, 1998; Zahara and Neubaum, 1998; Light and Pham, 1998; Hartenian and Gudmundson, 2000; Joyner, Payne, and Raiborn, 2002; Immergluck and Smith, 2003. Earlier sociologists and political scientists didn't entirely miss the important civic work that entrepreneurs and everyday businessmen and women do. They conducted numerous studies of "community power" throughout the 20th century. In this work, the prominent role that business people played in "getting things done" (sometimes in league with other kinds of leaders and sometimes not) was detailed. See: Lyon, 1987; Stone and Sanders, 1987; Stone, 1989; Rae, 2003. They also wrote about ethnic enclaves and the important parts that small businesses and social entrepreneurs played in making life inside small and distinctive urban islands good or at least a whole lot more secure for immigrants and poorer people. See: Light and Bonacich, 1988; Light and Gold, 2000). The central point made in this research was that entrepreneurs did more than provide goods, services, and employment opportunities to people. They were power brokers, bullies, philanthropists, and activists. More recently, prominent institutional leaders and businesses have been portrayed as playing fast and loose with the "community's interest" as they promoted and profited from different rebuilding projects and development schemes. See: Cummings, op. cit.; Feagin, op. cit.; Monti, 1990. This picture of entrepreneurs and business leaders is incomplete and perhaps even biased. Nonetheless, it affirms the contributions (both good and bad) these men and women make to everyday life in their communities. Entrepreneurs and business people are seen working together just as earnestly and effectively as they compete with each other. Evidence of collaboration and competition among ethnic entrepreneurs is laced throughout many studies of ethnic enclaves and ghetto life. The leaders of these communities have every reason to work together. If they aren't successful, both individually and collectively, the "people" of which they are part has little chance of making it in the larger economy and society. See: S.C. Drake and H. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); D. Tritarico, *The Italians of Greenwich Village* (New York: The Center for Migration Studies, 1984); J. Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and*

democratic practices and values. In fact, you have to go back to a time when people like me divined the future by running their fingers over the entrails of some poor chicken.

There weren't very many privileged persons back then; and the ones we had liked it that way. They were comfortable, if not pampered, and more secure than the rest of us. When they had a mind to, mostly during natural or manmade calamities like war, they would make appeals to the rest of us that sounded like we had more in common than we actually did.²⁶ On other occasions, they could get away with acting like people further down the local food chain, hang out where we hung out, and try on our ways of talking and acting. They also could do a lot of things that the rest of us couldn't even imagine trying. The best that the rest of us could do was to make fun of them for the way they acted and parody the way they strutted around and "lorded" over us. We didn't have too many chances to do this, and our fun never lasted long. But whenever we had this kind of fun we were pointing out just how arbitrary the whole arrangement was with them on top and us on the bottom. We accepted this arrangement, maybe even believed it was right; but we didn't like it.

the Struggle for Autonomy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); P. Skerry, *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority* (New York: The Free Press, 1993); H. McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). Cathy Clark has led the Research Initiative on Social Entrepreneurship (RISE) program for several years. RISE is an applied research project on for-profit and nonprofit social ventures and social venture capital. The project is jointly supported by the Social Enterprise Program and the Eugene M. Lang Center for Entrepreneurship at Columbia University. According to her website, RISE "was the first national survey of investment vehicles that make early-stage equity investments in scalable for-profit ventures which have positive social or environmental impacts. The RISE Double Bottom Line Investor Directory is the first national searchable public database of these funds. These resources, reports and other information are available at www.riseproject.org." What is notable about Professor Clark's work is that her research team and ours, whose work was funded by the Kauffman Foundation, came up with the idea of a "hybrid" business at the same time. Though our report came out a couple months before hers did, the dataset on which she based her observations is far more extensive than our own. It provides a clearer test of this idea than we could attempt. Her writing on the subject should be consulted.

²⁶ Smith, 1986.

The problem today is that the boundary line between people who are more privileged and the rest of us simply isn't as clear as it once was. The rest of us may not be as rich or accomplished and secure as they are. However, we have more chances to taste privilege today, to act like privileged persons act for more than a little while, and to pass those tastes and habits on to our children. Our pleasure comes with a price tag, a pretty good one it turns out. In return for the privilege of acting like our betters, more of us have had to assume responsibilities that are part of a privileged person's birthright. We also have borne the weight that comes with acting better than we probably are.

The part about getting used to acting privileged isn't so hard for most of us to take. The challenge is how to make us every bit as responsible and accountable as we are increasingly privileged. Fortunately for us all, Americans and people that want to become Americans have been working on this problem for over 400 hundred years, and we've come up with some really good ways of getting around it.

People versed in civic capitalism don't parody or mock the prosperous, at least not as much as they once did, anyway. They emulate them. What a society rich in civic capitalism does is create ever more ways for distinctly unequal persons to act more alike. All we need is a shot at wearing shoes, or driving cars, or living in houses, and donating our time and money, or behaving publicly in ways that remind us of how we expect privileged people to think and act.

History has taught us an important lesson about how to make a community that works well and prospers. Drs. Putnam and Florida had their hands on part of the answer; but they were too married to the idea that their part was the only one that mattered. The fact is that good communities have tradition-bound, church-going, lodge-joining team bowlers *and* gay poetry-reading computer programmers that just got off the boat. You need both.

American communities are something of a paradox. Another way of putting it is that the way of life people practice in their community reflects lots of

paradoxical principles and practices. The point is it works; and that may be the biggest surprise of all.²⁷

It turns out that civic capitalism is well suited to a messy world. Maybe that's why Americans make so many people that are good at it. They come up with answers to questions that blend older and newer ways of doing something or thinking about a problem. They aren't unmindful of the past; but they aren't tethered to it, either. Even when they act by themselves, they aren't alone or working without a cultural net.²⁸

Anyone who ever read Cicero could have told us this, of course. He composed a rather lengthy treatise on the subject of responsibility in 44 BC. One of the best and most quoted lines from that essay was "non nobis solum nati sumus." Translated roughly, Cicero was telling us that we are not born for ourselves alone. We were here for each other. A haplessly outdated idea, perhaps, but it certainly rang true for me.

Assuming that I got even half right what Cicero tried to say, then the best thing those of us that have more can do is figure out new and better ways for persons with less to get more. We don't do this because we owe them anything, but because in some larger social and moral sense we are ultimately no less accountable to them than they are to us.

My colleagues might take this as a sign that I should be pushed to the head of the line as the next long pig on the spit at a cannibal's cookout. But the fact is that what I'm saying isn't a new idea. It's not quite as old as what Cicero said, going back a mere 400 or 500 hundred years to the Renaissance, but it's been around long enough to matter to generations of humanists who had to figure out what their obligations were and how best to use what they knew.

Those of us in the humanities and social sciences have always been split on how to view everybody else's wealth and how we should treat rich or powerful people. Some of my peers have extolled the virtues of wealth and praised the good works accomplished with it. Others have preferred to admonish people

²⁷ Monti, 1999.

²⁸ DiLorenzo, 2004.

that were accomplished and wealthy, using much stronger words and raising doubts about their chances for immortality if they didn't act better.²⁹

So far as I've been able to tell, nobody back then came right out and said that having a lot of money or power was bad. That idea would have to wait a couple hundred years before being popularized by theorists with a decidedly "leftist" and even radical bent in their brains. These would be Marxists who believe that behind every great notion is a perfume salesman and post-modernists who never met a good idea that couldn't be turned bad if you twisted it long enough. They rebuke anyone with money or power and turn a suspicious light on anything rich or powerful persons do or have a hand in making, which gives them a lot of material to work with.

What I propose here is much more in keeping with the tradition of promoting good works, even when these good works keep already wealthy or powerful people wealthy and powerful. In my work as a humanist, I reaffirm the origin of civics and the call to duty of the people that Cicero thought could pull it off best. Mind you, I don't mean to say that rich folks are the very best or only persons capable of doing good works. I'm only saying that they are in the best *position* to do more good, because they have more to do good with.

Besides, it isn't just rich folks that get to act privileged anymore. Men and women of less wealth or social standing today have taken on duties and felt obligations that a long time ago belonged only to persons with better pedigrees.³⁰ I may never be President or Chairman of the board. But I get to vote, have a smaller but well-appointed castle, ride in a scaled-down horseless carriage, wear clothes and other finery that are knock-offs of the stuff that kings wear, eat the same foods, play the same kinds of games, and even own stock in the kingdom.

What's too bad is that the story of how persons from different social stations or ancestries came to share the same kinds of responsibilities and privileges, and as a result act and think more like each other than they may have recognized, is not told often enough. Nor is this celebrated often enough

²⁹ Martines, 1980, pp. 210-214.

³⁰ DiLorenzo, op. cit., pp. 93-109.

as a huge cultural accomplishment. The social worlds that human beings make for each other in this society are a lot more elegant, interesting, and balanced than we've been led to believe. In the remainder of the essay I turn my attention to how members of the *theory class* who should have seen this missed it by way more than a mile.

Paid to be learned, sharp-eyed, or opinionated, people like me are unofficial members of a *theory class*, men and women who think and often write for a living. The ones who do what I do observe how other human beings behave and make sense of the world. Sometimes we tell them how to make it work better. Otherwise, we like to draw larger lessons or morals about what people do and think. On our best days, which don't come around often enough, we uncover the complex elegance behind simple facts or find order in surprising and confusing places. On all the other days, we pass our time sharing what we know with anyone who will listen and sometimes with people who would rather not.

Boston is a particularly good place to uncover the surprises and elegance that people build into the worlds they make. Most any city would be, of course, which is why professional observers have long turned their attention to them. We all wanted to figure out how so many different kinds of people could possibly get along in the same spot. Unfortunately for me, it's precisely because Boston is such an interesting place that it also is the feeding and breeding ground for many other people who do what I do. In every sense of the phrase, Boston is a kind of elephant's graveyard for academics. It's where all college professors want to go to die.

This is both a good and bad thing. On the one hand, I am surrounded by many smart and skilled people. I like their energy. Some of their ideas are novel and insightful, too. On the other hand, there's a self-congratulatory tone to much of what they say and what they write seems awfully familiar at times.

We really shouldn't be surprised. There are so many of us today trying to make sense of other people. More than there were in the past. So, the number of learned, sharp-eyed, and opinionated people was bound to exceed the supply of big discoveries out there waiting to happen. That's why the noise-to-brilliance ratio around here is so out of whack at times.

What should surprise more of us is just how *alike* so many members of the theory class sound these days when we talk about how well people in the United States get along. People who usually can't agree on much of anything beyond how smart they are have come up with remarkably similar arguments about how flabby and ineffective our civic lives have become. Furthermore, we aren't expecting things to get appreciably better any time soon. Our way of life simply doesn't make as much sense as it once did. Too many pieces don't seem to fit. Indeed, the only place many of us expect to find security and good sense any more is in a cultural cul-de-sac filled with people just like us.

To be sure, Boston isn't like every other place in the United States. What people do and think around here won't necessarily tell us how people in every other place will act or what they believe in. However, if there's any validity to what I've said about people in Boston, then some of it may also apply to the people you know best and the way of life you're most familiar with wherever you happen to live.

Other than what I'm going to say in this essay about the people of Boston, for whom I have nothing but great affection and the utmost regard, this is the last respectful thing you're going to hear from me. Most of my other comments will be reserved for the members of my class, the "theory class." We who think for a living have turned our penchant for solitary pursuits, our inability to work well with almost no one but ourselves, and our barely muffled disdain for the trials and triumphs of everyday people into a far-reaching critique of American civic life and culture. Frankly, we're snobs. Worse than that, much of the time I think we're wrong.

Contrary to what many professional people watchers and prophets say about our disconnection from each other and from the places where we live and work, the people of Boston show each other daily that the place where they live and work matters to them. American cities (and increasingly American towns and smaller out-of-the-way places, too) are growing more accustomed to taking in different kinds of people and having to wrestle with different ways of looking at the world.³¹ You don't have to live in Boston to learn how different

³¹ Monti, 1999.

kinds of people figure each other out. It's just easier to see how all the bumping and reconciling actually works in a bigger place packed with many different kinds of people running around.

To be sure, there are pieces of Boston and pieces of how individuals live here that reflect poorly on them and us. After all, what good can you say about a culture that allows its children to kill each other so readily, except that it will run out of targets long before it does bullets? Or, that the adults who buy the poison children sell probably won't last appreciably longer than their killers? Not much good, I would venture. At the same time, you can say nothing but good about a people who refuse to give up on their children and work hard to show young people how to get along better than they have in the past.³²

The fact is that the city's most rundown neighborhoods were always more than slums filled with troubled people. Beacon Hill was never *just* a gilded enclave, an early gated community without gates. People in neighborhoods that lost many of their long-time residents haven't lost their moral compass just because yuppies are moving in. Old timers don't always teach the newcomers readily or well. But they will get around to it eventually.

Call them all grumpy civic capitalists.

Contemporary public intellectuals and garden variety university researchers are still working ground that Alexis de Tocqueville first broke almost two centuries ago. The seeds Tocqueville planted proved particularly hardy and still draw admiring nods from scholars trying to figure out this country and its people. I know and admire his ideas, too. In this essay, however, I want to pay more attention to what I think Tocqueville and others missed altogether or passed over with too light a brush.

Let's begin with his idea that Americans are more equal than they are alike. The equality we have at least in principle before the law and at the ballot box is important, to be sure. The superficial equality or "aliqueness" we accomplish through everything we buy and use is important, too, but not necessarily in a good way. Tocqueville wasn't wrong to point his finger at these expressions of "equality" and wonder what role they'd play in helping or hindering Americans

³² *The Boston Globe*, November 5 and 6, 2006.

when it came to building a unified country. If the way people in Boston get along is like the way people act where you live and work, however, then Tocqueville might have been about us being more equal than we can ever be alike. He also might have been wrong about where the most important sources of our “alike-ness” and “equality” could be found.

People in Boston are not equal. I know it. More importantly, they know it. They are not equal in their aptitudes, tastes, or in the condition of their lives. In a couple of ways that people like me think are especially noteworthy, most notably in the amount of wealth some persons have and other’s don’t have, people in Boston and elsewhere in America have actually become a little more unequal than they used to be. But it’s not just the fact that some people have more money around here than others do that bothers those of us who hang out in my corner of the theory class. We find that differences in wealth, power, or prestige are played out in many parts of one’s life, including how truly equal people are when they stand in front of a judge or when they want to influence law makers.

This bothers some of us more than it does others in Boston, and in your hometown, too, I’d wager. But no one who is bothered by all this inequality has yet come up with a plan to close the gap much less erase the differences between those Americans who have a lot and those with very little. The theory class, many of whose members profess to be bothered a lot by inequality, is hard pressed to come up with fresh ideas about how to make more of us passably better off. They haven’t a clue about how to do much more than fiddle around the edges of inequality.

This situation may be hopeless. There simply may not be anything that can be done, except perhaps soften or broaden a little more the top and bottom parts of the middle class. No matter what, some number of people in Boston and America generally will continue to move up (or down) the social ladder wherever they live, just as Americans have been doing since the 17th century. But the likelihood that a good idea about how to do much more than that will pop out the mouth of somebody in the theory class is small indeed.³³

³³ I may be speaking prematurely. A group in Boston is patenting a process that will enable low and moderate-income people, even young people, to become investors in the stock market. If

The big news already coming out of Boston, however, is that much bigger changes might not be necessary. If I've captured what people in Boston are saying and showing about what really matters to them, they've already made quite dramatic changes in how they look at the world and behave toward each other. More importantly, these changes have everything and nothing to do with how wealthy they are. Their way of viewing the world and treating other people is actually more important than how they divide up the goodies. If it weren't, there'd be a whole lot more fighting and bickering in Boston than we have seen in recent years. Life around here is far from equal and definitely not good for lot of people. But that hasn't discouraged anybody from trying to make whatever seems to be working in Boston work better.

All these changes lead me away from Tocqueville's conclusion about what matters most to the Americans that live and work in Boston and how we get along as well as we do as often as we do. Assuming people in Boston aren't all *that* different from the ones you know best, Americans aren't more equal than they're alike. *People are more alike than they are equal.*

Our similarities go much deeper than our tastes in food or the style of clothing we put on, things that social critics ever since Tocqueville have insisted made us alike in only superficial ways. We also share more important things, too, like the ideas we hold, the rules we follow, the customs we adopt, and even the kinds of groups we join. Our likeness doesn't necessarily come quickly or easily. It is earned and learned by trying on parts of someone else's way of life.

We all know that people watch and mimic each other all the time and no one gives it much thought. *But when very different kinds of people, like men and women, start aping each other Tocqueville said they were "inverting the natural order of conscience."* They were turning the world on its head by doing things they either shouldn't be doing or weren't supposed to be able to do. The trading off usually lasted just a little while. Then people returned to acting like they customarily did. On occasions when the switching became

their idea works, the ranks of the "ownership class" in America will be greatly expanded. More of us than ever will be alike.

more frequent and less surprising, everyone saw that the world could change without falling apart.

What people in Boston have been doing more of lately is the cultural equivalent of walking around in each other's shoes. All the small moments of trading off and turning the world on its head serve a much larger cultural purpose. Bostonians that became even a little more familiar with each other had a better chance to see the world as others see it. They didn't have to agree on every little thing. They just needed to know how other persons were likely to act and whether they could be counted on.

The lesson I and others can take from this for the people of Boston is as important as it is simple. *People can be alike and different at the same time.* On its face, this wouldn't seem to be a particularly big or even interesting idea. We all know people who are different from us in some ways and like us in others. However, from the perspective of a community where different kinds of persons – white, black and brown ones, rich and poor ones – are thrown together and have to figure out how to get along, working out how people can be alike and different at the same time is a very big deal.

The bad but not surprising news is that hammering out these kinds of accommodations isn't easy. People sometimes fight, even when they're usually on good terms. Fighting also happens among people that don't know each other or may have good reason to be wary. But if they have any chance of getting along, different kinds of people – Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic ones, Dominican and Puerto Rican ones – have to see each other dealing with everyday and extraordinary matters just like the rest of us do.³⁴ Then, at some point, different kinds of people have to find moments when their ways of managing these matters can be reconciled or ignored. Like I said, it's hard work and takes time. The good news is that Bostonians (and the rest of us, too) have been working hard at this for near 400 years and have a pretty good idea about how to pull it off or at least know that they can make it work.

The foundation of their solution to this puzzle is found in the way early colonists practiced religion and later real and would-be Americans came to act

³⁴ Alexander, 2006, pp. 429-451.

like they were part of distinctive ethnic groups. Basically, what happened is that religious people learned they had to soft peddle their doctrinal disputes and adopt words and ways of behaving in public that were inclusive. Immigrants and various minority populations had to learn that same skill, if they were to have any hope of making themselves into a self-conscious and effective group that could get along with representatives from any of the city's other ethnic peoples. That said, men and women from different religions and the leaders of their respective churches, synagogues, meeting houses, and mosques figured out how to do this before and better than their ethnic brethren ever have, which is why so few of us find it necessary to fly airplanes into each other's houses.

Many persons like me who put together intellectual puzzles for a living make a bigger deal than is either necessary or helpful about differences. We also tend to downplay similarities when we're not ignoring them altogether. Surprisingly, social scientists have produced all the evidence anyone would ever need to discount the fractured and conflicted view of the world that we like to push. It's to be found in the accumulated body of quantitative research we leave in many books and in virtually all the papers we publish in academic journals. When you look at all the sophisticated statistical comparisons social scientists have made of different kinds of Americans, it turns out that Americans are different, but they're not all *that* dissimilar or different. The same would be said of people in Boston.

Yes, the profile of white people is different from that of minorities, and the profile of women doesn't correspond exactly to that of men's *in some ways*. And, yes, the differences are real. They are not statistical anomalies. But the differences aren't as great as we like to make them out to be. That's why the correlations or measures of association we cite when comparing the life chances of various kinds of persons – as one would if he were to compare how much more money men make than women do – aren't especially big. The theory class also tends to overlook how much convergence there is in the ways different kinds of people have come to look at the world.

There's just a lot more overlap than gap in the way different kinds of Americans live and think. Furthermore, the gaps are shrinking. The differences may not be shrinking as quickly as many of us would like (or fear), but we are

definitely becoming closer or more alike, even if we never can be exactly alike or equal.

The significance of this convergence should be clearer to us and celebrated more than it is. The reason it isn't has to do with the way all of us in the theory class have been taught to look at the world and talk about making it better. No one affiliated with the theory class or who seeks out our work – certainly not the scientists, or loud-mouthed commentators we see on television, or the politicians that want to jump on or stop someone else's bandwagon – gets off this hook. We all have grimy collars and dirt beneath our fingernails. The fact is that the theory class and its fellow travelers aren't rewarded for discovering how much alike different kinds of Americans have become. People who do what I do for a living are more likely to be published and have our ideas taken seriously when we find new and bigger differences between particular types of persons or groups.

In places like Boston, there are a lot of people becoming more familiar with other peoples' ways and points of view. Again, this may not be happening as often or as quickly as you or I would prefer, but it's happening every day in virtually every corner of the city. The record of how often different kinds of people struggle in Boston to find common ground and reach an accommodation is simply too clear to ignore.

That's why it doesn't make much sense to worry about a small drop in the number of bowling teams and other kinds of groups that we join. People don't have to be in each other's presence every day or keep a big public eye on persons that are different from them. We have a pretty good feel for whom we can count on; and the parts we don't figure out today we'll be working on tomorrow. The differences among us can be gotten around, even when they can't be resolved to anyone's complete satisfaction. There still are plenty of groups out there working hard to mind our business along with their own. A number of them are new kinds of groups, just as Florida asserts and Putnam's critics have contended.³⁵ They may not be like the ones our grandparents liked;

³⁵ Peter Ester and Henk Vinken, 2003.

but they get the job done. On the other hand, there still are a lot of us that join the kinds of groups to which our parents and grandparents belonged.

This brings us back to a rather important point. Putnam's view of how good life used to be in this country, how much better we used to watch each other's back or mind each other's business, and how glorious our record of making and belonging to associations once was is just so much drivel. So, too, for that matter, is Florida's idea that somehow life's going to get much better in my town if I go out and capture more gay people, bohemians, and immigrants than your town does. The only thing worse than their ignorance of history, cooked numbers, oversimplified view of the world, and public preening was our gullibility. They didn't sell us anything we weren't ready to buy. The fact that it was real "scientists" who were doing the selling only made it easier for us to be suckered in. We wanted to believe that Americans had lost their way but could find it again.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm all for believing in something. But I've seen nothing from my fellow theory classmates to convince me that Americans had actually contracted a case of "declining civic fortunes" at the end of the 20th century.

A much friendlier and more uplifting conclusion is warranted here, I think. *Bostonians from different backgrounds and social stations are not hiding from each other more than they did in the past.* If anything, they have a better chance today of walking in each other's cultural shoes (and seeing how really similar those shoes are) than they did in the past. The nightmare that James Madison and Alexis de Tocqueville had about Americans retreating to their own small private circles and ignoring their civic chores and each other simply hasn't come to pass. People in Boston have more in common than a willingness to spat and dredge up old tribal animosities; and we've seen that they do work together. Even when they're not, however, they are watching each other. Critics like Putnam may not admire this kind of watching from a distance and mimicry; but the parallel play Americans do is a necessary precursor for group

play down the road. If you don't think so, I suggest you spend some time watching children working things out in a sandbox.³⁶

Even if people in Boston were running off to the opposite corners of their communal sandboxes as much as Putnam and others fear, Florida hopes will work out, and so-called postmodernists embrace, it wouldn't mean that Boston was broken. It would only mean that more of us today have the luxury of doing whatever our own thing is more than we did in the past. It wouldn't mean that we'd stopped watching out for their well-being, don't care for them, or are unwilling to work together when the need arises. Thanks to all those people that walk on behalf of every good cause imaginable (and lots of other folks who make a point of showing the rest of us how they live well and get along) we still have a good feel for how other people think and act and don't have to constantly attend to them.

The much ballyhooed "golden age" of civic associations in the United States, which began shortly after the Civil War and was over by the mid-20th century, certainly was impressive. Unfortunately, all those lodges and clubs that Putnam holds in high regard weren't nearly as inclusive or looking out for everybody else as he would have us think. They were organized by men and women who found comfort, a measure of security, and a collective voice with people who were a lot like them. To be sure, some organizations drew members from different social classes, religious denominations, and probably people from the several ethnic populations in their community. Most apparently did not, however. As Jason Kaufman has shown us, the view of "voluntarism" as something that would draw together the various strands of a community's population that was promoted by Madison and Tocqueville was overstated and far too optimistic.

«Organization building became an end in itself during the golden age...and the struggle to create exclusive voluntary organizations prompted many disparate social groups to "find themselves" through organizing. Recruitment, retention, and rivalry promoted a system of social differentiation (...) in which

³⁶ Monti, 1999, pp. 206-207, 221-223.

voluntarism, brotherhood, and mutual aid became bywords for segregation, not integration.»³⁷

In short, neither the political or “associational” arenas of American civic life were “inherently” disposed to bringing different kinds of people together. Not that this was a bad thing, but there was a whole lot more parallel playing, mimicry, and competition among the various “social groups” that wanted to be recognized going on than there was immediate collaboration and good feeling. The cautionary lesson in this for us is clear. Just because members of the theory class say our “associations” and politics seem more divided and contentious than they used to be that doesn’t mean they actually are. Whatever state of coherence or collapse our associations and political institutions are in today didn’t happen because different kinds of people suddenly found new and ingenious ways to avoid each other. We’ve been acting this way for quite some time. It’s nothing new.

As best as we can tell, then, politics never was the only place much less the best place where different Bostonians were going to learn the art of getting along. If anything, that happened at least as often at work as it did at stump speeches and voting booths or in lodge halls. The picture of a divided Boston and America works every bit as well for politicians and political commentators as it does for those of us who roost on the academic branches of the “theory class.” We all take shelter in its shade and have acquired a taste for its bitter fruit.

We need to take another look at the broader civic contributions that all kinds of businesses make to communities every day. Businesses of all sizes have explored for several hundred years now the connection between making a profit and giving something back to the communities where the profit was made. They have done so consistently, if not evenly or always with a smile on their corporate faces. Happy or not, the foundation of civic capitalism rests on

³⁷ Kaufman, 2002, p. 6. Alexander, op. cit., pp. 96-105, later made the same point in his book when he admonished “neo-Tocquevillians” that nothing inherently “democratic” or inclusive is accomplished by having lots of people participating in a great number and variety of voluntary associations. Such organizations might just as easily be used to support undemocratic and exclusionary goals.

the idea that those who have been blessed assume obligations equal to their social and economic standing. It turns out that businessmen and women were every bit the stewards Tocqueville speculated but could not believe they would become. By the start of the 20th century, business people, maybe especially the bigger and more successful ones, had done a good job of passing the notion of giving something back to many of their employees. It was a singular cultural accomplishment.

All that I've done here is to take this argument to its logical conclusion.³⁸ *We all know that businesses are all about making money. But at least in Boston, they render much broader cultural services to all of us, too. They also are civic associations.*

Evidence of this is clear in Boston and no doubt in your hometown. Now, we may choose to ignore what's happening right around us. However, the growing convergence in the missions of profit and non-profit organizations that's occurring nationally ought to make it harder for us to keep businesses out of our social surveys and make us think twice about how depleted our civic capital accounts are these days.

Even the shopping part of doing business is more important to our civic lives than many of us realize.³⁹ Somewhere along the line, unfortunately, the idea that shopping was one thing that different kinds of people did together every day was lost and the idea that Americans pay more attention to shopping than to their neighbors took its place. A man named Thorstein Veblen is credited with anticipating this problem back at the turn of the *last* century. He wrote a book entitled *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen, 1934).⁴⁰ It was all about the way people with too much time and money on their hands went overboard and indulged themselves, often wildly and excessively so. They

³⁸ We've already cited a great deal of social scientific evidence to back up this claim. What's notable about the following sources is that they were published around the time that "big business" began to dwarf small local businesses and acquire the reputation for being inattentive stewards of their community. See: Wright Mills and Ulmer, 1970; Fowler, 1970, pp. 154-163; Pellegrin and Coates, 1970; Mott, 1970; Butler and Kozmetsky, 2004; Cumbler, 1989.

³⁹ Monti, 1999, pp. 319-347.

⁴⁰ Veblen, 1934.

were “conspicuous consumers,” he said, the kind of people that knew the cost of everything and the value of nothing. As far as Veblen was concerned, they were becoming more numerous and obnoxious. Nothing good could come from such displays of self-indulgence.

Today, there are actually many more people with a genuine shot at acting like the conspicuous consumers and enjoying such privileges that come with membership in the “leisure class” than when Veblen wrote his famous book. That includes people that aren’t at all well-to-do. Veblen was definitely ahead of his time in that regard. But his description of the leisure class, its tastes and habits fit him and his circle of acquaintances far better than it did most other Americans back in 1900. They were, as people like me today are, members in good standing of the “theory class”.

Most academics and other public scholars never become rich. But we certainly learned early on how to curry favor with the rich and get substantial presents from them. Indeed, we qualified for membership in Veblen’s “leisure class” long before Richard Florida invented his fictional “creative class” and puffed himself up as its champion.

Researchers, writers, and teachers built comfortable careers out of stories they told about people with far less power, wealth and status than they had. The “theory class” was the voice and conscience for more prosperous people. That’s why social scientists spend a lot more time looking at the poor than we ever spend looking at the well-to-do and privileged. Part of our mission was to find a way for the poor and less-than-desirable people around us to fit in better.

The trouble is we never had to deny the existence of inequality in order to make the point that it’s okay for people to be more alike than they will ever be equal. As we’ve seen here, the effects of living amidst great wealth and poverty in Boston simply aren’t as nasty or widely disruptive as we expect. Maybe that’s because the same rituals and rites of accreditation that so many critics of our contemporary consumer culture like to scream about also draw us closer together by blurring the lines between our several social classes and races. Shopping and investing in Boston is something we can do together.⁴¹ People

⁴¹ Consult the following sources for a more sophisticated treatment of the way people use money and credit in the United States and how we created a “consumer culture”: Parker, 1976;

simply have more in common than we think. Furthermore, the more we think about other people this way the better off we'll all be in the long run.⁴²

The rituals and values embedded in the way we shop and spend can actually help make our communities better. It doesn't matter in the slightest that when we improve our communities this way we're doing it only one person at a time and probably couldn't explain how, even if our life depended on it.⁴³ Connected by circumstance and habit if not by sympathy, we share a parallel fate in the small places we live and work. Our sympathies may grow in time beyond the tightly knit bonds of our families, friends and neighbors. Or, they may not. To the extent that our views of the world and feeling toward others do broaden, however, it is because we had many more chances to try on each other's habits and points of view than we ever had occasion to think about out loud. We share every bit as conspicuously as we consume.

There's actually a lot of not-equal-but-becoming-more-alike stuff going on all the time in Boston. I suspect that it happens in your hometown, too. Our shortcoming as professional observers and chroniclers of the contemporary American scene has been that we don't pay attention to all the time Americans put into getting along with other people, including the ones we don't know especially well or like.

Compiling a list of all the ways that people in Boston learn to share by tithing up, donating down, extending all manner of credit or borrowing from each other would be difficult, perhaps unimaginably so. What I have noted in this book are only some of the bigger ways in which people from different walks of life do the cultural equivalent of walking around in each other's shoes.

To be sure, most of the exchanges are temporary. Only a few ever become more permanent, and it doesn't happen quickly. Some of the trading off is done out of necessity. On many other occasions, though, it seems almost accidental. The effect, sometimes consciously but usually not, is to make the boundary

Horowitz, 1985; Cross, 1993; Zelizer, 1994; Schmidt, 1995; Nissenbaum, 1996; Calder, 1999.

⁴² Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons And Other Hangouts At The Heart Of A Community* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1999).

⁴³ Monti, 1999, pp. 348-377.

lines between people from different social classes, racial and ethnic populations, religions, generations and genders fuzzier or more porous than they might appear to outsiders and even to the participants themselves.

Men and women at the top of Boston's social pyramid these days, for instance, are reminded that more is required of serious people than good breeding and "purposeful effort directed to some serious end." That is, they should do something more with their lives than hold a "make-believe" job – one that creates the appearance of "purposeful employment" but not much more.⁴⁴

For their part, the men and women trying to get to the top of the pyramid have learned that wealth doesn't carry the honorific clout they thought it would. Honor, much to their great surprise, has to be earned every bit as much as a good-sized fortune. For people closer to the base of the pyramid, the lesson is slightly different but equally important. They want what people above them already have. Emulation is at the root of their plan to acquire property and wealth. Once they get some property and wealth, however, they will find that ownership carries no guarantee that they will be acknowledged as worthy people. They cannot count on being openly embraced by folks higher up on the pyramid.

People react differently to this kind of news. Some of us continue to look upward most of the time, hoping to be touched on the shoulder by somebody with greater standing in the community. Other contenders for greatness certainly keep an eye on who's above them, but they also are mindful of the men and women standing off to the side and on levels of the pyramid beneath them.

Either way, the acquisition of property by men and women from populations that are looked down upon is important. It's important not just for them but also for everyone like them that hasn't made it yet and maybe never will. Not everyone can be a success, and people seem to understand and accept that. But those who do become successful show other people that it can be done and how to do it. The world isn't as closed off and the people above them

⁴⁴ Veblen, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

aren't quite as pinched as they've been made out to be. These living "success stories" share some of their secrets with their children and pass what they have acquired to them as well. You can imagine that the inheritors will be grateful and proud of their parent's accomplishments. Their neighbors probably will be, too.

Men and women who have been at the top of the pyramid for a while may not acknowledge the success of people that have only just recently scratched their way a little higher. But there's a very good chance that people on their way up will be honored by men and women who come from the same background they do. That's because it's easier for people to sing the praises of someone who's like them than it is to sing for someone who isn't.⁴⁵

Acceptance in the larger community doesn't require successful men and women to be heroes in the eyes of their own people. It certainly doesn't hurt their chances when they are, though. This is how a place like Boston becomes a stage on which aliens are magically transformed into a new kind of human being, one that's both ethnic and American at the same time.⁴⁶ A particular kind of fealty is built up in a place like Boston, one that's based on a belief in prosperity and nurtured by getting along with people that aren't like you. At the same time, this kind of fealty and feeling isn't as pronounced as it used to be.⁴⁷

People at the top of Boston's pyramid have actually given up a great deal over the years and had to put their own faith to the test in some very important ways. None has proven more important or obvious, however, than their willingness to accept less prominent people as candidates for clean work, more schooling, better clothing, housing, food, doctoring and even insurance against many of life's catastrophes. Swelling the ranks of people with more leisure and wealth didn't happen all at once or for everybody; but it has worked out for a lot of us.

Common people didn't get all this for nothing. They were asked to change their behavior in some important ways in exchange for the chance to acquire

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 35-38.

⁴⁶ Smith, op. cit..

⁴⁷ Monti, 1999, pp. 24-55.

even a little more wealth and personal freedom. They had to exhibit better taste, which basically meant copying people above them on the community's social pyramid. They were supposed to act like they cared when they offended somebody, even if they didn't and especially if they didn't like the other person. Finally, they had to acquire the same kind of proprietary feeling for the city that in the past only wealthy and well-placed persons were obliged to have.

Just because someone goes along with the program, of course, doesn't mean he will be successful or happy with everything in his life. On the other hand, people that don't go along with the program usually do not live happily ever after. There are exceptions, to be sure, but most of us don't lead storybook lives.

Patience really is a virtue. It actually took leading citizens a couple hundred years before they trusted everyday people enough to let them to decide when and where they could take grievances to the street. Who or what can be attacked isn't left up to the guys on top anymore, either. At the same time, community leaders don't dismiss such outbursts as much as they used to. Everyday people have to be more careful when they want to let off a little steam these days. They also can't feign surprise when somebody wants to hold them accountable for the damage they do.

It's not that common people were ever unschooled in the practice of civil unrest. Quite the opposite was true. They knew too well how to act out and get their way by using violence. It just took them a long time to learn to use violence less often and to be more selective in what they went after once they finally let their real character show.

There were other and newer ways for regular people to show that they could come together responsibly and act in concert. They did this by taking on many of the social duties that once belonged to a community's wealthier and higher status residents. People who weren't born with anything like a silver spoon in their mouth adopted the "mandatory code of decency" embraced by people above them on the city's social pyramid. One important part of that code

required adults to spend time in “clubs, sewing-circles, sports, charity organizations and other like social functions.”⁴⁸

Perhaps now we can appreciate the full measure of Robert Putnam’s despair when he thought people were turning away from voluntary associations and showing signs that they didn’t trust each other as much as they used to. He didn’t put it this way, but Putnam saw us turning our backs on the “code of decency” that Thorstein Veblen said in 1899 distinguished people who had joined the ranks of “conspicuous consumers.”

This also helps to explain why Richard Florida and all the people in his camp made such a fuss about the new ways people were finding to hang out together and fulfill their civic obligations. Florida, no less than Putnam, wants people to act decently. He just wants the rest of us to accept the fact that gay, poetry reading, computer programming immigrants are ready to be part of the team.

Many other changes in the everyday lives of “regular people” reflect the way they have become more like upper-class folks. Many persons these days hire someone else to pick up after us, watch over our children and elderly parents, and prepare our food when we’re too busy or just too lazy to worry about it. We can rent a chauffeur and a rug cleaner, find a variety of “handymen” to keep our house in good working order, and even hire people to clean up after our pets. Then there are all the gadgets and machines we buy to do chores we’d rather not have to do or to do nothing more than amuse ourselves.

The rest of us may like bright, shiny objects just as much as wealthy people do. But the fact that we have them is at least as big a social and cultural accomplishment as it is a personal triumph. All the gilded stuff we have around us is a sign that the “code of decency” to which Veblen referred is alive and kicking just about everywhere and inside almost everybody. This includes transients, unattached young people, and minorities. These bearers of bad cultural news are still around; but they aren’t nearly as scary as they used to be because we have worked so tirelessly and well to de-fang them. We helped

⁴⁸ Veblen, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

make them and they helped make themselves into commuters, tourists, students, and ethnic people. They did so by practicing the same cultural slights of hand that the rest of us use everyday to fool ourselves into thinking and acting as if we really are equal to the human beings that run the place.

We have come to pay taxes to governments, just like the wealthy do, and sometimes even more than they do. We also have come to expect favors from governments. The favors and donations that the rest of us get won't be as big as the ones doled out to big wigs. They are tokens, affording us a taste of equality and inverting the natural order of conscience enough to make us a little more like wealthier and well-placed people.

We are all citizens, and we are all consumers. It's how generations of Bostonians have built a better community one person and purchase at a time. We make each other more credible and credit-worthy by acting like any conventional person would be expected to act.

Businessmen and women accomplish much the same goal. They do it by working together rather self-consciously, often investing much that they have in the hope that everything they touch together will turn out better. They also do it one-on-one with us, their customers, in countless civil exchanges in which we give a small part of our wealth to someone with a lot more on his shelf than we have on ours.⁴⁹ All their money and deal-making enforces a set of customs around tithing and donating that less wealthy and well-placed persons must learn. Otherwise, these lesser men and women will have no hope of being taken seriously or being accepted into the community of believers that more well-placed and wealthy people have traditionally occupied.

Ethnic people are no less prone to competing and cooperating with each other than are businessmen and women. But their unique contribution to building better communities comes by enforcing customs that let both successful and less accomplished men and women see each other as cousins, if not brothers and sisters. It's how they practice being alike and different at the same time.

⁴⁹ Lee, 2002a; Lee, 2002b.

Thanks to all these people, the community created and nurtured in the place called Boston works. People around here have their civic act together, but not because better bred and wealthier Bostonians and the leaders of important institutions like the Catholic Church are doing a good job as leaders today. Everybody else has their act together better because they had many years of trying on the rules, customs and ideas that their superiors used to think were theirs alone to use and abuse.

The other reason Boston's civic culture works as well as it does is that the people living and working here ignored the single most important lesson that would-be social philosophers have been telling them for almost 400 years. Namely, there's only one right way to make a good community, and people that don't follow the right (or left) path to salvation will come to no good end.⁵⁰

With that in mind, I have to say that I'd really like to be around for Boston's 400th birthday party in 2030. I'll certainly be watching to see how Bostonians do their civic homework for as long as I'm here. But mostly I'd like to see how right I was about what I wrote here. Whether I'm still around or not, however, I already know one thing. Even if future Bostonians are doing a good job with their civic homework, there will be people like me ready to tell them how they're really making a mess of things and should be working harder or better together. The good news is that Bostonians probably won't pay any more attention to future finger wagging members of the theory class than they did in the past. Based on what I've seen, people around Boston will be better off if they ignore us. The rest of America probably would be, too.

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⁵⁰ Monti, 1999, pp. 124-240; Alexander, op. cit.

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