

## **Robert D. Putnam between Italy and the United States**

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This article is based on the *laudatio* read at the ceremony to confer the laurea honoris causa in Political Science on Professor Robert D. Putnam at the Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali (LUISS) Guido Carli on 17 May 2011.

### **Putnam and Italy**

Robert D. Putnam has been, among non-Italians, one if not the most influential interpreter of post-war democracy in Italy. Studying the Italian case, Robert Putnam developed a sophisticated approach for understanding what makes contemporary democracies stable or unstable, effective or ineffective, legitimate or not-legitimated. Italy has been for Robert Putnam what America was for Alexis de Tocqueville. Indeed, it is my argument that between the two is detectable a formidable continuity, a common approach to social and political research. Although Robert Putnam drew conclusions about Italian democracy that have been criticised and opposed by many native scholars, nevertheless even the most vociferous among them have had to engage with the scientific work supporting their conclusions. The strength of a scholarly work is not in the degree of consensus it enjoys, but in the fact that it is a necessary reference point for those dealing with the topic investigated by that work. Just as it is meaningless to try to understand America without consulting Tocqueville's work, so it is implausible to understand Italy without engaging with Putnam's work.

### **Putnam's scientific work**

Robert D. Putnam's scientific work has been driven by the need to find answers to important questions, to make those questions the object of empirical examination, to support such examination with parsimonious

arguments and thus to reach reliable and persuasive conclusions. The big questions that Bob has pursued concern the functioning of democracy; that is, he has investigated what it is that guarantees (or might guarantee) that the latter is of high quality. The investigation of democracy continues to be the focus of his scientific work. For forty years (from the first volume in 1970 to the latest volume in 2010) Bob has asked the question that the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville had posed after his American tour of 1831-1832: if democracy is a 'difficult' political system, what then makes it possible? In seeking the answer, Bob has become, it seems to me, more and more and more 'Tocquevillian' in the sense that his research has ended up mirroring most of the insights of the brilliant French investigator, demonstrating their validity with the tools of modern social science. I think that if Tocqueville could have chosen his intellectual heir, he would undoubtedly have appointed Bob – knowing that, as often happens, heirs tend to surpass their masters.

Why is Bob a 'Tocquevillian'? Alexis de Tocqueville was the first major political researcher who linked the smooth functioning of democracy (in his case that of the US) to the existence of favourable conditions external to the democratic process itself. That is, he linked it to the political culture of its citizens and elites (we would say today). In that remarkable work, *De la Democratie en Amerique* (the first part of which was published in 1835, the second in 1840), which has inspired generations of students and scholars and even today is a fundamental text for understanding democracy, Tocqueville concludes that American democracy has not been turned into a 'tyranny of the majority' because of the particular ethos of its members, rather than because of the particular system of separation of powers introduced in Philadelphia forty-four years before his transatlantic voyage. If I look at Bob's work from a Tocquevillian perspective, I seem to detect a consistent evolution, though not without some significant theoretical discontinuities. It seems to me that there are, in fact, three different phases in Bob's work that reflect three different research focuses, although each period is connected to the other. Italian democracy occupies the second period, but the approach that was refined by investigating it thus supported, if not inspired, the work of the following period. It is the evolution of his scientific research that made me think that Bob, in the end, has returned to Tocqueville. We will see why.

### **The first research phase: The elites in democracies**

The first period of Bob's scientific work was the 1970s. In this period the focus of research was political and administrative elites. Bob investigated the beliefs (ways of thinking, values) of the elites who govern and administer the major democracies, assuming that the quality of these elites is a prerequisite for a stable democracy and for its smooth functioning.

Hence the volumes: *The Beliefs of Politicians: Ideology, Conflict, and Democracy in Britain and Italy* (1973), *The Comparative Study of Political Elites* (1976) and *Bureaucrats and Politicians in Western Democracies* (1981, the latter written with Joel D. Aberbach and Bert A. Rockman). These volumes consist of rich data on the attitudes of those who govern modern democracies and the difficult relations between the administrative and political actors and contexts of democratic government. A further development of the interests of this research phase was the research on the characteristics and modes of action of political leaders who attended the G7 summit, the organisation of seven major democracies born in 1976. The volume, *Hanging Together: the Seven-Power Summits* (1984) is the result of this research – research that would receive considerable international attention.

Furthermore, a scientific product of great importance came out of this research: the essay, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games”, published in 1988 in *International Organization*. This essay is still considered one of the most influential contributions (and one of the most quoted) to the field of International Relations. Using the tools of game theory, Bob developed an original model to predict the behaviour of government leaders or ministers of finance in international negotiations. According to this model, the international negotiations between liberal democracies’ governmental leaders consist of simultaneous negotiations that are held at both intra-state and inter-state levels. In internal negotiations, governmental leaders take those positions and strategies (based on the preferences of interest groups, political parties, economic centres, financial establishments) that are useful to their goals, while using external constraints to neutralise those that are dysfunctional. At the same time, in international negotiations, governmental leaders use internal constraints to neutralise or moderate positions (or requests) of other governments that, if accepted, would conflict with their domestic policies. There will be an equilibrium point (that is a win-set position) when the concerns of actors at the two levels finally overlap, thus making international agreement possible. By connecting domestic politics with international politics, Bob was among the first to question, on an epistemological level, the disciplinary distinction between the two. For Bob, if one wanted to understand the behaviour of governments, a model was needed that was capable of combining the analytical aspects of domestic politics (investigated with the tools of Comparative Politics) with those of the international system (investigated with the tools of International Relations). With that essay, we can say that Bob contributed to the definition of a new approach, today known as International Comparative Politics.

## The second research phase: the Italian institutions

The second phase of Bob's scientific work developed during the 1980s, though the research of this period was initiated in the previous decade and then published in the next. This period affects Italy directly because Italian institutions represent the focus of research. Italy, in fact, had offered a great opportunity for those who wanted to understand the reasons behind the (better or worse) functioning of democracy. Italian regions were introduced in 1970 starting as a phase of devolution that the republican constitution of 1948 had promised but not (till then) maintained. Beginning in the 1970s and then developing it in the next decade, Bob's focus was on investigating and monitoring the process of institutionalisation of the Italian regions, work that involved the gathering of a huge amount of empirical data. With the help of two (then) young research assistants (who subsequently went on to brilliant careers, with Robert Leonardi at the LSE now teaching at LUISS and Raffaella Nanetti at the University of Illinois at Chicago), as well as of many other young researchers and interviewers, Bob travelled the length and breadth of the country as a sort of Tocqueville in reverse (coming this time from the New World to investigate the Old one).

The outcome of this complex research was, first, a volume published with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti, *La pianta e le radici: Il radicamento dell'istituto regionale nel sistema politico italiano* [The plant and the roots: the roots of regional government in the Italian political system] (1985) and, then the book *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993), a volume that provoked one of the most heated international debates of the 1990s. On the other hand, the conclusions which Bob reached at the end of his research on the institutionalisation of the Italian regions and displayed with clarity in the volume of 1993 were inevitably 'worrying'. According to the research, in fact, the highly differentiated performance between the Italian regions (high in the north-central regions and low in those of the south) was not to be found (or at least to be found mainly) in the structuring of those institutions, but in the social context within which they had to operate. What 'makes democracy work' is the existence of social capital on which democracy can stand; likewise, democracy does not work properly in the absence of that capital. Thus, with his research on the Italian regions, Bob alighted upon a new concept in the social sciences, that of social capital, a concept which since then has had extraordinary success in social research around the world.

Using a parsimonious approach (a lean and mean definition, as he wrote several times), Bob defined social capital as the 'social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam, 2000: 19). It is the absence of robust social networks, and thus the lack of mutual trust among citizens, which has rendered inefficient the regions of the south and distorted their democratic functioning. Meanwhile, it has been the reverse in the north-central regions. This thesis

sparked a heated debate also because Bob had recourse to different historical trajectories in various parts of Italy to explain the presence or absence of that capital. According to the logic of path dependency, those different historical events had created social arrangements that were then institutionalised in relatively stable patterns of social behaviour. So in the end, the proper functioning of democracy depends on conditions that are external to it and basically on the culture of a given community, its ability to self-organise and foster trust among its members. To those who (like me) believe that institutions are the intervening variable on which one should rely to promote changes in individual and group attitudes, the findings of Bob's research could not but elicit concern. If history has not given us the social capital, then must we despair of building a good democracy? And how does one pursue or create such social capital?

### **The third research phase: Social capital in America**

The third phase of Bob's research aims to answer these questions. Begun in the 1990s, it is still ongoing and more creative than ever. At this stage, in fact, Bob's research focus is represented by the system of associations and organisations that operate between the individuals of liberal society and the institutions of democratic politics. That is why Bob has gone 'back to Tocqueville'. It was Tocqueville, in fact, who argued that a society of free individuals does not need to resort to a Leviathan to regulate relations between them if and only if, among those individuals and public elites, there is a wide range of voluntary associations – associations that aggregate these otherwise isolated individuals so as to solve common problems, without depending on public authorities; associations that, in the 'discovery' of American democracy by Tocqueville, were presented as the real training grounds for citizenship education (in self-government and mutual trust). It was these deep-rooted and extensive citizen organisations that allowed America (according to those who have followed the interpretation of Tocqueville) to remain and prosper as a democratic country.

And it was this civil infrastructure that Bob started to investigate in the early 1990s, reaching troubling conclusions in this case too. First, in an essay published in a specialist journal (*Journal of Democracy*, 1995) and then in a book a few years later under the same title – *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) – Bob showed empirically how those 'Tocquevillian' assumptions of American democracy had been decreasingly true in the period since the 1960s of the last century. Because of technological changes in communication systems and behavioural changes in the cultural system, Americans' predispositions to associate had dramatically declined, thus creating patterns of social relations that were more and more individualised. With a formula that captured the headlines

of many newspapers and the attention of many governmental leaders, Bob argued that, in recent decades, in America the number of bowlers had gone up while the number of bowling leagues had gone down. Again, with the help of sophisticated research methodologies, Bob showed empirically the vertical decline of voluntary associations, the dramatic reduction in social initiatives, and the scaling down of the agencies of collective mobilisation (including trade unions and political parties).

Promoting comparative research, Bob and his team therefore aimed to investigate social capital in other democracies, concluding that its decline was not an exclusively American phenomenon. In the book edited with Susan J. Pharr, *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* (2000) and then in the book he edited, *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society* (2002), it was shown that the decline of social capital in the advanced democracies was correlated with the growth of social inequality, thus falsifying the argument that participation in civil and religious associations contributed historically to the empowerment of the weakest individuals of the society. Bob, however, has not only analytically reconstructed the reasons for that decline, but he has also identified the counter-tendencies to the decline. In America, for example, among these counter-trends is the particular persistence of religious associations. The country continues to be the most religious country among the advanced democracies, a country where religious practice has always been intertwined with political participation, a country where different religions compete with each other. How can a country so intensely religious, with so many different religions, continue to be a country so tolerant?

The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen Bob engaged in research of great methodological and organisational complexity, intended to investigate the relationship between religions and democracy in America. The result of this research is the recently published book with David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion is Reshaping Our Civic and Political Lives* (2010). In this case, the research's results appear much more optimistic than one would expect on the basis of previous research. In *American Grace*, the authors show that religious diversity does not produce social unrest thanks to a specific property: the extreme porosity of the borders between the various religious communities. In America, religious communities are not closed in themselves: each of their members are related to members of other religious communities as well as to those who are not religious; each member of a religious community has in her/his life had other religious experiences; religion has a social character besides its theological nature. This property is epitomised by the religious experience of the two authors of the book. Bob, as is reported in the introduction to the book, was raised an observant Methodist in the 1950s. He converted to Judaism at marriage: he and his wife raised their two children as Jews. One

child married a practicing Catholic, who has since left the church and is now secular. The other child married someone with no clear religious affiliation but who subsequently converted to Judaism. Thus, these overlapping religious identities make possible an intense inter-religious pluralism and, at the same time, guarantee that such a pluralism works in favour of an environment of religious tolerance.

Again, Tocqueville was right in highlighting the social importance of religion in America. Indeed, after him, many scholars have shown how the religious pluralism of the country has allowed and legitimated the development of its political pluralism. Bob has not only confirmed that intuition, but has proved it scientifically, showing the logic that has made possible the combination of religious pluralism and political tolerance. It is hard to say if Bob's conclusions reinforce the idea of American exceptionalism so poignantly described by the French researcher, or if the American experience can be considered as a precursor of transformations under way in other advanced democracies and the European ones in particular. After all, the massive increase of immigration in the latter seems to indicate a development towards an inevitable heterogeneity, not only ethnic but also religious and cultural. Europe (this time as the European Union) also faces the challenge of how to achieve unity in diversity, how to make the most of such diversity, and how to give life to the *e pluribus unum* that the Americans have pursued since the beginning of their new republic.

The fact is that by using the most advanced tools of the social sciences, Bob has produced with his colleague, David E. Campbell, a volume that will be a focus of public and scientific debate, not only in his country. It is a book that might turn out to be in fierce competition with the masterpiece of his French mentor. Bob has shown that the growing diversity of our society (produced by immigration but also by global transformation) may be a threat to stability in the short term; but over the medium-to-long term will certainly be a prerequisite for growth. This leads to the questions: by what means can we connect the short to the long term? How can we build the social capital necessary to absorb the negative consequences of the short term and prepare to receive its benefits in the long run? Besides being a scholar of great talent and an effective organiser of complex research projects, Bob is also a socially committed intellectual. With other colleagues he set up, at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, the Saguaro Seminar, a project aimed at supporting the efforts of civic engagement in America through the dissemination of ideas that can help voluntary associations, both religious and non-religious, to connect with each other, particularly in communities characterised by growing social and economic inequality. The communitarianism of Bob is thus open to external and internal pluralism, contrary (let me add) to a large part of European communitarianism.

### **The intellectual cipher**

The originality of Bob's scientific work is supported by a methodological versatility uncommon among social scientists. For Bob, the research method is a tool for investigating a problem. It is the problem to be solved or understood that determines the method, not the method that selects the problem to be investigated. For this reason, Bob does not belong to any of the various methodological churches to be found in the academic world. Bob is thus a methodological pluralist, as he can switch from using statistical tools, to those based on qualitative research frameworks. Bob is intellectually a liberal, open to diversity, generous in his work, rigorous in his research, and willing to change his mind if the situation demands it. He prefers to beat new paths, rather than singing in a choir already organised. He has many students and friends, but not a specific school. He built institutions of higher education and research, not clubs of uncritical followers and supporters. I have personally witnessed these characteristics of Bob, both scientific and intellectual, since when, between 1986 and 1988, I worked as a Fulbright Scholar in the Department of Government at Harvard University, which he then directed. For Bob, time is a precious resource, a resource that should be administered carefully. Nevertheless, he has never avoided discussions with colleagues and students, and conversations with the larger public.

Because of these properties, not only could he maintain a network of many friends, but he has also received recognition that few political scientists in the world have ever achieved. The Honorary Degree in Political Sciences that has now been given by LUISS joins a long list of international awards. I hope, however, that it will have a special meaning for Bob. Not only because it is the first degree he has ever received from an Italian university, but also because it celebrates the intellectual partnership that has been institutionalised in decades of scientific dialogue between Bob and the Political Sciences (and more generally the Social Sciences) of Italy. I do not know if this partnership is, in its own way, a form of social capital among scholars of different countries, although I like to think of it in those terms. In sum, Bob, welcome to the Italian academic community.

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