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American Frontier History, Citizenship Education and the Social Capital of America

During the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Illinois Senator Barack Obama made perhaps the best speech during that election cycle. One of the more popular parts of the speech was when he said, “I am my brother’s keeper.” As I watched the speech, I agreed with many of the other things he pointed out about America during the speech. It seemed as if he had given a speech for all Americans, regardless of party affiliation. I believed that until I got to work the next day. Several of my colleagues began criticizing the speech, especially the “I am my brother’s keeper” part of the speech I had agreed with the night before. As I listened to their critiques of the speech, I realized why they opposed the “brother’s keeper” idea. My colleagues believed that individual responsibility is the key to the future and that Obama’s words indicated he wanted to create a welfare state for those lazy people that refuse to accept responsibility for their actions. Unfortunately, my colleagues, mainly history teachers, have bought into one of the great myths, or half-truths, of American history.

It is this myth that has caused Robert Putnam (2000) to write *Bowling Alone*. Throughout the book, Putnam chronicles the decline of “social capital” in the United States. For Putnam, social capital “refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arises from them” (19). Signs of America’s loss of social capital are everywhere. Putnam finds that Americans are more individualized in their religious affiliations than members of an organized church. Social clubs such as the Elks and Veterans of Foreign Wars are unable to find

replacement members as their aging ranks dwindle. Membership in labor unions as well as professional organizations are at their lowest points in forty years. The Red Cross has seen the number of volunteers plummet in recent years. This has occurred while the number of hours per day the average American spends watching TV increases. Combine this with the time Americans spend alone in their cars commuting to work, the average New Yorker spends 38 minutes in the car commuting to work (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004), it easy to see how the amount of time available to group organizations decreases, which means social capital declines with it.

Despite these alarming statistics, many Americans are not bothered by this. The typical responses are very similar to the response my colleagues had to the Obama speech. Typical responses such as ‘that’s not my problem,’ or “what can I do about it” speak to the myth that pervades the American identity, even among some of the more learned in the history teaching profession. While Samuel Huntington (2004) defined the American identity as having elements of

...the Christian religion, Protestant values and moralism, a work ethic, the English language, British traditions of law, justice and the limits of government power, and a legacy of European art, literature, philosophy and music. (40)

From this identity, according to Huntington, the Americans created a nation based on liberty, equality and private property that would be guaranteed by republican government. However, this is not the entire story. While Huntington did not specifically cite historical sources, his book was more on the state of American politics and citizenship of today, many readers would infer that he is referring to the great myth, or half-truth, of American history. This is the myth of the American rugged individual

frontiersman on his farm as the reason for America's spread across the continent and then rise to world power.

The idea of the rugged individual has developed from Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 paper delivered at the American Historical Association's annual conference. According to Turner, the individual work ethic created on the dangerous frontier is the defining aspect of American democracy. Those who worked hard could carve out a life for themselves, however, those without the work ethic simply perished from the harsh living conditions. Central to this idea is that there was no one to help the frontier farmer. Therefore, "my brother's keeper" did not exist. American historiography in the twentieth century has been dominated by this theme and continues to dominate the individualistic philosophies of the Americans described by Putnam.

Unfortunately, Turner's thesis on the American frontier and its affect on the development of American democracy is only a half-truth. At the time of his death, Turner was working on a follow-up to his individualism on the frontier with a paper on the role of towns and cities in the frontier as an important part of America's democratic development (Wade, 1959). This meant that the role of the frontier town and its impact on America was not fully addressed until Richard Wade (1959) published *The Urban Frontier*. In his book, Wade argues that the role of the individual in the frontier cannot be denied, but it is only half of the story. The role of the towns and cities on the frontier played an invaluable role in allowing for the development of the frontier and American democracy.

The frontier town was the place where the individual farmers and their families came to go to church. It is where they traded goods with the other farmers in the region.

It is where these families gathered for social events and other recreational activities. The frontier town provided a general government in the form of a town council where these frontiersmen would meet and create laws and regulations to govern the activities of the region. From this government, the town was responsible for defending against the greatest threat to the American frontiersmen, attack from the natives (Wade, 1959). In essence, the town served as “my brother’s keeper.” Everyone within the town’s borders and its hinterlands was responsible for the overall well-being of the town. In return, the town would look out for the well-being of the individual. At its core, Wade’s description of the frontier town closely resembles what Putnam describes as positive “social capital.”

Despite the groundbreaking work, Wade’s urban thesis met with great resistance from historians who had grown up reading and admiring Turner’s work. While Harvard historian, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., began teaching urban history, the urban frontier thesis was disregarded by conservatives in the United States whose creed began to focus more on individual responsibility instead of collective responsibility (Chudacoff & Smith, 1994). America’s refusal to deal with the entire history of the frontier has continued to lead America further down the path of isolation within its own borders.

Despite the alarming trends, the situation is not hopeless. When the Supreme Court wanted to end racial segregation and begin the reversal of the societal outcomes of segregation, it turned to the public schools. Beginning in Topeka, Kansas and continuing in school district after school district, the Court ordered desegregation. Since this 1954 decision, schools have played a central role in the reversal of segregation and many of the racial acceptance gains throughout the United States. The public schools are also the place to begin a reversal of the social capital trend Putnam describes.

Schools must begin to teach implicitly about the importance of collective responsibility and inclusiveness. Print and Coleman (2003) argue that that perfect place to begin this is in the civics classroom through a comprehensive citizenship education that emphasizes the importance of the common good. Allowing students to work together to solve problems in a inclusive democratic environment will result in positive social capital. Creating opportunities for all students to get involved in clubs, activities and other group organizations will give them the experience necessary to transfer into adulthood with the skills necessary to develop social capital, which only serves to benefit the overall society. An effective and authentic student government would allow students the opportunity to understand representative government in a meaningful way, which would also transfer easily into adulthood.

In addition to these school-wide initiatives, Howard (2006) develops the idea that service-learning, the cornerstone to many citizenship education programs, will develop social capital for students by teaching them that they are their “brother’s keeper” through experiences relating to learning how organizations and people work together. The Constitutional Rights Foundation has developed a curriculum, CityWorks USA, that intentionally works to develop positive social capital among students in civics classes (Kahne, Chi & Middaugh, 2006). Schools have a seemingly endless supply of packaged curricula to use that will develop positive social capital in their students, which will lead to better citizenship education.

Even if schools do not want to invest into these programs, it would not take much effort to develop programs and class activities that would accomplish these same goals. Any activity that teaches students how to work within a group for the collective good

would help teach students the importance of being a part of a community. No one survives without help from others. It was ironic that my colleagues who refused to believe that they were their “brother’s keeper” immediately went into the classroom to teach students. I guess they believed that they had learned everything they needed on their own. They must not have received any help from teachers...or parents...or bus drivers...or friends...or neighbors...or grandparents...or government agencies. After all, they are not “their brother’s keeper.” It is probably a good thing they were not alive on the frontier.

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