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**Robert D. Putnam, "Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis." New York: Simon Schuster, 2015, 400 pp.**

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## Book review. Social Inequalities in the XXI Century

**Robert D. Putnam, “Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis.” New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015, 400 pp.**

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Robert Putnam’s book *Our Kids* explores a topic that continues to capture the attention of sociologists, social scientists and policymakers – the widened class-based opportunity gap and social mobility in the American society. More specifically, this book examines the ways in which the class gap evolved over time and its consequences on children’s life chances.

In order to explain the increase in the class-based opportunity gap in the recent decades, the scholar illustrates how income inequality has an effect on family structure, parenting, residential segregation, school quality and community. As a consequence, children from upper-class homes have increased their chances of attaining a high job status or benefitting of high quality education in contrast with children from lower-class homes whose chances decreased. Throughout the book, Putnam conceptualizes social class in terms of education. His arguments are delivered by emphasizing the different life outcomes of children raised in “upper-class homes” (both parents graduated) and “lower-class homes” (parents with high-school degree or less). This book does not only highlight the discrepancies in the labour market or educational chances between upper and lower-class children, but it also indicates the alarming extent to which upper class children broadened their privileges in the last decades.

Putnam’s research combines an incredible amount of academic studies with a lively ethnography. Criticizing the conventional indicators which he considers to be “invariably three or four decades out of date” [p. 43], the scholar suggests that we do not have time to wait assessing comparatively education/income of individuals when they are in their 30s and 40s and of their parents. The time lag is not beneficial. We need to assess the state of social mobility for the newest generations as soon as possible because the lives of lower-class children have consequences for our economy, values and democracy.

In this context, the scholar examines the factors that lead to the gap in social mobility chances of children from different backgrounds. Following this line of thinking, Putnam believes that the research on the class-based opportunity gap does not need to be constrained to the macro-level but needs to be extended to the micro-level. The life experiences of the children in their homes, schools and communities are factors that need to be taken into consideration when we discuss social mobility. Putnam uses mixed methods for his research. His ethnography manages to bring to life the analysis of the academic studies by portraying the contrasting family structure, parenting style, quality of school and community experienced by “real” children from upper and lower-class.

The gap in the inequality of opportunity between upper and lower-class children starts early in life. Family structure plays an important role in the development of children. For example, early childbearing in unstable relationships and multi-partnered fertility is associated with less parental involvement in children’s lives. The non-marital births among well-educated women remain at the same level since 1970s. However, the level clearly increased for the less-educated women that now account for more than

half of all non-marital births. Children from well-educated parents are more likely to be raised by married parents that have a solid relationship. In contrast, children from less-educated backgrounds are more likely to be raised by unmarried parents in a less stable relationship or by a single-parent.

Not only family structure but also parenting is meaningful for children's outcomes in life. Upper-class parents consciously invest time and money in their children, being aware of the benefits of the social and cultural capital for upward mobility. "My life was programmed from the time I was born until I was through college" [p. 6], mentioned Frank, a kid from a privileged background from Port Clinton. Being actively involved in their children's life, upper-class parents make sure that their children have as few obstacles as possible in having desirable life outcomes. For example, upper-class parents are aware that family dinners facilitate the developing of non-cognitive skills and aspirations for their children. Since 1970s, the amount of family dinners decreased regardless of the social background. However, from 1990s upper-class families managed to maintain their frequency in contrast with the lower-class families. Even though lower-class parents invest time and money in their children, most often there are material and time constraints. Moreover, lower-class parents opt for a "natural growth" parenting style in which parents rely less on scheduling and school involvement [Lareau, 2011]. Consequently, parenting style encouraged the widening of the class-based opportunity gap over the last decades.

As education expanded, not only the quantitative differences in education are important, but also the qualitative ones. As Putnam mentioned, children from upper-class family do not succeed in life only because they have more education but also because they have *better* education. Inequality in educational opportunities starts even before the children are born and are associated with residential segregation. Upper-class parents, move to neighborhoods in order to have a well-educated community that strengthens the aspiration of children and provide access to high-quality schools.

Upper-class children benefit from high-quality schools that have more resources. They offer various extracurricular activities, career counseling and a useful social network that nurture upward mobility. Putnam shows that 50 years ago extracurricular activities were considered to be the responsibility of the public schools. Nowadays, even if schools provide extracurricular activities, there is an increase of "pay-to-play" policies that prevent the participation of lower-class children. Moreover, the extracurricular gap even widens further in favour of children from well-educated homes due to private after-school programs.

Residential and educational segregation makes the opportunity gap less visible as more and more parents and their children live in separate and different worlds. This is dangerous. Less and less individuals from the upper part of the social ladder are aware of their privileged start in life. As a result, they live in their own bubble and they think that they are part of the "have" category because they fully deserve it, failing to take into consideration that they were born in the "right families".

While Putnam explains the widened class-based opportunity gap in an elaborate manner, it is surprising to notice that he is not discussing the role of politics. It is worth taking economic decisions made by successive governments into consideration as they might affect individuals belonging to different social classes. For example, during both the Reagan and Bush administrations, cuts of income and property taxes, which favoured

the most wealthy, encouraged less redistribution, and thus inequalities widened [Bartels, 2008]. Another example would be the signing of NAFTA (*North American Free Trade Agreement*), which may have impacted well-paying working class jobs, and might also have contributed to increasing income inequality.

Reading *Our Kids*, it is good to keep in mind that Putnam is conceptualizing parental social class in terms of education but it would be valuable to refer to it also in terms of occupations. While parental education and occupations represent inter-related dimensions of social class, they might have different effects on children's outcomes. On one hand, social class based on parental education plays an important role in explaining the acquired cultural capital and aspirations of children. On the other hand, social class based on occupation signals the employment relations, security of employment and career advancement opportunities of the parent. Thus, parental occupations might have a great impact on family's economic stability and social capital. In the context of the educational expansion, more and more people acquire higher education but this does not necessarily translate into secure jobs with high social and economic reward.

The well-grounded arguments presented by Putnam throughout the book made the readers reflect on the worrying size of class-based opportunity gap of young people. The scholar recognizes that there are no easy solutions for this problem, but nevertheless he compiled a feasible list of possible policies.

*Our Kids* distinguishes itself as a book that explains the inequality of opportunity between young people from different family backgrounds, not only in a rigorous but also in a less abstract manner. The real-life stories make the book accessible for the wide public and encourage researchers to zoom in on the shape of inequality. As Putnam concluded, instead of distancing ourselves from lower-class children, we need to actively engage and invest in them because they are "our" children and thus, our responsibility.

## References

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