

Nicholas A. Eckstein and Nicholas Terpstra, eds. *Sociability and its Discontents: Civil Society, Social Capital, and their Alternatives in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*.

Early European Research 1. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2009. vii + 326 pp. illus. €65. ISBN: 978-2-503-52473-3.

In a famous study *Making Democracy Work* (1993) Robert Putnam argued that differences between a civic, democratic Northern Italy and an uncivic, corrupted South depended on the communal cultures of the medieval and early modern North and the feudal traditions of the South.

This collection of essays aims for a critical test of the Putnam thesis and sets out to explore its use for historical research. Putnam's historical explanation is refuted in two ways in various essays. Some argue that the South had communal traditions similar to those of the North, while the North itself increasingly turned to forms of princely rule. Others show that monarchical government could perfectly respect the privileges, local autonomy and self-agency of the civic commune, not only in cities such as Naples or Bologna (Marino, Black, Terpstra) but also in villages under feudal authority (Cohen). Princely government could be seen as the guardian of civic harmony, civility, and social justice (Cohen, Abulafia, Hanlon, and Scott, for England), while communal rule could very well be associated with inequality, injustice, and disorder (Jurdjevic and Van Bruaene).

The focus of most essays is on the struggles for local autonomy, the preservation of local customs and privileges, and the role of the civic commune in the political and juridical structures. The essays dealing with such political aspects point to the role of social conflict, controversy, and scandal that Putnam seems to theorize as outside or beyond civil society in favor of a focus on harmony, peaceful cooperation, and rational exchange as categories of civil society. While Kuehn criticizes the ignoring of social strife, Newbegin even argues that scandal is a source of social capital, generated through shared experiences, the invocation of shared norms, and the engagement of concerned citizens, and stored in narratives of the community. The reluctance to think of conflict, or even violence, as constitutive of civil society, stems from a fundamental flaw of most civil society research: the apparent difficulty to distinguish adequately between the utopian vision of a civil society (which in Renaissance Europe was communal and republican in nature) and the experiences of every day social and political life (only Jurdjevic, Scott, and Van Bruaene in a way acknowledge the distinction).

By turning away from a political orientation Eckstein shows the various forms of social capital generated through clusters of weak ties and thick trust, by focusing on how a family of painters accumulated the social capital that drove their enterprises in the context of a fifteenth-century Florentine parish. Eckstein fleshes out the contacts and associations of the complex social fabric that crossed professional and geographical boundaries supporting guilds, parishes, confraternities, and other institutions for the public good such as hospitals that were the longterm agents of civil society established and governed by the community. Short-term projects such as the creation of a painting in a parish church or recurrent projects such as the creation of a play generated social capital (on a personal and an aggregate level) and required the involvement of active members of the community.

Eckstein and Hudson show the crucial role of creative networks and festive culture in the generation of overlapping communities. The patronage of wealthy and aristocratic families also played a central role in such networks, as is also shown by Castiglione, who stresses the crucial role of women in generating trust within the nuclear and extended family and in devotional culture. The essays by Eckstein, Hudson, and Castiglione stress the crucial role of people skills in the hard work involved in generating and managing the ties that make up the complex social fabric

of overlapping communities and networks that together form the patchwork of living civil societies.

The essays by Eckstein, Castiglione, Cohen, Jurdjevic, Scott, and Garrioch (on the role of eighteenth-century Parisian religious confraternities in the training in citizenship) are the best of this volume. The book in general lacks coherence and most essays, including the introduction, lack focus. The title is highly misleading given that most essays, with the exception of three, deal with Italy. Finally, while the volume criticizes Putnam for assuming, rather than studying, the continuity from medieval to modern Italy, the introduction and several essays unfortunately could not resist the temptations to criticize the political present in ways that are unrelated to the historical problems discussed in this collection.

ARJAN VAN DIXHOORN  
Ghent University