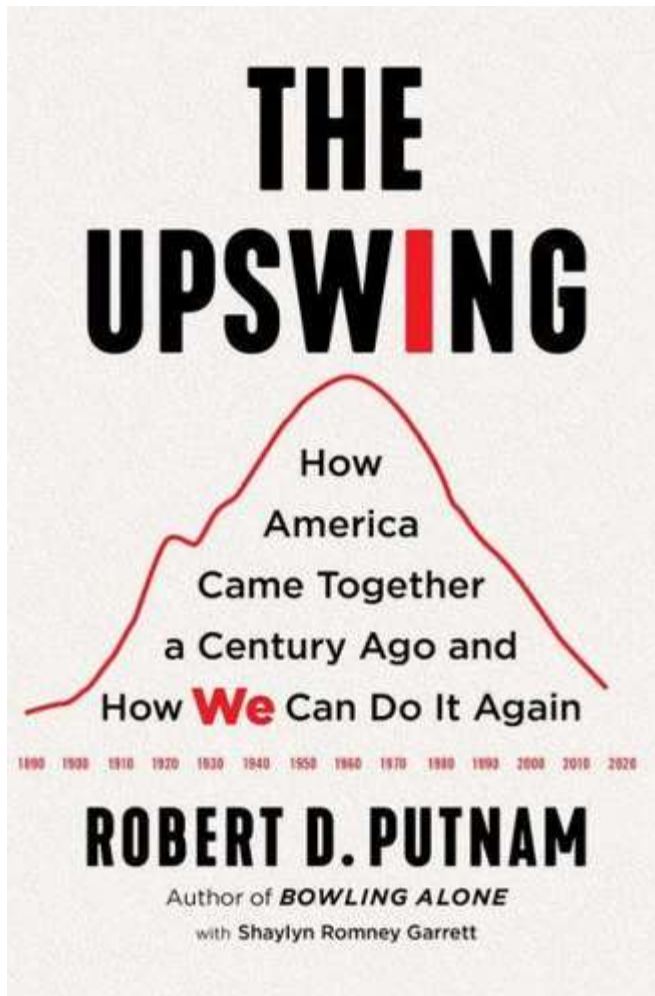


## ‘Mesmerizing’

### Authors deliver in-depth critique of American economic system

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*“The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again” by Robert D. Putnam with Shaylyn Romney Garrett. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020. 480 pages, \$32.50 (hardcover).*



“Class segregation in the form of an entrenched elite and a marooned underclass is often a crippling physical, social and psychological reality for those striving to get ahead,” Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett assert near the beginning of “The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again,” their riveting new treatise on the lessons we can all learn from a careful and reflective analysis of the past hundred years or so in the United States. “Young people and new immigrants enter the labor force filled with the hope that the American Dream can be theirs through persistence and hard work.

“But they often become disillusioned to find how great their competitive disadvantage is, and how difficult it is to make the leap to where the other half lives,” the authors continue. “American idealism increasingly gives way to cynicism about a rigged system. Many now question whether this nation could ever produce anything close to equality for all.”

So begins one of the most in-depth and mesmerizing critiques of the American

economic system, with its inherent implications for virtually every aspect of modern society and culture that has ever been produced. Moreover, the subject matter could not be timelier. Why have protesters filled the streets demanding the end of systemic racism, including its shameful legacy and persistent consequences? Why are so many Americans hopelessly disillusioned with the trajectory our country seems to be taking at an ever-accelerating pace? Why does every conversation seem to devolve into a bitter diatribe totally devoid of anything that resembles civil discourse?

Putnam and Garrett answer all of these questions, and a whole lot more, through their meticulous dissection of the pivotal events as well as the more subtle trends that have characterized and shaped the American experience from the end of the 19th century to the current day. Even those who pride themselves on their extensive knowledge of history will have to admit after only the first few pages of this insightful and perceptive re-envisioning of the course we have chartered for ourselves that they still have a lot to learn. Often, it is only in retrospect that we can come to a more realistic and meaningful interpretation of the true significance the past plays on the present. The authors

challenge us to step back and see the big picture – and when we do, the parallels they describe become crystal clear.

“The Upswing” is one of the most extensively researched books I have had occasion to read in recent memory, with 92 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the nine chapters that form the main narrative. The primary thesis revolves around the notion that we have, in a very real sense, been here before. Accordingly, they dismiss the proposition, perpetuated by many politicians and articulated by an even greater number of pundits and social critics, that things “have never been worse.” I began making my way through this volume, as I often do, as a skeptic; however, by the time I reached the third chapter, “Politics: From Tribalism to Comity and Back Again,” I was a true believer. The sense of *déjà vu* was unmistakable.

Putnam is the Malkin Research Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University and a former dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government. A consultant with the past four U.S. presidents, he was awarded the National Humanities Medal in 2012. His research program, the Saguaro Seminar, is dedicated to promoting civic engagement in America. His previous books include “Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis,” “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community” and “Double-Edged Democracy: International Bargaining and Domestic Politics.” Garrett is an author and award-winning social entrepreneur. A staff writer and strategist with Weave: The Social Fabric Project (an Aspen Institute initiative), she is a former Peace Corps volunteer who holds a degree in government from Harvard University.

One of the more remarkable features of the book is Putnam and Garrett’s ability to translate highly quantitative concepts into language that is accessible to the general reader. Sure, for some of the more “academic” sections of the manuscript, an advanced knowledge of the underlying methodology will help decipher and illuminate the applications that only become obvious upon closer inspection. But the conclusions reached by these two intrepid researchers are difficult to refute, such is the persuasiveness of the evidence presented.

Witness the following from “The Arc of the Twentieth Century,” the eighth chapter and one of my personal favorites: “Given the tensions between community and individualism, it is natural to use the metaphor of a pendulum, swinging back and forth between those two poles. As a pendulum moves steadily in one direction, countervailing forces begin to build up, and the pendulum eventually reverses direction. After the reversal, movement in the opposite direction accelerates, but as the pendulum moves toward the opposite pole, it slows in response to equilibrating forces, until it reaches the other pole and once again reverses. This metaphor leads naturally to a search for equilibrating forces, especially as the pendulum nears one pole or the other. What events rupture people’s confidence in current institutions and behavioral patterns? What events tear us apart or knit us together? Which ideas come to seem outdated, and which ideas now seem fresh and more attractive, and why? Something like that happened during the 1960s.”

Each generation tends to see the society in which they live through a collective lens that has distinctive characteristics members of that generation see as unique to them. But is this really the case? For example, many currently see the deep and escalating inequality, political polarization, vitriolic public discourse and an almost irrational fixation on the self as exclusive to contemporary culture. But nothing happens in a vacuum and very few things are truly without precedent. The social fabric flexes and technology forever transforms the ways we interact with, and relate to, each other. But there is something immutable about human nature; something that Putnam and Garrett capture in a powerful way in “The Upswing.”

Yes, I liked this one. My sense is that if you are one of those folks who wants to understand the world in a more comprehensive and intuitive manner, you will too. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.