



## Peak Oil and America's Declining "Social Capital"

Posted by [Prof. Goose](#) on June 28, 2005 - 11:24am

I have been thinking a lot about the communities that are going to result from peak oil's havoc. With the economic fabric already growing increasingly tattered and the class structure increasingly bifurcated, it seems logical that many people are going to be at a loss due to recession and a decline in the standard of living that is the result of what's coming.

Will the citizenry not attempt to return to some kind of social structure from the past? If so, what will that social structure look like? 1960? 1920? Does it depend on the pace of the economic and cultural decline? or will be it some sort of futuristic isolated technological society that is governed by big brother?

Sure, no doubt there will emerge small self-sufficient communities that are socially-based, such as those promulgated by [Community Solution](#) and the like. However, much of our society is currently well outside of those sorts of cultural and mental bounds; much of our current society has (d?)evolved into a selfish culture of instant gratification and social isolation.

If you buy Hubbert's curve, and you believe we are at the plateau, five years from now, oil production will equal that of 2000, ten 1995, etc., all the while demand grows.

Therefore, it is an important thought experiment to think about what our society will look like in three, five, even ten years...will we be enduring the consequences of an overshoot? will we attempt to revert to our social structures of yesteryear? or are we too far past those to ever return? Those suffering in the Great Depression at least had social structures to rely on...what will we have to rely on?

The answer may be "ourselves" unless we wake up and understand the need to return to a social fabric.

Let's diagnose where we are. One of the most influential books in my discipline over the past ten years has been [Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community](#).

I'll not review the book, as there are many astute [reviews out there](#) already.

My main objective here is to think about how peak oil will affect what Putnam calls an already declining amount of "social capital," which is the notion that social networks add value to a society. A country's social capital is therefore "the collective value of all "social networks" [who people know] and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other ["norms of reciprocity"]."

Putnam's main premise is that American social capital has been in decline for decades, and it has resulted in a society that is less worthwhile and less cohesive.

That's a very erudite way of saying we crazy-assed Americans have fewer meaningful neighborhoods than in the past. We are more likely to lock our doors than thirty years ago. We don't have as many friends over for dinner. We don't belong to nearly as many bowling leagues or social clubs. The social fabric is tattered in Putnam's eyes.

Yes, Putnam's work quickly becomes normative, but perhaps appropriately so. He rails against commuting, he rails against suburbia, he rails against many things. But, Putnam comes to the conclusion that, in a lot of ways, our culture has changed for the worse.

The dystopic visions of peak oil that get discussed on this site lead to the downfall of commuting, suburbia, and many of the other things Putnam believes erodes social capital. So, with those influences absent and people's lives changing because of recession, how will our quantity and quality of social capital change?

People's lives are going to change, but how so? Will we get to know our neighbors again? Will we build the social fabric of our neighborhoods again? Or can we get them back?

Does anyone else find it ironic that we need a decline in our society to have an opportunity to build back our social capital?

(This is post one of two or three on this topic...)

*(edited to add: please go over and read [Kurt Cobb's piece on the "Politics of Survival,"](#) a topic related to this post.)*

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