

The Malling Of Europe

"Eurosprawl" by Alex Marshall, in *Metropolis* (Jan.-Feb. 1995), 177 E. 87th St., New York, N.Y. 10128.

To Americans who loathe suburban sprawl and shopping malls, Europe has always seemed the promised urban land. Writing about the woes of U.S. cities, architects and city planners frequently dot their texts with cosmopolitan asides about how much more Europeans still care about community, about public spaces, about cities. "Well, they don't. At least not as much as we think," writes Marshall, a reporter for the *Virginian-Pilot* of Norfolk, Virginia, who explored Western Europe for 10 weeks last summer on a fellowship.

Outside Lyon, outside Copenhagen, outside Brussels, outside Cologne, he found a surprisingly familiar sight: "Just as in the United States, Europe's middle class has moved to the suburbs—where they shop in malls, live in secluded subdivisions, and drive on traffic-clogged freeways." Most Americans, Marshall notes, "don't see it and don't know about it because they don't go to Europe

to see shopping malls."

Yet the malls, very much like their American counterparts, are there. In one outside Lyon, France's second-largest city, Marshall encountered Jacques Martin, a balding man in his fifties, nursing a cup of coffee and reading the morning paper at L'Absinthe, a mall version of a sidewalk cafe. "I come here about once a week to shop and relax," Martin told the journalist. Although born and reared in old Lyon, Martin said he seldom ventured downtown anymore. "The traffic is too bad," he explained. Of the Lyon metropolitan area's 2.5 million people, less than 10 percent live in the city's core.

Eurosprawl is not quite the same as U.S. suburban sprawl, Marshall acknowledges. The European suburb "remains tied to the center by some form of mass transit. At least a bus line, and often train, subway, and bike lanes as well." One can travel from the baroque city hall in Lyon to open farm fields in under 15 minutes. "Europeans pay a price for this," he says. "In exchange for tighter, more cohesive cities, they generally live in smaller, meaner spaces than Americans do." They also



The sight is familiar to Americans, but not the site: just outside Lyon, France's second largest city.

must pay more for items such as washing machines "because there is less space for a Wal-Mart to muscle its way in beside the nearest freeway."

But the similarities outweigh the differences. "The classic European city no longer represents the real Europe," Marshall writes, any more than New York's Greenwich Village represents America. "The perfect European city we see on postcards and brochures is Europe in a box, kept there to remind the natives of their heritage, to look pretty, to reap tourism dollars. Meanwhile, the real day-to-day action goes on in the suburbs." *Mon Dieu!* What would Henry James think?

Bowling and Civic Rot

"Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" by Robert D. Putnam, in *Journal of Democracy* (Jan. 1995), 1101 15th St. N.W., Ste. 802, Washington, D.C. 20005.

More Americans go bowling today than ever before, but too many of them are bowling alone. Nearly 80 million went at least once during 1993, a 10 percent increase over 1980. Nevertheless, bowling in organized leagues has plummeted 40 percent. This development may seem unimportant in the larger scheme of things but Putnam, director of Harvard's Center for International Affairs, insists that, on the contrary, it is very significant: one more sign, whimsical though it may be, of the decay of America's "civil society."

Americans' inveterate inclination to form civic associations greatly impressed Alexis de Tocqueville when he visited the United States during the 1830s. He considered, as do many latter-day Tocquevilles, that such civic engagement is vital to making democracy work. Putnam agrees. His own 20-year study of Italy, published as *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993), showed that the quality of governance in different regions varied with the level of civic engagement, as reflected in such things as voter turnout, newspaper readership, and membership

in choral societies. Many other observers have stressed the importance of a healthy civil society to the new democracies in Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

Putnam's evidence of civic decay in the United States goes beyond organized bowling (and the oft-deplored decline in voter turnout in national elections):

- The number of people reporting that they attended a public meeting on town or school affairs in the previous year fell from 22 percent in 1973 to 13 percent 20 years later.

- Participation in religious services and in church-related groups has declined by perhaps one-sixth since the 1960s.

- Participation in parent-teacher associations fell drastically—from more than 12 million in 1964 to barely five million in 1982 before recovering somewhat (to seven million today).

- The number of people who volunteer for mainline civic organizations is down. Volunteering for the Boy Scouts is off 26 percent since 1970; for the Red Cross, 61 percent.

- Membership in traditional women's groups has steadily declined since the mid-1960s. In the national Federation of Women's Clubs, membership is down 59 percent since 1964; in the League of Women Voters, it is off 42 percent since 1969.

- Membership in fraternal organizations, such as the Lions, Elks, and Masons dropped substantially during the 1980s and continues to fall.

It is true that newer organizations, such as the Sierra Club and the American Association of Retired Persons, have greatly expanded their memberships, says Putnam, but most members of such groups never even meet; they just pay their dues and perhaps read the organization's newsletter.

What has caused the erosion of America's "social capital"? A big factor, obviously, has been the movement of women into the work force. The loosening of ties within the family may be another. TV and VCRs, by turning citizens into couch potatoes, may also have played a role. Whatever the causes of the rot, Putnam concludes, America's civil society urgently needs repair.