

SOCIETY

The Lonelier Crowd

THE SOURCE: "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks Over Two Decades" by Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew E. Brashears, and "Trends in Civic Association Activity in Four Democracies: The Special Case of Women in the United States" by Robert Andersen, James Curtis, and Edward Grabb, in *American Sociological Review*, June 2006.

The Deep South, by contrast, nearly abandoned traditional British fare, according to James E. McWilliams, an assistant professor of history at Texas State University, San Marcos. Growing rice with a labor force of slaves, southerners were much more likely to eat rice or peanuts along with local game and Native American and African-American crops such as Indian and Guinea corn.

A growing American hunger for rum and molasses from Barbados in the early 18th century spurred culinary cross-fertilization among the colonies. Ships that started out trading only rum and molasses began to carry foods. Okra appeared in Rhode Island, New England cod went to the middle colonies, Virginia ham was available in South Carolina.

As the Revolution approached, the culinary repertoire of the colonial cook was abruptly truncated not only by embargoes but by a sense that proper American food should be different from that of Europe, frugal and unpretentious rather than refined.

Patrick Henry once condemned Thomas Jefferson for his love of fine French food instead of "native victuals." Increasingly, the elevation of the simple American over the fancy European became a defining American feature in food as well as in manners, dress, and leisure pursuits. In the election campaign of 1840, William Henry Harrison delivered the coup de grâce to his opponent, President Martin Van Buren, by charging that Van Buren's tastes ran not to real American food, but to soup à la reine and pâté de foie gras.

WHEN IT COMES TIME TO let down their hair and talk, Americans have fewer people to confide in than they did just a generation ago. The number of people the average person would consider going to for advice fell from about three to two between 1985 and 2004. Almost half the population now says they can discuss important topics with only one other person or no one at all.

The greatest change has come in the decline in intimates outside the family circle. Twenty years ago, 80 percent of Americans who responded to the national General Social Survey had at least one confidante who was not a relative. By 2004, that number had fallen to 57 percent, according to sociologists Miller McPherson and Lynn Smith-Lovin, of the University of Arizona and Duke University, respectively, and Matthew E. Brashears, a Ph.D. candidate at Arizona. The number of people who depend totally on their spouse has doubled, to not quite 10 percent.

Better-educated and younger people have larger "discussion networks" than others. Women have slightly more confidantes, statisti-

cally, than men, and whites have more than nonwhites. Intimate friendships between neighbors and fellow participants in civic activities have declined the most.

The authors say that their research may have detected another trend. "Shifts in work, geographic, and recreational patterns" and increasing use of the Internet may be leading to the development of larger, less localized groups of friends than in the past, when strong, tightly interconnected networks were more the norm.

Similar social forces may be responsible for the purported decline in civic engagement in the United States. Sociologists Robert Andersen, James Curtis, and

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Edward Grabb, of, respectively, McMaster University, the University of Waterloo, and the University of Western Ontario, all in Canada, studied civic activity in the Netherlands, Great Britain, Canada, and the United States. They found a decline only in America—and, significantly, only among women. While the lessening of civic involvement in the United States has been blamed on television watching and the fading of the more selfless World War II

generation, the authors note that the same factors are at work in the other three countries. Because the decrease in civic involvement is limited to women, Andersen and colleagues suggest that the “greater demands” on American women’s free time may be responsible. Women’s child-care duties have increased in the United States, while declining in Canada and the Netherlands, for example. “The larger time commitment American women now make to paid work, combined with their increased time for child care, could be the principal explanation behind the decline in civic association activity of Americans,” the authors say.

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The Poverty Conundrum

THE SOURCE: “The Mismeasure of Poverty” by Nicholas Eberstadt, in *Policy Review*, Aug.–Sept. 2006.

WHEN THE CENSUS BUREAU reported in August that the U.S. poverty rate essentially held steady at 12.6 percent of the population in 2005 instead of rising, as it had every year since 2000, the Bush administration hailed the news, while Democrats charged that it proved once again that the economy

EXCERPT

Ah! Old Age

I am old and I feel and look old. . . . Ever since I have inhabited old age . . . I have looked and listened, mostly in vain, for news of what it is like for other people who inhabit it as I do. Naturally, I'm interested in its well-known deprivations, the physical and mental ones that people in their forties and fifties so publicly dread. . . . The pills and sticks, the shrieking hearing aids and dental weaponry, the tricks for countering the loss of names and threads and glasses and for circumventing insomnia, the visits to the back shop. But that's not all. I have a fond hope that there may be new kinds of time and new kinds of pleasure, perhaps even new kinds of vitality, and that though we forget and muddle and fail to hear things, there may be moments when we understand what's going on for the first time.

—JANE MILLER, author and poet,
in *Raritan* (Summer 2006)

was failing to lift the downtrodden.

The annual announcement of the number of Americans living in absolute poverty—now defined as less than \$19,806 a year for a family of four—has turned into a political circus. Nicholas Eberstadt, a demographer at the American Enterprise Institute, writes that the poverty rate has become “an ever less faithful and reliable measure with each passing year.”

The statistic is a relic of the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty. Developed in 1965 by Mollie Orshansky, an economist at the Social Security Administration, it is set at roughly three times the cost of the Agriculture Department’s

“thrifty food plan,” a nutritionally adequate but bare-bones diet, adjusted for family size.

It’s hard for Eberstadt to believe that all the social spending of the last three decades has failed to budge the poor out of conditions in which “everyday living implied choosing between an adequate diet of the most economical sort and some other necessity,” as Orshansky put it. Although statistics show that some groups, such as the elderly and African Americans, are better off now than they were in 1973, the official poverty rate has bobbed steadily above 11.1 percent for 32 consecutive years. Last year, 37 million Americans were classified as poor.

Year after year, the number has stubbornly failed to fall—even as the nation’s per capita income rose 60 percent, the percentage of working-age people with jobs went up by six points, the proportion of Americans with a high school diploma increased 24 points, and government spending on the poor tripled. By 2001, more than half of all poverty-level homes had cable television and two or more TV sets. One in four households had a personal computer, and by 2003, nearly three out of four poverty-level households had some sort of motor vehicle. And yet, with nearly every increase in statistical well-being, the poverty rate has gone up. “Something is badly