The decline in political and civic engagement, immigration and the growing role of religion are Robert Putnam’s central themes of reflection. Putnam recently addressed a conference organised in Rome by the Foundation for Active Citizenship in the framework of the 2006 edition of the “Euro-American Colloquia on Citizenship” programme. He invites civil society to invent new forms of cohesion.

This is the bitter conclusion that emerges from the work of Robert Putnam, who draws on evidence gleaned from interviews and research into American civil society and outlines his findings in his bestselling book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Putnam described his conclusions in detail at a conference in Rome on 16 May.

However, the issue of social capital in America cannot be summed up by these conclusions alone, and Putnam goes deeper with his analysis by examining the phenomenon from three different but connected perspectives – social connectivity in the United States, the new importance of religion (Evangelical movements in particular) and the effects of the new wave of immigration into America in recent years.

America today is very different from the America that Tocqueville described as the ideal homeland of democracy and social

In 1950s America, the habit of meeting in bowling leagues indicated people’s tendency to establish interpersonal ties, a tendency that now appears to have disappeared once and for all.
Civil society must re-invent itself and create community opportunities in order to tackle increasing social exclusion and ensure that the transformation on the economic front does not have a negative impact on society.

capital, just as it differs from 20th century America with its extremely high levels of associational life and social cohesion in every sphere of life, whether public or private. The size and shape of associational life has quietly and gradually decreased, with a 50% drop in citizens’ civic engagement from the 1990s on. Surveys on this issue, such as those aimed at surveying the American lifestyle, have noted a declining tendency to get involved in associational life, whether formal (membership of political parties, political activism, voting and active volunteering) or informal (family dinners, meeting friends, picnics and excursions). Further confirmation of the weakening of traditional social ties, reciprocity and civic sentiment is provided by a series of surveys that indicate a continuing erosion in mutual trust as well increased criminality and other forms of asocial behaviour that demonstrate that the situation is continually worsening.

It should however be noted that, while Putnam points on the one hand to a crisis in traditional forms of associational life, on the other he underlines the increase in forms of relations linked to religious participation – while the number of Americans belonging to volunteer and civic organisations and associations is diminishing, the number of churchgoers is on the rise.

Religion plays a very different role in civic life in America than it does in Europe. While religion has always been associated with conservative values in Europe, it has historically always played a progressist and reformatory role in America. It is sufficient to remember the early 1800s and the predominant role that Evangelist fervour
played in the process that led to the abolition of slavery, or 1900, when a religious thrust led to the start of the so-called “Progressivist era” and the recognition and consolidation of a series of rights. About half of all American civic life has a religious connotation; a large part of philanthropic and charity activity in America – as well as volunteer work – bears a religious stamp. Within ethnically and sociologically composite American society, crossed over the course of the years by continuous and diversified immigration flows, the Church and the Evangelist movement in particular has always been a catalyst for the new peoples, representing a kind of “reception centre” and a guarantee of social integration. This process took place in the past, with the wave of immigrants from Europe between 1840 and 1914, and has been repeated over the last 30 years with the new immigrants from South America and Asia. In the latter case, however, it is an “exclusive” form of social capital that shuts off the members of the group from the wider network of social relations and hence does not encourage an enlargement of the social sphere. This form of social relations appears indicative of an inward-looking society in which people seek solidarity within a short radius determined by criteria of homogeneity and shared conditions, values and interests.

Besides the new forms of social capital encouraged by religious aggregation, however, immigration too has a strong impact within society. In fact, while it gives a boost to the country’s economy on the one hand, on the other hand it creates widespread dissatisfaction in the short term.

Who is Robert Putnam?

Born in 1940, Robert D. Putnam teaches Public Policy at Harvard University and was Chairman of the American Political Science Association. He has written several books, published worldwide, and is considered the leading exponent in the field of social capital, i.e. small and large social networks (families, neighbourhoods and personal and professional clubs and associations) and the norms of trust and reciprocity associated with these, which form the basis of social life and encourage the growth of civic engagement.

Putnam is best known in Italy for his book Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy (Mondadori, 1993), in which he showed how the varying performance of Italian regional administrations is the result of different traditions, methods and levels of civicness. The book – and the 20-year research it is based on – is a milestone in the international scientific community’s studies on civil society.

In 2000 Putnam published Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (published in Italy in 2004 by Il Mulino with the title Capitale sociale e individualismo. Crisi e rinascita della cultura civica in America), which became a worldwide bestseller and deals with the crisis in traditional forms of civic engagement in the United States.

Putnam collaborates on these issues with the U.S. government (both Democrats and Republicans), the Blair government in the U.K. and the Irish government. On the basis of Putnam’s work, the U.K. government approved a series of programmes at the start of the 21st century to encourage the strengthening of social capital and communities at the local level.

Putnam’s current research focuses on three issues – the change in the role of religion in contemporary America, the effects of work changes on family and community life and the drawing up of strategies for civic renewal in the United States in the context of immigration and ethnic and social diversity.
from a sociological point of view. Diversity creates discomfort, a shutdown and a tendency to become inward looking. The biggest challenge for any country faced with the phenomenon of immigration is to create a new national identity that is not tied to ethnic origin. The pledge of allegiance to the American flag derived from the need to create a sense of national identity that was not founded on blood ties. It is no coincidence that the pledge was written in 1906, when immigration was at its peak, to signify that whatever people’s religion or skin colour, the important thing was to have them believe in the concept of a single and indivisible nation. Hence the need emerging from this phenomenon is to find a new sense of belonging to the nation.

The growth of social isolation on the one hand and the increase in religious sentiment on the other are complex issues that should not, however, be viewed pessimistically: strong political leaders sensitive to certain problems, as well as active citizens, can find
new forms of cohesion and union. Mediation is required in the context of globalisation and the great economic changes it entails, with a deeper divide between rich and poor and increased social exclusion. It is not civil society alone that must reinvent itself and create community opportunities; institutions, too, must find ways to ensure that the crisis and transformation on the economic front do not have a negative impact on society.

Aware of “history’s course and recourse”, and hence the alternation between periods of civic engagement and disengagement, Putnam calls on the various members of civil society (in the public as well as the private spheres) to invent new forms of solidarity and cohesion to provide support and a foundation for democratic renewal.

America is witnessing a crisis in traditional forms of associational life; while the number of Americans belonging to volunteer and civic organisations and associations is diminishing, the number of churchgoers is on the rise.