

Book Notes:

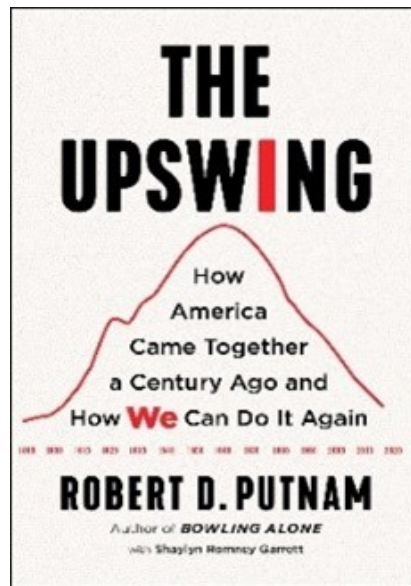
Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Alone Together

Part Two

Putnam, Robert with Shaylyn Romney Garrett. *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*.



(New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

"The fundamental rule of our national life – the rule which underlies all others – is that, on the whole, and in the long run, we shall go up or down together."
Theodore Roosevelt [1]

As I said last week, it is not often that one finds a book whose explanatory power illuminates so many issues that it can only be called brilliant. Wrestling with the various conundrums and zero-sum games of America's culture wars for the past five to six years, I found Robert Putnam's and Shaylyn Romney Garrett's *Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* to be exceptional.

Since the 1990s, Putnam has been investigating Americans' increasing disconnectedness, most prominently in his 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. [2] Garrett is involved in attempting to reweave America's social fabric through her work with the Aspen Institute's *Weave: the Social Fabric Project*. [3]

In the interest of full transparency, they had me at "weave," for aren't we all "weavers" weaving together the many threads of our common culture? During those opening of the academic year convocations at which the "Presidential Address" is one of the responsibilities of the job, I told the assembled faculty that we're all "weavers."

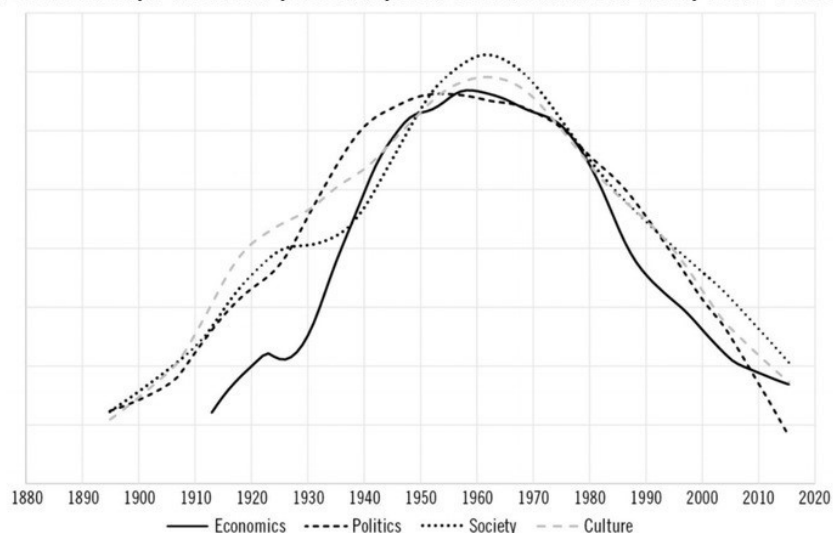
Particularly at liberal arts colleges, in which one of the college's tasks, in addition to preparing students to earn a living, also was to help them discover how to live a life. Helping students discover how to not only live a life of personal responsibility, but also of social responsibility, for, as John Donne said, "no man is an island/entire of itself" defines these schools. [4]

I would tell the faculty that civilization is tissue paper thin; it rips under pressure and when it rips, out springs the beast. Educators thicken civilization's fabric by reaffirming society's core values. For Americans, those core values are freedom, liberty, equality, and opportunity for all in a nation of laws seeking always to enhance and expand the definition and solidarity of the "We" in America's founding documents "We the People."

While I find the weaver metaphor apt, it is Putnam and Garrett's reconceptualization of American history's last 125 years that I find most insightful. Beginning in the late-19th century and proceeding through the 20th century into the first two decades of the 21st century, they see the era bookended by two hyper-individualistic Gilded Ages sandwiching a 60 to 70-year period of increasing social solidarity and respect for the common good.

They call it an "I-we-I" arc, an inverted "U" of decreasing "I" self-centeredness and an increasing "We" of social responsibility and cohesion which then in the mid-1960s began to reverse itself with a declining commitment to the common good. They state, "Over the first six decades of the twentieth century America had become demonstrably – indeed, measurably – a more 'we' society." [5]

ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL TRENDS, 1895–2015



They traced that growing social cohesion across four vectors – economic,

political, social, and cultural. Last week's *Book Notes* examined that increasing social cohesion in decreasing income inequality or, phrased more positively, in increasing income and economic equality, in decreasing political partisanship and in increasing "across-the-aisle" political cooperation, and in an increasing social solidarity as Americans discovered during the Great Depression and World War II that they were, indeed, in this together.

Then, in the mid-1960s, as Joseph Heller once said, something happened. The process began to reverse itself. It was if Americans had collectively forgotten the lessons of the early 20th century and began to systematically undo the progress made during, as Richard Hofstadter called it, that great "age of reform." [6] Last week's *Book Notes* detailed the Progressive Era's major innovations in the cause of the common good that Americans have seemingly forgotten or willfully rejected. I used to quip that some politicians have spent the past 40 to 50 years running against Franklin D. Roosevelt. Now I realize that I was only partially correct. They are running against the early 20th century's championing of the common good. And now we find ourselves in a neo-Hobbesian state of both right-wing and left-wing libertarian strife which, one could argue, led to the recent Texas energy fiasco.

How did that happen?

Before exploring the vexatious question of causation, let's take a closer look at what happened. In the mid-1960s, the culture pivoted. Maybe, more accurately, it began to pivot leading to Pat Buchanan's well-documented declaration at the 1992 Republican National Convention of a culture war for America's soul. [7] As Andrew Hartman has asserted, the culture wars are about what it means to be an American; Americans are still trying to answer "Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's famous 1782 riddle: 'What then is the American, this new man (sic)?'" [8]

The culture wars are about what American culture means; maybe more existentially, what American culture *is*. As Putnam and Garrett analyze it, the meaning of that "*is*" rests on the fulcrum of attempting to balance *Individualism versus Community*. I think they use a not entirely satisfactory pendulum metaphor, but the point is the same – what is the balance point, the point of rest, the point of equilibrium? Is it either/or? Is it both/and? And if the latter, what are the proper proportions of each? As they say, "the evolving dialectic of the individual and the community is an important feature of American history." [9]

The answers to those questions are culturally determined. Before exploring Americans' differing answers, three brief observations. First, what is culture? Rather than losing themselves in a definitional debate, Putnam and Garrett opt for a slight variation on the standard definition. They say culture means the "beliefs, values, and norms about fundamental aspects of American society." [10] I might add customs and mores to their list, but any undergraduate in a Sociology 101 survey course will recognize their meaning.

Secondly, however, a question arises: Are those "fundamental aspects of American society," *nee* culture, *fixed*? Which is to say, do they change or are they, in the fancy language of philosophy, essentialist – unchanging givens? That is not an academic question, for there are those on both the right and the left who say those "fundamental aspects" are fixed. But are they? Borrowing from Lionel Trilling, and I agree with them, Putnam and Garrett say culture is fluid. It "always entails a contest, a dialectic, a struggle." [11]

And that struggle is definitional, for America is very much a work in progress. While its core values of “liberty, freedom, equality, opportunity, and the rule of law” may be givens, what do they mean? To whom do they apply? Do they apply equally? Who is more important – the individual or society? Who decides?

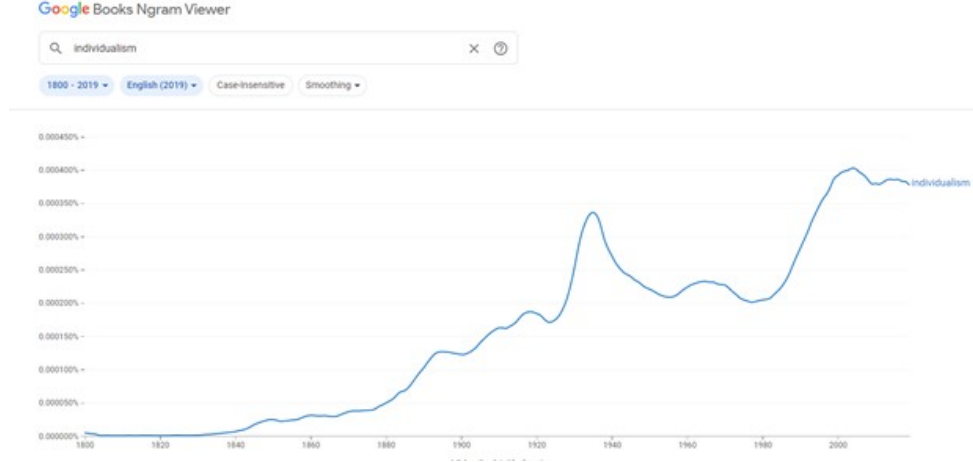
All of these questions continue to be debated, for, as Alan Brinkley has noted, America is an *Unfinished Nation*. [12] As Inaugural poet Amanda Gorman said, “America is not broken, it’s just unfinished.” [13] Or, as I replied when once asked to respond to a presentation by Diana Eck at Notre Dame College on America’s new religious pluralism, “It’s neither good nor bad, it just *is*.” (*Aside*: I think it is good; it is what makes America America.) “America,” I continued, “is an existential nation in a continuing process of becoming. As such, as Krishna said to Arjuna, ‘we can’t stay here, we can’t go back – fare forward.’”

The faring forward, however, has been contested every step of the way. And the contest has almost always been about who is included in and who is excluded from the American “We.” More to the point, the contest has been about which is more important – the American “We” or “Me” in my own private “I” world of needs and wants.

Who is more important – the individual or society? Putnam and Garrett trace our oscillating response to that question from Lincoln’s Whiggish concern for society as a whole to the “rugged individualism” of the first Gilded Age to the increasing social solidarity of early 20th century America and back to hyper-individualism. They trace Americans’ back-and-forth attitudes on the topic by exploring what was acceptable social discourse at any given point in time. A concept known as “The Overton Window,” named after Joseph Overton, defines this as “the range of ideas tolerated in public discourse.” [14] In short, Americans’ attitude toward either individualism or society is gauged by what was permitted or not permitted to be said about each throughout the 20th century.

Since one obviously can’t go back to 1890 or 1930 or even 1965 and ask Americans what they thought about these issues, how do Putnam and Garrett derive their insights? With the social scientist’s penchant for data, they employ Google Ngrams to track the frequency with which certain words were used to gauge the word’s cultural acceptability over time. [15] In short, the more frequently the word is used, the more culturally acceptable its meaning. They then fit the words’ frequency to their inverted “U” of “I-we-I” to see if they fit. Interestingly enough, they fit, if not perfectly, very well.

Today, for example, as I was writing this, I tracked the frequency of the use of the word “individualism” in English since 1800. As the following graph depicts, it first appears in the late-1830s (cf. Tocqueville) and steadily rises in usage to a peak in the 1930s when it begins a descent to a low point in 1977 and then steadily rises again to a high point in 2003 when the curve flattens but at a higher level than at any previous point. In short, it very closely follows Putnam and Garrett’s “I-we-I” trajectory.



[16]

Using Ngram data and other information, Putnam and Garrett trace the fluctuating acceptability of two sets of competing notions about individualism and community. As they state, “One instructive measure of the waxing and waning of the emphasis on the individual or the community ... turns out to be the changing relative frequency of two phrases born in the second half of the nineteenth century – ‘survival of the fittest’ and ‘social gospel.’” [17]

“Survival of the fittest,” a misuse of a concept from Darwin’s theory of evolution, was used to justify the predations of a hyper-individualistic capitalism that sorted society into winners and losers with the winners having no compassion for the losers. Its popularity peaked around the turn of the 20th century but had begun to fade by 1920 supplanted by a rising interest in the “social gospel.” The social gospel was a Protestant “more socially engaged theology ... that emphasized that community and equality lay at the heart of the Christian message.” Its Catholic version’s greatest expression was Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which inspired Catholic social teaching. [18]

The other pair of concepts are the complementary yet often competing concepts of *social capital* versus *human capital*. “Social capital” refers to those community investments that “improve social life, support local schools, foster a more engaged ‘new civics’ education, create community centers.” [19] In short, they refer to societal and governmental investments in the common good that flourished during the Progressive Movement at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

But by the 1970s and throughout the remainder of the 20th century, it was supplanted by a focus on “human capital” as the primary justification for social and personal investments in education. The concept of human capital asserts that society invests in education to increase each individual’s economic value to themselves and, by extension, to society. Obviously, the terms are not mutually exclusive, but in policy debates in the late-20th century, investments in human capital were used to justify the social value of educational spending. It was investment in the individual not in society which then, in an ironic reverse, was used by conservative thinkers to justify cutting education spending because the benefits accrued to the individual! [20]

Originally coined by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 *The Epic of America*, Putnam and Garrett trace the changing meaning of the phrase the “American Dream.” While I have explored the topic in *The American Tapestry Project*, my colleague at the Jefferson Educational Society, Rev. Charles Brock, has been

examining it for years. [21] Adams' original notion was that the American Dream "has not been a dream of mere material plenty. ... It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development ... unhampered by the barriers ... in older civilizations." [22]

In Adams' meaning, it was about "we" and it persisted to have this "we" meaning well into the 1960s when it reached its apotheosis in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech in August 1963. As Nobel Laureate Robert Shiller wrote, "it meant freedom, mutual respect and equality of opportunity. It had more to do with morality than material success." [23] But then, as the "I-we-I" curve would predict, it began to change in the 1970s and 1980s as it was increasingly used as "a symbol of material success, such as homeownership, not collective moral success." [24]

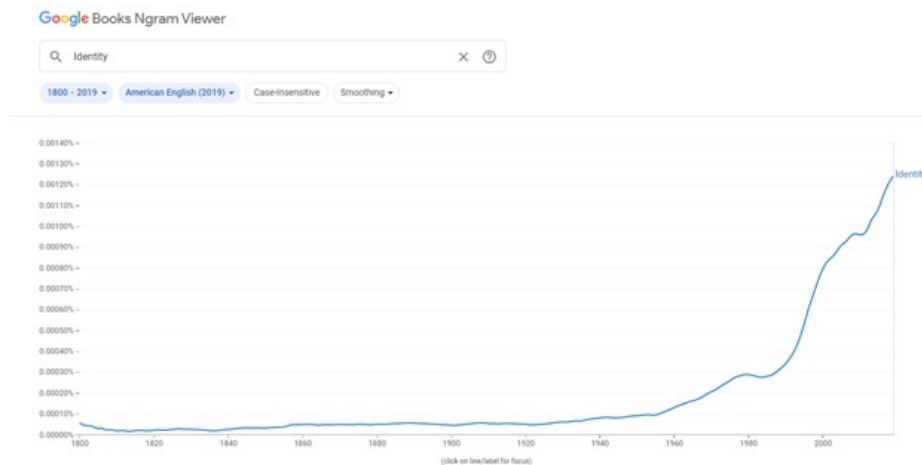
As the "we-curve" ascended in the mid-20th century, Putnam and Garrett note that there were "rumbles of dissent." The underside of community is conformity, which cuts both ways. There are champions of social conformity who scorn, if not scourge, those who do not conform. And, of course, there are those who will not conform as they assert their individuality. Early 1950s McCarthyism excoriated political subversives as un-American "commie sympathizers" and social dissidents as deviants and pariahs. [25]

There were also those who resisted conformity. As I wrote a few weeks ago, "one sees it in the 1940s and '50s in social science treatises such as William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), which asserted Americans had eschewed individualism for a corporate, collectivist ethic, a theme echoed in 1950s popular fiction such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1957) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). One also glimpses it in the newly emerging youth-oriented rock 'n' roll music and films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). And in that literary and musical anti-conformity movement known as *The Beats*. [26]

This tension between individualism and community found a strange next iteration in the 1950s/1960s rise of the New Right and the New Left, both of which attacked conformity and celebrated individualism. In some ways, they were and are the obverse and reverse of the same coin. The New Right's intellectual underpinnings were in the anti-big government writings of Joseph Hayek, notably in the *Road to Serfdom*, and Ayn Rand in *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Both were reacting to collectivism's errors, if not systemic evils, under communism and Nazism. In America, this found fertile soil among those who opposed FDR's New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. As Putnam and Garrett state, "Hayek was the better thinker, but Rand was the better novelist." [27] Rand attacked the social gospel with phrases that became memes echoed today by libertarians such as Rand Paul and Paul Ryan: "Altruism is incompatible with freedom, with capitalism and with individual rights." [28] Randian extreme libertarianism inspired the New Right, which "stressed the virtues of individualism, unfettered capitalism" at the expense of the common good. [29]

Something similar happened on the New Left. Its early 1960s incarnation condemned "egoistic individualism ... while praising self-expression against conformism." [30] Not as intellectually coherent as the New Right – a phenomena that still defines right vs. left politics in the early 21st century – the New Left's anti-government philosophy, fueled by opposition to the War in Vietnam, morphed into the late-1960s hippie, counter-cultural notion of "do your own thing" and an excessive celebration of self over society. This led on the libertarian right to an emphasis on individual rights at the expense of the common good and, on the left,

to an intense focus on identity. In a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, the New Left's lasting legacy to American politics and society might be the current obsession on individual and group identity fracturing American culture. The following Google Ngram shows the explosive use of "identity" in American English since the 1960s.



[31]

If a major strength of *Upswing* is Putnam and Garrett's tracking of their "I-we-I" curve to explain American society's increasing polarization, a weakness is their fumbling attempt to explain what caused it. Part of the problem results from their scrupulous adherence to the social scientist's refusal to confuse correlation with causation. However, it leads them to miss the things the poet, the artist, the narrative historian sees. Mired in data, mired in the details seeking some sort of causal analysis, they miss the plot, the grand narrative line that ties it all together.

They sense this about their work, for they quote Frederick Lewis Allen, a mid-century historian who wrote about the difficulty of tying all the threads of his history together into a coherent whole. He said, "Sometimes the historian wishes that he were able to write several stories at once, presenting them perhaps in parallel columns ... thus gaining a livelier sense of the way in which numerous streams of events run side by side down the channel of time." [32] Citing economist Robert Shiller, they acknowledge something John Lewis Gaddis noted in his *Landscape of History* when he argued that the flow of history will never reveal itself in a *t-test* or a *p-score*. Seeking the ultimate cause leads one down a rabbit hole of proliferating causes until one gets lost in a maze.

Upswing examines with illuminating insight those threads of proximate causes identifying the 1960s shift away from the social solidarity of an American "we" culture to our current hyper-individualistic "I" culture. Among them are the earlier noted 1940s/1950s era precursors, but, more revealing, in the arts were such indictments of excessive social cohesion as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible's* recasting of the Salem Witch Trials condemning 1950s group-think and William Golding's prescient critique of a "youth culture" run amok in *Lord of the Flies*.

Putnam explores the books that led to "The '60s" social upheaval – *Silent Spring*, *The Fire Next Time*, *The Feminine Mystique*, and *The Other America*. He and Garrett revisit the social crises that plagued the era from Vietnam to Watergate, the 1970s stagflation, and dozens of other ideas, events, and bedevilmments that defined the era. They shrewdly note pop culture's signaling the ascendancy of "I" over "We" in The Beatles progression from "all you need is love" to George

Harrison's lament that all he hears is an "I-me-mine" chorus to John Lennon's rejoinder after the group broke up that "I don't believe in Beatles/I just believe in me." [33]

Searching for the answer to what caused the mid-1960s pivot from a "we" culture to an increasingly fragmented and socially fraying "I" culture, they discover the limits of social science. They discover, without ever really acknowledging it, what artists and historians have always known. There may be no ultimate cause, no one cause but rather a web of proximate causes.

It is the web that *tells*.

It is the story the web *tells* that counts.

It is not a cause, but the tapestry of causes woven together that got us to now.

Or, as in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, they all did it. More mundanely, as on any multiple-choice test that asked is it "A and C" but not "B and E" that ever tormented you, the answer is "All of the Above."

If the story *Upswing* describes is America's journey from a late-19th century fractious "I" culture to a mid-20th century "we" culture enjoying both economic prosperity and social solidarity and then somehow reverting back to a fractious "I" centered culture all but at war with itself in the early 21st century, then it is important to note that the story is unfinished.

The story, like America itself, is a work in progress.

The important issue is what happens next. What needs to be done to recapture that mid-20th century America united in pursuit of its founding ideals of liberty, freedom, equality, and opportunity for all in an ever expanding and united "We the People?"

How?

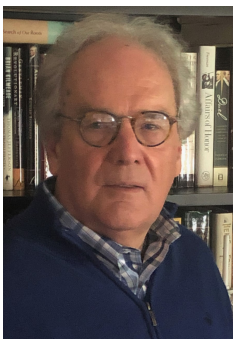
Putnam and Garrett's answer is a disappointment. In a sense, the book trails off in a plea for a second progressive movement, a restoration of the lessons learned a hundred years ago that we have long forgotten and discarded.

How to make that happen?

As always, it is a question of leadership. Although they provide some very insightful mini-biographies of progressive champions from the late-19th and early 20th century – people like Frances Perkins, Paul Harris, who founded Rotary, Ida B. Wells and Tom Johnson, Cleveland's great mayor at the turn of the 20th century – beyond that they do not go.

Despite its rather insipid ending, Putnam and Garrett's *Upswing* provides a superb and challenging recounting of the past 125 years of American history -- superb in its conceptual framework and a veritable trove of data and information. The 93 pages of "End Notes" alone are worth reading for their data and other suggested resources.

Upswing's overview, however, its "I-we-I" framework, anchored in data, provides a "from the mountaintop perspective" illuminating what happened in America in the 20th century on the road to now.



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End Notes

1. Roosevelt, Theodore. "December 3, 1901: First Annual Message" quoted in Putnam, Robert and Shaylyn Romney Garret, **The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again**. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), p. 341.
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3. **Weave: The Social Fabric** Project available at <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/weave-the-social-fabric-initiative/> accessed February 22, 2021.
4. Donne, John. "No Man Is an Island," at **All Poetry** available at <https://allpoetry.com/No-man-is-an-island> accessed March 2, 2021.
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6. Cf. Hofstadter, Richard. **The Age of Reform**. (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).
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8. Hartman, Andrew. **A History of the Culture Wars: A War for the Soul of America**. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 2.
9. Putnam and Garrett, cited above, p. 163.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 164
11. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
12. Cf. Brinkley, Alan. **The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People** 8th Ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2015).
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14. Putnam and Garrett, cited above, p. 165.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
16. "Individualism," **Google Books Ngram Viewer** available at https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=individualism&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cindividualism%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2Cindividualism%3B%2Cc0 accessed March 3, 2021.
17. Putnam and Garrett, cited above, p. 169.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
20. Cf. Roth, Andrew. **Saving for College and the Tax Code: A New Spin on the "Who Pays for Higher Education?" Debate**. (New York: Garland Press, 2001), pp.27-30.
21. Cf. Brock, Charles. **Mosaics of the American Dream: America as New Israel**. (Oxford, UK: Bayou Press, Ltd., 1994).
22. Adams, James Truslow. **The Epic of America**. (Boston: Little Brown Co., 1931, reprinted by Simon Publications, Safety Harbor, FL), p. 405.
23. Putnam and Garrett, cited above, p. 177.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
26. Roth Book Notes
27. Putnam and Garrett, cited above, p. 186.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 187
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
31. "Identity," **Google Books Ngram Viewer** available at https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=identity&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=28&smoothing=3 accessed March 3, 2021.
32. Putnam and Garrett, cited above, p. 284.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 308.

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