Dear Readers,

This is TISR 9th issue, devoted to the publication of part I of a new anthology, The Erosion of the Social Link in the Economically Advanced Countries, edited by Patrick Hunout between 2000 and 2003. It attempts to offer a global overview of the contemporary social crisis, its roots, causes, forms, and remedies.

Our societies, in effect, seem to all correspond to the figure of a “depressed” society, where most indicators of ill-being, such as suicides, psychic disorders, divorce and loneliness, and the like, are widespread and increasing. The social link, or in other words, what keeps us together within society, is suffering from the contemporary developments, as if a centrifugal force was exerting its effects on the members of this society and keeping them away from one another, either in terms of personal relationships or in terms of collective energy and capacity for action.

The American Paradox as a universal Western paradigm

What researcher David G. Myers called “the American paradox” can be easily extended to all economically advanced countries, such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Northern and Western European countries, and Japan (No doubt similar developments also can be expected in the very near future in countries that have been considered more “traditional” but that are now “catching up” with the West, like the East European countries, Ireland, and some Mediterranean countries). Myers defines this paradox in this way: “We now have doubled real incomes and double what money buys. We have espresso coffee, the World Wide Web, sport utility vehicles, and caller ID. And we have less happiness, more depression, more fragile relationships, less communal commitment, less vocational security, more crime, and more demoralized children”.

On the one hand, there has been a prodigious increase in the wealth produced, even though one can state that this increase did not benefit all categories of people equally. On the other hand, there has been an erosion of the link that keeps us together within society.

Myers said that a very “social recession” coexists with the relative “economic expansion”. We are better paid, better fed, better housed, better educated, healthier than ever before; we have faster communication and more convenient transportation than we have ever known, and our average disposable income in constant currency is more than double that of the mid-1950s. This enables us to have, among other accouterments of an unprecedented wealth that has been multiplied, twice as many
cars per person today as then and to eat out two and half times as often. From 1900 to the present, life expectancy has risen from 47 to 76 years. However, from 1960 until the early 2000’s, our countries slid into a deepening social recession that dwarfed the comparatively briefer economic recessions that often dominate news and politics. Since 1960, the divorce rate has doubled, the teen suicide rate has tripled, the recorded violent crime rate has quadrupled, the prison population has quintupled, the percent of babies born from unmarried parents has sextupled, cohabitation (a predictor of future divorce) has increased sevenfold, depression has soared - to ten times the pre-World War II level, by one estimate. The American National Commission on Civic Renewal combined social trends such as these in creating its 1998 "Index of National Civic Health" - which has plunged since 1960.

Fig. excerpted from Myers D. G. (2000), The American Paradox, Spiritual Hunger in the Age of Plenty, Yale University Press.

Problems seem to be concentrated particularly among youth. Writing with Elizabeth Gilman, Yale psychologist Edward Ziegler reported a consensus among researchers: in the past 30 years of monitoring the indicators of child well-being, never have the indicators looked so negative. In 1960, just over 1 to 10 children did not live with two parents. Today, a third do not. American Psychological Association members rated the decline of the “nuclear family” as today’s number one threat to mental health.

The Decline of Social Capital in the Western Countries

The concept of “Social Capital” is another way to formulate the problem.

- Social Capital has been theorized about by a long list of scholars, from Emile Durkheim to Ferdinand Tönnies, Pierre Bourdieu, Robert Putnam, Robert Bellah, Francis Fukuyama, and others. The famous sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (a former member of the TISR Editorial Advisory Board) showed that “social” capital has to be distinguished from other sorts of capital, such as “economic” and “cultural” capital. The definition used here is: social capital is an instantiated informal norm that promotes cooperation between individuals, according to a definition by Fukuyama.

- The norms that constitute social capital can cover a wide range of actual behaviors or beliefs from reciprocity between two friends all the way up to complex and elaborately articulated doctrines like Christianity or Confucianism. They must be instantiated in an actual human relationship: The norm of reciprocity potentially exists in my dealings with all people, but is actualized in my dealings with friends, networks, clients, collaborators, civil society, and the like which arise as a result of social capital more than they constitute social capital itself.

- Not just any set of instantiated norms constitutes social capital; they must lead to cooperation in groups and therefore are related to traditional virtues like honesty, the keeping of commitments, trust, reliable performance of duties, reciprocity, and the like. A norm like the one as characterizing southern Italy which enjoins individuals to trust members of their immediate nuclear family but to take advantage of everyone else, is clearly not the basis of social capital outside the family. Similarly, the Mafia achieves cooperative ends on the basis of shared norms, and therefore has social
capital, but it also produces abundant negative externalities for the larger society in which they are embedded.

Robert Putnam, Dillon Professor and Director of the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University, fed a debate on the erosion of social capital in the US in an article published in 1995 called "Bowling Alone", and later in his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Are people (here, Americans) losing their social bonds, why does it matter, and what has to be done? True, practically nobody bowls alone, nor does Putnam claim they do. What he does show is that people who used to join bowling leagues have, in recent years, dropped out and instead simply bowl with friends. And the same holds for membership in practically all other voluntary associations.

For his book, Putnam collected a vast array of data to support his two points: participation has dwindled in almost every activity, and the fraying social fabric imposes heavy costs: the fewer our social bonds are, the more likely we will suffer from depression, nervousness, and other health problems. We also will be more likely not to vote, not to trust our neighbors, to sue and so on - quite a list. Some of Putnam's data-based observations are summarized below:

Whatever happened to civic engagement? Considering the well-known decline in turnout in national elections over the last three decades, we see that from a relative high point in the early 1960s, voter turnout had by 1990 declined by nearly a quarter. Broadly similar trends also characterize participation in state and local elections, and in most countries alike, except in those (such as Belgium or Denmark) where voting has been made mandatory by law, which hides the discrediting of the political class. But it is not just the voting booth that has been increasingly deserted. Since 1973, the number of Americans who report that "in the past year" they have "attended a public meeting on town or school affairs" has fallen by more than a third (from 22 percent in 1973 to 13 percent in 1993). Similar (or even greater) relative declines are evident in responses to questions about attending a political rally or speech, serving on a committee of some local organization, or working for a political party. The proportion of Americans who reply that they "trust the government in Washington" only "some of the time" or "almost never" has risen steadily from 30 percent in 1966 to 75 percent in 1992. People's direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily and sharply over the last generation, despite the fact that average levels of education - the best individual-level predictor of political participation - have risen sharply throughout this period.

Religious affiliation is by far the most common associational membership among Americans. Yet religious sentiment in America seems to be becoming somewhat less tied to institutions and more self-defined. Net participation by Americans, both in religious services and in church-related groups, has declined by perhaps a sixth since the 1960s.

For many years, labor unions provided one of the most common organizational affiliations among American workers. Yet union membership has been falling for nearly four decades, with the steepest decline occurring between 1975 and 1985.

The parent-teacher association (PTA) has been an especially important form of civic engagement in twentieth-century America because parental involvement in the educational process represents a particularly productive form of social capital. Participation in parent-teacher organizations has dropped drastically over the last generation, from more than 12 million in 1964 to barely 5 million in 1982 before recovering to approximately 7 million now. Of course part of this decline and recovery reflects fluctuations in numbers of children in school.

Next, we turn to evidence on membership in (and volunteering for) civic and fraternal organizations. These data show some striking patterns. First, membership in traditional women's groups has declined more or less steadily since the mid-1960s. For example, membership in the national Federation of Women's Clubs is down by more than half (59 percent) since 1964, while membership in the League of Women Voters (LWV) is off 42 percent since 1969. Similar reductions are apparent in the numbers of volunteers for mainline civic organizations, such as the Boy Scouts (off by 26 percent since 1970) and the Red Cross (off by 61 percent since 1970).

In sum, after expanding steadily throughout most of the last century, many major civic organizations in the U.S. have experienced a substantial and nearly simultaneous decline in membership over the last decades. *Mutatis mutandis*, similar remarks can be made about other economically advanced countries.

Perhaps the traditional forms of civic organization whose decay we have been tracing
have been replaced by vibrant new organizations, but these new mass-membership organizations, from the point of view of social connectedness, are different from classic "secondary associations". For the vast majority of their members, the only act of membership consists in writing a check for dues or reading a newsletter.

Yet, many students of the new democracies that have emerged over the past decade and a half have emphasized the importance of a strong and active civil society for the consolidation of democracy. Especially with regard to the post-communist countries, scholars and democratic activists alike have lamented the absence or obliteration of traditions of independent civic engagement and a widespread tendency toward passive reliance on the state. To those concerned with the weakness of civil societies in the developing or post-communist world, the advanced Western democracies have typically been taken as models to be emulated. There is striking evidence, however, that the vibrancy of Western civil societies has notably declined over the past several decades. In Europe, the EU tries to impose its "social model" on the former soviet Eastern countries, but this model is eroding within the Western part of the EU itself.

**Which are the causes of the current social crisis?**

Many of us did not need Putnam's research to experience the difficulty that one nowadays has to mobilize people within movements or projects oriented towards the good of the community. Most political parties, unions, and associations have difficulties keeping their members, even in the countries that have less individualistic cultures, such as Germany and Japan. It is all the more difficult when these organizations are not yet established, but are still to be launched. Aspiration to change does exist, but few are those who actually are willing to invest their energy or financial means; mistrust and fear of taking risks dominate their feelings and behaviors.

If social capital is an instantiated norm, a set of norms or mental attitudes underlying actual behaviors, it follows that the manifestations of the decline of social capital in our countries derives from the transformation of these norms and attitudes. The erosion of the social link – and beyond that, the erosion of underlying social capital – must therefore be analyzed in terms of *systems of values*. The less the systems of values include social capital, the less they will induce actual behaviors likely to strengthen the social bond.

In 2001 in the North of France, in a train, a girl was raped by seven adolescents. There were two hundred people in the train; no one moved. This is a clear example of situations that are generated by the lack of feelings of belonging to a community. The first explanation actually is radical individualism and indifference, the second explanation is fear of not being supported by the others.

Radical INDIVIDUALISM is familiar in contemporary values. "Do your own thing", "Seek you own bliss", "Challenge authority", "If it feels good, do it", "Shun conformity", "Don't force your values on others", "Assert your personal rights", "Protect your privacy", "Cut taxes and raise executive pay" (personal income takes priority over the common good), "To love others, first love yourself", "Listen to your own heart", "Prefer solo spirituality to communal religion", "Be self-sufficient", "Expect others likewise to believe in themselves and to make it on their own…": such slogans define the heart of social individualism, which finds its peak expression in the contemporary Western countries. They encourage people to think that they can find happiness and self-accomplishment WITHOUT the community, instead of finding them WITHIN the community. Paradoxically, however, it seems difficult even for the most reclusive personalities to find happiness without some sort of harmonious interaction with the others.

But for today's radical individualism, we pay a price: a social recession that imperils children, corrodes civility, and diminishes happiness. When individualism is taken to an extreme, individuals become its ironic casualties. This is notably the thesis of the Communitarian movement. In 1991, the press started referring to Dr Etzioni, a George Washington University professor, as the "guru" of the Communitarian movement. Etzioni was influenced by ideas drawn from the traditional German community spirit, defended notably in *The Limits of Privacy* (New York, Basic Books, 1999), *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda* (New York, Crown Books, 1993), and *The Moral Dimension: Toward a New Economics* (New York, Free Press, 1988) that the tension between personal privacy and the common good should be diminished through a limitation on the importance of individualism.
Individualism is not the only component of the new systems of values that started to spread within our societies in the late 1960’s. A second important element is based on the concept that self-accomplishment and happiness are to be found in pleasure. This is the HEDONIC component of contemporary morality. This covers sexual pleasure, as shown by the success in the 1970’s of the novel *Emmanuelle* (and its cinematic derivatives), by Emmanuelle Arsan, for which an unrestricted sexuality was becoming an honor, not a shame - inverting traditional values. In this culture, personal attractiveness and youth become capital values (see, e.g., French novelist Michel Houellebecq, such as *Les Particules Elémentaires* and *L’Extension du Domaine de la Lutte*). Consuming goods can be also a source of this pleasure that is supposed to guarantee happiness - in opposition to the sterner former morality, which insisted on the accomplishment of duties and responsibilities, on work and constructive values. Of course, the Communitarian Movement was also on the track as it suggested balancing individual rights with responsibilities.

A third major component of contemporary Western morality is CONSUMERISM. A lot has been said about the society of consumption. Control over others, through processes of possession, domination, and seduction, are the main mechanisms at work here. Possessing material goods (or the wealth that allows possession of them) is supposed to be the natural aim of human action, and the sole source of prestige, respect and social status. This is of course encouraged by advertising and marketing campaigns, that sometimes run very deep, such as those purveyed by the automotive industry. In some cases, one can observe people who withdraw from business and worldly preoccupations, and turn towards the wisdom of India or other far East countries where spirituality is still rooted in the culture. (Gandhi had well defined Indian identity as a spiritual one, opposed to Western “materialism”.) This is a reaction against the excesses of the POSSESSION values, for which this wisdom substitutes DETACHMENT. In general, as James Redfield [ref.] rightly observed, spiritual consciousness and preoccupations are progressing significantly in the Western countries, in a way or another, as one can see through the clothing or hairstyle fashions, musical trends, or trendy restaurant decor, which express the fascination that Westerners feel for the spiritual far East.

Our TISR MODEL, elaborated by Patrick Hunout in the years 1995-1996, constitutes an attempt to reach global understanding of the current transformations occurring in our contemporary societies. The second diagram of the model suggests the consistency that exists between three dimensions of the “New Leviathan’s” policy: economic flexibility that produces precariousness, immigration that produces anomie, and individualism that produces a cellular, atomistic society. These three trends contribute to further destruction of the social link. Going back to the new morality, it is remarkable that it closely corresponds to the basic interests of the “New Leviathan”: individualism helps develop “autonomous” and “proactive” individuals, whose behaviors adapt in a quicker and easier way to economic and technological changes, and whose sophisticated tastes (presented as a way to “personal identity”) allow some outlet for innovative, although often useless, products. Individualism helps destroy the ancestral community links, facilitating the recourse to peopling mass migration that emphasizes class inequalities and favors authoritarian governance of society; in turn, multiethnicity breaks further the ancestral community links, and contributes to strengthening atomistic individualism that becomes the only way to survive in a society deprived of a collective project.

In the heart of the quest for the “self” that contemporary individuals believe to be a process that frees them from the weight of societal and family constraints hides a new, infinitely subtle form of slavery.

Facing this erosion of the social link, can we - without yearning for an unreal past or squashing basic liberties - expose the corrosive forces at work and renew the social fabric?

The response is, of course, of a political type. The TISR Model suggests a triad of new economic policies based on solidarity, ethnic policies respecting cultural identities, and the reinforcement of congeniality through the adoption of new values and practical behaviors. But this is a programme that awaits development later and elsewhere.

The Erosion of the Social Link in the Economically Advanced Countries: an Overview
The developments we portray above may characterize some adaptations of all economically advanced societies over the last decades. It is all the more crucial to identify what they have in common, and examine causes, consequences, and remedies.

This anthology, *The Erosion of the Social Link in the Economically Advanced Countries*, checks off all the facets of the phenomenon. Thus, the various chapters bear on aspects that give evidence of it, such as increasing suicides, depression and drugs, loneliness, difficult gender and intergenerational relationships, escalation of incivility, malaise in cultural identity, or the rise of new religions.

In this issue, we tackle a preliminary set of these questions.

The chapter by Scott, Deane and Ciarocchi bears on the increase in suicides:

Globally, suicide mortality has increased by around 60% in the past 45 years. Suicide is one of the five leading causes of death for 15-24 year olds. Even worse, for every completed suicide, as many as 40 more attempt suicide. Closely related to suicide is depression. Depression is one of the most debilitating disorders, being associated with, but not limited to, impaired social judgments, school difficulties, job loss, unsatisfactory marital relations, and feelings of loneliness and hopelessness. Depression is widespread, and increasing globally. It is predicted to become the second largest health problem worldwide by the year 2020. The type of economic development that is currently underway promotes individualism and low social integration, both of which increase suicide risk. Notably, individualists have smaller and less satisfying social support networks, report more feelings of hopelessness, and are more likely to think about suicide.

Loneliness, with which suicide can be associated, is rising in our societies. The chapter by Warren Jones and Lauriann Hebb reviews psychological research on loneliness and, as such, represents a *tour de force*. Their conclusions show the existence of a clear link between the rise of loneliness and the erosion of social capital. To summarize, although some experiential precursors of loneliness are social isolation and a lack of social contact, many studies suggest that it is emotional conflict within on-going relationships (e.g., arguments, ill-will, misunderstandings) rather than the loss of contact or termination of relationships that is most often conducive to the development of loneliness. Although loneliness is related to various objective situational and social factors (e.g., relationship status, relational stress, being isolated or rejected, etc.) it appears to be even more strongly related to subjective psychological factors including expectations regarding relationships and satisfaction with available friends and relationship partners. Increases in factors that inhibit or disrupt close, warm, reciprocal and mutually satisfying relationships increase the likelihood of loneliness, and this would include situational and culturally determined influences such as individualistic as compared to collectivistic values and practices.

The increase in the consumption of drugs also may be linked to a decrease in psychological well-being. Philippe Le Moigne’s chapter shows why the prescription of psychotropic drugs use is associated with some specific aspects of isolation. Implicit treatment norms allow for prescriptions among the elderly since, in their case, loneliness and organic diseases are often combined; housewives’ consumption is also encouraged because their situation can be described as a problem of sheer solitude or personality. But the treatment of the sufferings linked to poverty, unemployment, or working conditions collides with moral reprobation even though these forms of vulnerability are rooted in a deficit of solidarity. The diffusion of psychotropic drugs in the Western nations thus appears to articulate two tendencies: it underlines the current erosion of the social link, and it simultaneously expresses a normative vision of this phenomenon.

Robin Kowalski’s interesting chapter examines the changes in moral behavior and what underspins them through a particular theme that many of us experience in our daily lives: the escalation of incivility in Western culture.

Her work shows the rise of impropriety, violence, and tension in interpersonal relationships in our societies. It also allows a better understanding of how this development is linked with the loss of community and collectivistic values. A few examples:

- In response to receiving an invitation to a wedding that you cannot attend, you carefully select, wrap, and mail a gift to the bride and groom. A year after the wedding, you realize that you have still not received a thank you note from the
couple.
- As you are driving down the road, you are suddenly cut off by another driver who is trying to cross several lanes of the highway in a short period of time. After narrowly avoiding an accident, you blow your horn at the driver who proceeds to “flip you off”.
- You are a high school teacher who is telling his class about an upcoming test. In response to your discussion of the material that will be covered on the test, a student in your class curses at you and raises a question regarding what right you have to give the kinds of tests that you administer.
- Having worked at a particular company for over 10 years, you feel that you have a good relationship with your immediate supervisor. He/She has assigned you to work on a particularly important project to which you have devoted an inordinate amount of time. Unhappy with the finished product, however, he/she publicly humiliates you in front of all of your co-workers.

These situations represent just a sampling of the types of rude, offensive, or hurtful behaviors that people are exposed to on any given day. Societal norms no longer dictate that people stay relatively settled in their jobs and communities or that they necessarily follow prescribed rules for appropriate behavior. Rather, people live more transitory lives characterized by increased isolation from others. Facilitating this increased isolation are technological advances that, though useful, come at a social cost.

The decrease in social capital exists also between men and women:

The chapter by Aguiar & Ferreira is a reflection on the evolution of the gender relations that seem to show signs of a more difficult adjustment between males and females in terms of matching expectations:

As an example of this unhappy matching, we would gladly mention the discourse of the creators of the website meetabride.com which says they help Western men and Russian women to meet:

"Why date or marry a Russian woman, you might ask? The inspiration for the MEETaBRIDE website grew out of the frustrations the website’s creators had over trying to find nice American women to date. American women can have attitudes that are difficult to deal with. They are often demanding and hard to please. Russian women on the other hand are so unspoiled. In many less-developed countries, like countries of the former Soviet Union, women have a much lower social status than men. Russian men are often abusive and disrespectful toward women. This is what Russian women are used to. Compared to that, the life you can give her will make her so happy and grateful. Russian women tend to be devoted adoring wives. In Western societies women have an equal status to men, as it should be. Russian women see American men as kind, sensitive, respectful, understanding, compassionate and dependable, and for the most part American men are this way. Many American women take these qualities in American men for granted. However, because of what Russian women are used to, they will never take these qualities for granted. These qualities make American men very appealing to Russian women. Perhaps the best evidence that Russian women make good wives and life companions is the low divorce rate between American men and Russian women. According to data supplied by the United States Census Bureau and the Dept. of Immigration and Naturalization (INS), the divorce rate for marriages between American men and American women is 48%, and the divorce rate for marriages between American men and foreign women is 20%".

Here, it is clearly a better matching of role expectations that authors point out as a success factor in male-female romantic relationships. Conversely, unsuccessful male-female relationships within a given community (here a national one) are attributed to the difficulty of matching reciprocal expectations.

This observation is confirmed by the global analysis of the multiplication of interethnic marriages. Is the rate of interethnic marriages a sign of a better « societal integration », a fairly common portrayal. It seems that it is NOT, in reality. In effect, although the conventional sociological explanation in terms of class endogamy may explain the global increase in interethnic marriages, it does not explain the male-female proportions within intermarriages. In the US, on average, Asian women and Black men are more demanded as spouses than are Asian men and Black women. This, according to some research, is because Asian women tend to be perceived as slightly more feminine and Black women as slightly less feminine than
White women, and Asian men as slightly less masculine and Black men as slightly more masculine than White men. Apparently, men want women who let them feel more like men, and vice versa for the women. In a society where male-female roles are less clearly separated than ever before, it may be easier to switch to another ethnic group than to adapt to complex, embroiled, and destabilizing new role expectations within one’s original ethnic group.

Does mass immigration destabilize our societies by multiplying cultural benchmarks and breaking ancestral community links?

The chapter by Geller et al. examines the loss of cultural benchmarks among ethnic majorities and minorities in economically advanced countries in Europe, Central and South America, Asia, and the United States. Actually, as we detail the increase of migration and resulting growth of minority ethnic groups in modern, industrialized countries, we also see how an increase in environmental stressors and disintegration of social cohesiveness are linked with an upsurge in psychopathology. Research shows that positive resources gained from social networks can help offset the deleterious effects of life stressors. As individuals become increasingly atomistic and abandon many of their cultural traditions, they become isolated from their families and communities, making them more vulnerable to the negative products of stress. Thus, migration has been linked with increased physical illness and psychological disorders among uprooted and displaced minorities; even among majority culture members, increasing social disconnectedness and a loss of distinct cultural benchmarks contribute to increased susceptibility to stress. As economically advanced countries continue to see a decrease in social cohesiveness, they also see higher rates of psychiatric disorders in ethnic majority and minority members alike.

Sects and religious movements are gaining ground:

As Hexham and Poewe’s chapter shows, this can be related to the loss of moral benchmarks that confronts individuals. People going haywire might believe they could find in the new cultic movements a response to their needs for moral security and social support. Since the late 1960’s numerous New Religious Movements, often identified as “cults” or “sects” thus appeared in Western societies. Until 1979, however, only a few people paid serious attention to such movements. Then on 18 November 1978 over 800 people died in Jonestown, Guyana, in what appeared to be a mass suicide. Fifteen years later vivid television pictures of the last hours of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians at their compound in Waco, Texas, on 19 April 1993, reinforced the view that cults may be dangerous. Add to this the Solar Temple suicides in Canada and Switzerland, and the AUM initiated gas attack on 20 March 1995 against commuters in the Tokyo underground, and a very scary picture emerged.

Our next issue (Part II of this anthology) will continue to demonstrate how the mainstream individualistic, hedonic, and consumerist system of values erodes both the social link and social capital.