

Book Review

Still Connected: Family and Friends in America Since 1970

By Claude S. Fischer

Russell Sage Foundation. 2011. 176 pages. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer: Omar Lizardo, *University of Notre Dame*

Americans are increasingly isolated and disconnected from one another. A distressingly growing proportion of the American population has nobody to talk to about “important matters.” The communal core of the American family has dwindled to nonexistence, crushed by the weight of increasing demands on personal time by forces outside of the family (namely, work), increasing use of electronic gadgets and the Internet and peripatetic patterns of geographic mobility. Americans increasingly find themselves with no friends or family to rely in times of need. They now feel increasingly lonely, while trusting people less.

These are some of the claims that are increasingly heard in both the popular media and (more distressingly) peer-reviewed publications in social science (and social scientists reporting on these results in the mass media). The picture that they paint is not pretty. If even a small proportion of these claims were true, it would represent a shift in the routine social life of Americans of seismic proportions. Such a shift would also entail a number of substantial consequences, some of which are predictable but others hard to anticipate. One thing that we can say is that none of the consequences are positive.

The fact that social scientists seldom observe changes of this magnitude on such a vital aspect of the everyday social life of persons (in any historical or geographic setting) should make consumers (both lay and expert) of these sorts of claims immediately suspicious as to their validity. However, there *is* something indubitably attractive and intuitive about these sorts of epochal shift arguments, which may account for their periodic emergence and subsequent resilience. After all, one of the first books of “pop” social science, written by the German Sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies exactly 125 years ago, captured the imagination of an entire generation of Euro-American scholars and moralists precisely because it made claims of this kind (*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* was a bestseller that went through seven editions and made Tönnies a celebrity scholar in his lifetime).

Claude Fischer's pithy monograph *Still Connected* enters to this intellectual environment at precisely the right time. As given away by the title, the basic intellectual motivation and goal of the book is precisely to explode arguments of the "epochal shift" kind, with a focus on the case of the United States. Fischer's approach is distinctive in three ways. First, it is resolutely empirical; second, Fischer's reasoning stays close to the evidence; third, Fischer's focuses on a rather ignored aspect of associational life: that which includes the so-called primary groups (kin and close friends).

These three aspects of Fischer's approach account for the major strengths of the book. In regards to the first two, gone are the speculative flights of fancy or the unrestrained extrapolative reasoning that governs other entries dealing with similar subjects in the intellectual marketplace (with the work of Barry Wellman and collaborators at the University of Toronto's *Netlab* being a signal exception). Instead, what we find is an almost heroic marshaling of essentially every available survey-based data source on the informal social life of Americans currently in existence. In regards to the third, we find that the contemporary literature has produced grand claims mostly about public associational life (e.g., in the work of Putnam), but the "meat and potatoes" patterns of informal sociability have received comparatively little attention. *Still Connected* does a great job of shedding empirical light on patterns of sociability, frequency of face-to-face contact and patterns of social support coming from kin and friends across an impressive span of time.

The picture revealed by Fischer's inquiry should represent the death knell of the epochal shift argument. Across an impressive variety of data sources, the overriding conclusion is inescapable: *no overarching transformation in the intimate life of Americans has occurred*. In these broad terms, the early 2000s are simply not that different from the 1960s and 1970s, or (when the data are available) even the 1950s and before. To wit: Americans have *not* experienced dramatic declines in the number of nonkin friends or in the frequency of social contact with such friends outside the home. Americans today continue to rely on their kin and friends for social support at similar rates as in the past. Americans today continue to value friends and family life at similar levels (or even higher levels) as in the past. Finally, there is no defensible evidence for the claim that there has been a substantial spike in the proportion of Americans who report feeling lonely or isolated.

This of course does not mean that *no* changes can be detected; it is just that none of these changes have resulted in the alleged epochal shift trumpeted by the neo-Tonniesian scholars and commentators. Thus, families are significantly smaller, cohabitation has increased and the traditional (one-earner) household is a thing of the past. The data show that two informal institutions traditionally conducive to face-to-face time and sociability have experienced a decline: the "family (dinner time) meal" and "at home (dinner-time) guest entertainment." It is likely that the decline of the traditional around-the-table dinner is due precisely to the "time-crunch" (as well as the availability of relatively low cost, less labor-intensive alternatives) However, this just means that sociability has

moved *outside* of the home, not that it has *disappeared*. The pattern is not one of *extinction*, but one of *resilience in the face of structural change*.

In all, *Feeling Connected* is a refreshing entry into the conversation on the fate of the associational life of Americans in the 21st century. Its sober, data-centric approach provides a sound footing from which to draw the proper conclusions. Its verdict is also clear. Stop worrying, and learn to love the Internet.