Palaces for the People
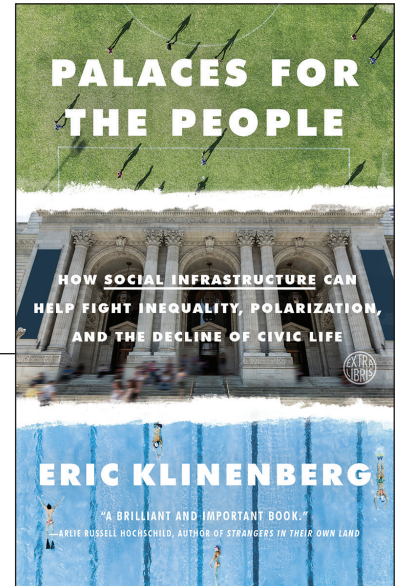## How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life
by Eric Klinenberg

"Klinenberg draws on loads of published scholarship as well as his own, weaving it together into a powerful argument. . . . What Klinenberg advocates is not luxury along the lines of grand train stations of the past but decency and thoughtfulness in designing the spaces we live in." —*Inside Higher Ed*

"Eric Klinenberg believes that social life can be designed well, just as good buildings are. His book is full of hope, which is all the more striking because Klinenberg is a realist. He is a major social thinker, and this is a beautifully written, major book." —Richard Sennett, Professor of Sociology, London School of Economics

• about the book •

We are living in a time of deep divisions. Americans are sorting themselves along racial, religious, and cultural lines, leading to a level of polarization that the country hasn't seen since the Civil War. Pundits and politicians are calling for us to come together and find common purpose. But how, exactly, can this be done?

In *Palaces for the People*, Eric Klinenberg suggests a way forward. He believes that the future of democratic societies rests not simply on shared values but on shared spaces: the libraries, childcare centers, churches, and parks where crucial connections are formed. Interweaving his own research with examples from around the globe, Klinenberg shows how "social infrastructure" is helping to solve some of our most pressing societal challenges. Richly reported and ultimately uplifting, *Palaces for the People* offers a blueprint for bridging our seemingly unbridgeable divides.

about the author

Eric Klinenberg is a professor of sociology and director of the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University. He is the coauthor of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Modern Romance* and the author of the acclaimed books *Going Solo* and *Heat Wave*. He has contributed to *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *This American Life*.

note to the instructor

In *Palaces for the People*, Klinenberg draws on extensive research spanning his academic career to highlight the importance of social infrastructure—"physical places or organizations that shape the way people interact" (5). Further, he contends that as "societies around the world are becoming more fragmented, divided, and conflicted" (8), social infrastructure, which is often overlooked in favor of spending initiatives on "critical infrastructure" (transit, communications, electrical systems, etc.), could play a crucial role in repairing our ever-widening divisions.

From the outset, Klinenberg makes the distinction between social infrastructure (libraries, schools, churches, parks, etc.) and social capital ("the measure of people's relationships and interpersonal networks" [5]). Through Klinenberg's descriptions of successful examples of social infrastructure around the world, the reader is able to understand both the impact of social cohesion on public health and its potential role in addressing political polarization, climate change, inequality, and other challenges America faces today. While social infrastructure alone cannot solve all that ails a community, Klinenberg convincingly establishes the vital role it plays in uniting communities and the overwhelming benefits of expanding our investment in these sorts of public spaces.

recurring themes

The Role of Libraries

Andrew, an employee at the Seward Park Library, is quoted as saying, "There's a term you don't hear these days, one you used to hear all the time when the Carnegie branches opened: Palaces for the People" (53). Why did Andrew Carnegie choose this descriptor for his libraries? Klinenberg spotlights a variety of places and institutions in his text; why did he choose this as the title of the text? How does the author use and refine the meaning of the phrase "Palaces for the People" over the course of the text? In recent years, many libraries have grappled with financial challenges, and, as Klinenberg explains, ". . . political leaders driven by the logic of the market have proclaimed that institutions like the library don't work any longer, that we'd be better off investing in new technologies and trusting our fate to the invisible hand" (220). How has the American cultural relationship to the library changed over the years and how has the availability of technology impacted that relationship? How does consumer spending influence the focus of political leaders, and should the value of the library, an inherently "free" public institution, be subject to the "logic of the market"? As technology continues to develop and information becomes even more readily available, should the government dedicate more resources to the maintenance of public libraries or allocate those resources toward the establishment of new ways of providing universal access to information through technology? Why or why not? How can libraries better establish themselves as valuable and essential institutions in communities?

Mixed-Group Relationships

In describing the effects of deindustrialization, Klinenberg writes, ". . . deindustrialization devastated neighborhoods, making cities and suburbs throughout the United States even more segregated by race and class" (151). How has the fall of industrialization contributed to polarization in America, and what role does social infrastructure play in lessening this gap? Klinenberg states that today Americans are less likely to marry someone outside their social class (153). How does this phenomenon further exacerbate the chasm between groups? Why is diversity across social class, race, ethnicity, and religion important in the formation and socialization of groups? How has Iceland's establishment of public pools helped to unite its people? How does the societal role of the public pool in Iceland differ from the role that the public pool has historically played in American society? How does a safe space, such as a black barbershop, "serve as a valuable resource that, counterintuitively, diversifies and enriches American civic life" (161)?

The Impact of the Internet

Despite the common misconception that the Internet is responsible for increasing loneliness and isolation, Klinenberg cites research by Claude Fischer that "shows that the quality and quantity of Americans' relationships are about the same today as they were before the Internet existed" (41). If the Internet is not to blame for people's increased feelings of isolation and loneliness, what is? What impact does the Internet have on social experiences? Research conducted by danah boyd, of Data & Society, suggests that as parents have curbed their teenagers' "freedom to roam around their neighborhoods and local public spaces" (43), their time spent online has increased. Is this a healthy trade-off? Despite lower crime rates today versus previous generations, boyd's research suggests that "adults have restricted [teenagers'] mobility so thoroughly" that they don't have many alternatives to communicating primarily via smartphones. What reasons might today's parents have for more intensely restricting their teens' social lives? What kinds of opportunities exist in communities for teens to socialize outside of school, and how does children's lack of access to outdoor public places affect their health and influence their leisure activities? How does the Internet "contribute to our widening ideological divisions" (174) while also allowing people to "build more unlikely social bridges" (175)? In what ways could people be encouraged to use the Internet to better connect with their communities?

The Architecture of Spaces

Klinenberg writes, "In coming decades, the world's most affluent societies will invest trillions of dollars on new infrastructure—seawalls, smart grids, basins for capturing rainwater—that can withstand twenty-first century challenges, including megastorms like Harvey and Irma" (187). What opportunities arise for the development of social infrastructure alongside increased spending on physical infrastructure? How did the winning projects in the Rebuild by Design competition following Hurricane Sandy, for which Klinenberg served as research director, integrate social infrastructure? In what ways does the incorporation of social infrastructure into these projects potentially affect the community before, during, and after megastorms and natural disasters? In Bangladesh, the "floating schools and libraries" program was implemented by a nonprofit. What level of responsibility for innovative programs such as this falls to the government, to citizens, or to nonprofits? What are the best means by which to affect innovative changes in one's community?

Exclusive Social Infrastructures

In describing Caldeira's assessment of gated communities, Klinenberg writes, "Caldeira grants that these systems protect those who can afford them, but worries, quite rightly, that they weaken democracy, deepen social divisions, and endanger as well as infuriate the people whom they exclude" (73). In what ways do gated communities negatively impact a society as a whole? Should gated communities be allowed to exist? Klinenberg describes a situation in Jacarezinho in which "an impoverished, crime-ridden community" installed gates and security cameras in an attempt to monitor and mitigate police violence against them. How is the community's use of gates and security in Jacarezinho both similar to and different from that of typical gated communities, and did those differences warrant the removal of the gates?

In regard to fraternities, Klinenberg states, "Since most fraternities select people with similar backgrounds and interests—ethnicity, race, religion, class, or often sports (and occasionally academics)—joining one is an effective way to avoid the diversity and difference a university offers" (97). Campus clubs and other groups are also formed based on commonalities, whether they be academic or social. Do groups formed in this manner constitute a beneficial form of social infrastructure? Is there a reliable way to gauge the value of these groups? Due to the reputation fraternities have earned at a national level for their involvement in "rampant discrimination, violent hazing, excessive drinking, and, too often, sexual assault" (97), have they, as Klinenberg suggests, "earned an expulsion" (98)?

Crime

Klinenberg quotes C. Ray Jeffery: "There are no criminals, only environmental circumstances which result in criminal behavior. Given the proper environmental structure, anyone will be a criminal or a noncriminal" (59). Yet Klinenberg argues that ". . . most policies that aim to reduce crime focus on punishing people rather than improving places" (59). In what ways does one's environment shape one's choices? How can environments be designed to discourage crime?

Silicon Valley and the Role of Big Business

Klinenberg describes the impacts that the tech giants in California have on surrounding areas, writing, "There is another community that has suffered devastating losses since Facebook and other big tech companies began setting up shop in the Bay Area: poor, working-class, and middle-class residents of the region, who have been steadily priced and crowded out" (213). What responsibility do large companies have as they expand into preexisting neighborhoods and communities? How and for what should they be held accountable? Contrasting the philanthropy of today's business owners with that of the tycoons of the past, Klinenberg explains, "Entrepreneurs have amassed vast fortunes in the new information economy, and yet no one has come close to doing what Carnegie did between 1883 and 1929, when he funded construction of 2,811 lending libraries, 1,679 of which are in the United States" (218). Is it the responsibility of wealthy individuals to contribute to social infrastructure? Why or why not? Does the fact that the entire tech industry "depends on a technology developed by the government—the Internet—and a publicly funded communications infrastructure" (219) play a role in their degree of accountability to the public?

Public Health Risks

In discussing "the largest American public health crisis since the HIV/AIDS epidemic: opioid addiction" (118), Klinenberg describes Switzerland's "international model of effective, if still controversial, social infrastructure, and one with a proven record of saving lives" (122). Why is Switzerland's approach so controversial despite its successes? Should more countries adopt this approach in addressing opioid addiction? How is Boston's approach both similar to and different from the Swiss approach?

classroom activities

1. In reference to the impacts of global warming, Klinenberg writes, "ferocious hurricanes, searing heat waves, and raging wildfires have threatened life and destroyed valuable property in the world's most affluent societies" (199). Choose a natural disaster that had devastating effects on a particular community and research the preparation for and response to the event. Write a critical analysis that provides background on the events preceding and following the disaster as well as its lasting impacts. Include in your analysis a proposed way forward that would enable both the government and communities to be better equipped to cope in these situations.

2. Research the definition of gentrification and its impact on various communities across the country. Pay close attention to its results (both pitfalls and benefits), whom is affected, and in what ways. Read these two pieces presenting opposing views on the issue of gentrification in Denver: **tiny.cc/inkcoffee** and **tiny.cc/gentrification**. Upon completion of your research, compose an opinion piece explaining whether or not gentrification is beneficial to local communities. Include in your piece an acknowledgment and counter of the opposing argument.

3. Research the current status of hard infrastructure proposals in the American political arena. Additionally, review the "American Infrastructure Report Card" (**tiny.cc/usreportcard**). Which are the most pressing issues and how is the United States currently addressing these issues in various communities? How can these issues be adequately addressed while also improving social infrastructure?

4. Begin by reading the article "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety," available online as part of *The Atlantic*'s archives. Then, use the list of articles in the "Chapter 2: Notes" section (pages 244–245) to find the criticisms of the broken-window theory written by Bernard Harcourt, Robert Sampson, Stephen Raudenbush, and Franklin Zimring. Read at least two of the criticisms and write an informed critique of the theory addressing its validity or lack thereof. Include in your critique the arguments against the theory and assess their credibility.

5. In discussing the polarity of the media, Klinenberg writes, ". . . as social inequality and class segregation have deepened, national news programs that transcended ideological lines have lost viewers, and the Internet has generated the rise of 'filter bubbles,' where everyone can find facts and opinions that confirm their beliefs" (151). Choose a politically polarizing topic and identify four articles on the topic from four different sources. Ensure

a balanced view by utilizing articles from both liberal- and conservative-leaning outlets, and include articles whose arguments contradict your own personal opinions. Read the articles, and write an analysis describing your own opinion on the topic and your reasoning behind it. Address the arguments of the articles you read in your analysis, and assess the value or lack thereof of engaging with opinions that diverge from your own. Link your conclusion to Klinenberg's discussion of "filter bubbles."

6. Form small research teams and list examples of social infrastructure in your community. Start with those places that Klinenberg directly identifies, such as parks, libraries, universities, etc., but also expand your scope to include any other "physical places or organizations that shape the way people interact" (5). Discuss the effectiveness of each in terms of both engaging the community and encouraging a sense of community. Take into account in your discussion societal problems that your community specifically faces, and create a presentation illustrating how social infrastructure could be improved, or implemented, to better serve the needs of your community.

resources

"Actions That Build Community," (**tiny.cc/communitybuildingactions**): A checklist of ideas and ways in which individuals can work to build community in their own lives.

Chera Kowalski's TED Talk, "The Critical Role That Libraries Play in the Opioid Crisis," (**tiny.cc/libraryopioids**): Kowalski discusses the importance of libraries in general as well as her personal experience working to improve health and safety in her own community.

"Eric Klinenberg: Palaces for the People | Talks at Google," (**tiny.cc/klinenberggoogle**): The author speaks about his book and provides additional context for ideas explored in the text.

"Harvard Kennedy School Social Capital Toolkit," (**tiny.cc/socialcapitaltoolkit**): A resource providing information about social capital and how it encourages development in communities.

Susan Pinker's TED Talk, "The Secret to Living Longer May Be Your Social Life," (**tiny.cc/livinglonger**): Susan discusses her research in a Sardinean blue zone and addresses the impacts of social relationships on life expectancy.

"The Concord Handbook: How to Build Social Capital Across Communities," (**tiny.cc/uclasocialcapital**): A handbook created by the UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research, outlining design principles that effective organizations have used in "creating 'bridging social capital'—the human and organizational resources that span social differences." This is a resource for organizations and others interested in implementing strategies that successfully bring differing groups together across communities.

other works of interest

Modern Romance, Aziz Ansari and Eric Klinenberg

City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo, Teresa Caldeira

Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive While Others Collapse, Timothy P. Carney

The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs

Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago, Eric Klinenberg

Netherland, Joseph O'Neill

Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, Robert D. Putnam

#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media, Cass R. Sunstein

about this guide's writers

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