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From Main Street to Mainstream
*Middletown, Muncie, and "Typical America"

SARAH E. IGO

“No one who wishes a full understanding of American life today can afford to neglect this impartial, sincerely scientific effort to place it under the microscope slide,” announced a writer for the New York World. The New Republic agreed, calling it a “book . . . that will give the reader more insight into the social processes of this country than any other I know.” Even the characteristically cynical H. L. Mencken proclaimed, “I commend [it] to all persons who have any genuine interest in the life of the American people. . . . It reveals, in cold-blooded, scientific terms, the sort of lives millions of Americans are leading.” And The Nation declared, “nothing like it has ever before been attempted; no such knowledge of how the average American community works and plays has ever been packed between the covers of one book. . . . Who touches this book touches the heart of America.”

Sarah E. Igo is an assistant professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. She wishes to express her gratitude to Bruce Geelhoed for facilitating her first trip to Muncie and the Center for Middletown Studies. For organizing the conference that inspired this article and for assistance with the editing process, she also thanks Jim Connolly as well as the editorial staff of the Indiana Magazine of History.

Such words were extravagant praise for a book that began its career as a standard religious survey. That *Middletown*—Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd's 1929 study of Muncie, Indiana—captured the national limelight should be surprising. Social surveys, one response to the challenges posed by a new industrial order and rapid urbanization, would hardly have been unfamiliar to contemporaries. Similar investigations had been fixtures of the American scene since the late nineteenth century, from Jane Addams's *Hull House Maps and Papers* of 1895 and W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* of 1899 to the six-volume Pittsburgh Survey of 1909-1914. These ventures, by turns altruistic and anxious, mapped urban poverty, explored the structures of African American and immigrant communities, tracked transformations in rural life, and examined industrial working conditions. By one count, at least 2,775 such surveys on various aspects of American life had been completed by the time of *Middletown*’s publication. Yet no other study was instantly pronounced a revelatory investigation into the modern United States, a “mirror held up before us,” telling Americans “how we live and what we think about.” And none would have the impact—or the reach—of the Lynds’ survey.

Indeed, one of the most striking things about *Middletown* was how many non-experts were aware of it. Readers seemed spellbound by the sweep of the Lynds’ findings: that workers rose earlier in the morning than their employers; that schoolgirls preferred silk to cotton stockings; that the newest homes in town lacked parlors; that belief in hell was weakening. A reviewer noted with astonishment in 1929 that “not many years ago it would have seemed incredible that any social survey could achieve the distinction of a big seller in the book trade. This, however, *Middletown* has accomplished.” The book went through six printings in its first year of publication alone, and bookstores and libraries could hardly keep it on their

16 (March 1929), 381; Stuart Chase, “Life in Middletown,” *The Nation*, 128 (February 6, 1929), 164.

shelves. The range of publications reporting on the study was impressive. *Middletown* was discussed on the front pages of major as well as minor newspapers and journals—from Florida’s *Fort Myers Church News*, to *The American Teacher*, to *The New York Medical Week*—and in classrooms, community centers, churches, and households all over the country. Its publisher, Harcourt, Brace, and Company, was perhaps justified in its advertisements trumpeting *Middletown* as “the latest and most indispensable word in the new American vocabulary.”

What accounted for the astounding success of this more than five-hundred-page study of an anonymous community in the Midwest? How and why was it judged uniquely illuminating of the modern United States? Answers lie both in *Middletown*’s content and in its form. Extensive interest in the Lynds’ findings signaled a growing curiosity about what “ordinary” Americans did and believed. It also expressed a fascination with the very social scientific mode that permitted such discoveries. Historian Lynn Dumenil writes that the 1920s were “distinguished by Americans’ growing consciousness of change, a perception that a yawning gulf separated them from the world of only a decade before.” As such, *Middletown* located patterns in and imparted shape to a new world, responding to worries over standardization and conformity, changes in work and leisure, and shifting gender roles and moral codes. Or as Good *Housekeeping* observed of the study, “Nothing is so interesting as ourselves, and this was like looking at yourself in a mirror.”

The fact that *Middletown* seemed to offer definitive, scientific knowledge about the mainstream United States allowed it to resonate differently than had prior surveys, more narrowly focused on specific problems and reforms. But there is more to the story. The Lynds’ survey also offered a reassuringly familiar picture of just who Americans were amidst unsettling social, demographic, and economic developments. As such, *Middletown*, coupled with the 1937 follow-up study *Middletown in Transition*, was a

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CITIZENS OF MUNCIE, INDIANA, c. 1910s-1920s

The Peterson family at the dinner table, May 1916.
Otto Sellers Collection, Ball State Archives & Special Collections

Muncie school children, c. 1927.
W. A. Swift Collection, Ball State Archives & Special Collections
A crowd gathers downtown to watch a scene from the movie Muncie's Hero being filmed, July 1924.

W. A. Swift Collection, Ball State Archives & Special Collections

Women of the Moose at their refreshment stand, c. 1927.

Spurgeon-Greene Collection, Ball State Archives & Special Collections
crucial step in the social scientific production of “typical America.” This essay explores how the investigation of a particular community became bound up with the question of national self-definition—and how broadly accessible social data were coming to shape understandings of the U.S. public in the early twentieth century.

“The Genus Americanus”

For contemporary observers, Middletown had two separate claims to novelty. The first was its dispassionate, objective, and most of all, anthropological approach to American culture. In his foreword to the study, Clark Wissler, an anthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History, summed up the shock the book would create: “to most people, anthropology is a mass of curious information about savages,” that is, not a tool that had been applied to “civilized” white Americans. Commentators, both popular and scholarly, made much of this new way of looking at the United States. The Lynds “made an anthropological study of the genus Americanus just as their fellow-scientists frequently study the habits of primitive man in Africa or of the Indian tribes in Central America,” reported the Boston Herald. “Ethnologists and sociologists have been examining the cultures of other peoples in such fashion for a half century, but have only begun to give us an equally objective interpretation of our own culture,” proclaimed Chicago School sociologist Harvey Zorbaugh. Middletown, he stated, “cannot fail to increase our objectivity in considering the social life of which we are a part.” It was this unusual step of viewing U.S. culture as alien or other that made the Lynds’ study so illuminating, claimed Wissler. Until Middletown, he pronounced, “we ha[d] no complete picture of life in a modern community, especially one that is so nearly objective.” The study was a breakthrough in impartial scholarship, “true to life, remorselessly realistic.”

Reviewers of Middletown applauded its stringently scientific tone. One described the Lynds’ treatment of the materials they gathered as “without any emotional gloss, as clean as a butterfly crisply labeled and stuck on a pin.” Impartial observers watching and recording their subjects, another claimed, the researchers “simply turn[ed] the lens of social science upon the flow of community life and let its folkways disclose themselves.” The Lynds, of

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course, were hardly passive receptacles of social scientific knowledge; their calculated use of the naïve observer and sharp critique of Middletown's commodity culture have been well documented. But the technical apparatus of the study and its particular style of reportage could make it appear otherwise. The Lynds "have collected case reports and their pages are larded with percentages and statistics," explained one journalist. "Our authors do not tell us . . . [their conclusions] in so many words. They are too unbiased and too scientific to do so." Observed another, "These are the cold, objective facts, as impersonal as the fluid in a laboratory test tube." As such commentary reveals, Middletown's brand of social scientific realism managed to persuade.

The second aspect of the Lynds' study that seemed stunningly new was its object of investigation: "average" American life. Hundreds of studies of gangs, factory workers, immigrants, and paupers predicted Middletown. But the Lynds' project, many commentators noted, marked a bold departure from "special studies . . . made of the notorious trio, 'dependent, defective and delinquent.' " Unlike surveyors who had gone before them, Wissler recognized, the Lynds' attention was trained not on worrisome subgroups or social problems—"coal miners, teamsters, working girls, etc."—nor indeed on any particular fraction of the population, but on the nation writ large. The rhetorical turn from "others" to "ourselves," from the usual objects of anthropology to "typical Americans," was a key source of fascination for those who encountered the Lynds' survey. Middletown, in contemporary reviewers' words, put "the average American city under a ruthless microscope" and uncovered "the real culture of the American small town." It analyzed national "manners, morals, habits, ideas" and presented "an authentic picture of America in process." It revealed, in sum, "the truth about ourselves." In the Lynds' hands, Muncie would become a microcosm of the mainstream United States, defining its content and its boundaries.

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It was this particular conjunction of objective science and "average America" that enabled a social scientific survey to carry so much weight in public discussions of the day. Historian Warren Susman long ago pinpointed the interwar years as a time when many "began thinking in terms of patterns of behavior and belief, values and life-styles, symbols and meanings," and made "the effort to find, characterize, and adapt to an American Way of Life." Like Herbert Hoover's ambitious data-collecting project, Recent Social Trends, and the social documentary impulse that would engage so many artists and writers across the next decade, the Lynds' survey was at once a symptom of national introspection and an agent in defining the terms of the discussion. One contemporary admirer of the Lynds' work put it this way: "the portrait of a community, representative of millions of our population, barely groping for a national culture still to be born, jumps out of their careful paragraphs."

Moreover, Middletown made "the typical" visible, and empirically real, at a moment when any sense of American commonality was difficult to discern and national culture seemed deeply fragmented and unstable. Noting the intense class, racial, ethnic, and political conflicts of the early 1920s, historian Margo Anderson writes that, to many, urban industrial society had come to appear "a monstrous perversion of American ideals and ways of life." The 1920 Census, which indicated that the rural-urban balance of the country was tilting decisively toward the latter and that the foreign-born were overtaking old-stock Americans, "seemed to confirm the pessimist's worst fears." Rather than viewing these trends as harbingers of inevitable social change, elites in Congress and elsewhere sought to reverse the current. It was, of course, a coincidence that the Lynds set out for their Muncie fieldwork in 1924, the same year that the Johnson-Reed Act, "crudely discriminatory" in its effort to curtail immigration from all countries save those of Western Europe, became law. But in the context of renewed nativism, eugenic designs, and postwar patriotism—indeed, the height of "racial nationalism" in the twentieth century—a scientific description of the United States, trained not on urban problems but on a "typical" Midwestern town, could act as a powerful cultural arbiter. Like national origins quotas,

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In Middletown, the Lynds mounted a critique of American life, and particularly of modern commodity culture, in the hopes of effecting change. But, perhaps paradoxically, they also put into circulation a newly authoritative representation of that culture. The study would not enlighten readers in ways the surveyors had expected. In the end, the detached and “objective” portrait of U. S. culture found in Middletown served to reify as fixed the very aspects of that culture that the Lynds had meant to question.

A “Representative” Community

One of the most striking aspects of commentaries about Middletown was the speedy acceptance of the notion that its authors had discovered a community that could stand in for the whole United States. This was apparent in journalists’ constant invocation of the words “average,” “normal,” and “typical” to characterize the Lynds’ findings. Writing of their portrayal of Muncie, for example, the New York Evening Post asserted, “these are normal activities, and ‘Middletown’ is a normal city.” One reporter claimed that in Middletown, the researchers had found Aristotle’s “mean man . . . the average man.” Another wrote of the Lynds, “the reader sees in their picture of Middletown the spiritual lineaments of Hometown, of Anytown in the U.S.A.” Even for John Dewey, Middletown was “Anytown.”\footnote{William Soskin, “Books on Our Table,” New York Evening Post, n.d., RHL, R7 C12; J.M.T., “Average America,” \textit{The Message}, St. Andrew’s Church (New Bedford, Mass.), April 28, 1929; Isabel Paterson, “Books and Other Things,” \textit{New York Herald-Tribune}, January 29, 1929; Sheffield, “Recent Books of Special Interest,” 306; John Dewey, “The House Divided Against Itself,” \textit{The New Republic}, 58 (April 24, 1929).} For those prepared to accept Middletown as America, what mattered was not that the Lynds had tabulated “representative” rates of unemployment or divorce; indeed, most readers would not have been able to evaluate such a claim. Instead, the advantage of the anthropological stance was that it seemed to have allowed the researchers to penetrate to the very heart of the nation’s culture: its guiding habits, political and economic ideologies, and modes of living. Reviews in popular publications easily slipped between “Middletown” and “America” or “Middletown” and “ourselves,” rarely
challenging—instead more often creating—the dominant understanding of the study as a scientific explication of mainstream American values and behavior. Collapsing any distinctions between Middletowners and himself, the book's reviewer for the Saturday Review of Literature stated, "38,000 of us were recently observed to work, learn, love, and play in a typical though anonymous Middlewestern city." Comparing the study to an unforgiving mirror, he continued: "If you believe it would do your soul good to look at such a reflection of yourself—youself and all the rest of us—then look into this book's pages—and if you can, keep from unhappy pondering as to what manner of man—and woman—you and all the rest of us are apparently becoming?" "Surely these people cannot be our fellow citizens," lamented another commentator, "they cannot be us. But they are." Embracing Middletowners as "us," this sort of reportage reinforced Muncie's status as an authentically representative place, one profoundly revealing of the modern United States.11

There were deep ironies in such endorsements of Middletown's typicality. One British commentator pronounced that the Lynds were "determined to get at the normal in American life." This was certainly true. However, the Lynds explicitly eschewed any claim for their site's typicality in the introduction to the first study. They wrote: "although it was its characteristic rather than its exceptional features which led to the selection of Middletown, no claim is made that it is a 'typical' city, and the findings of this study can, naturally, only with caution be applied to other cities or to American life in general." Over the years, both researchers reiterated this disavowal. Of course, by titling the study "Middletown" and by describing it as an account of "contemporary culture," the Lynds did suggest that Middletown was representative of something larger than itself. As a shrewd reporter for the New York Evening Post observed, "To have called the book by the actual name of the city . . . would have made it only another social survey. But to call it Middletown stirs connotations of the average American city. . . . The term becomes generic and symbolic. Middletown is—or at least is meant to be—America."12


12"A Genuine Document in Sociology," Constable's Monthly List (UK), June 1929, 5; Lynd and Lynd, Middletown, 9; Maxwell A. Lerner, "Middletown Has an Air of Mr. Babbitt's Zenith, Ohio," New York Evening Post, February 9, 1929. Helen Lynd noted in 1978, for instance, "we certainly never made any claim that it was a specifically typical city"; Helen Merrell Lynd, with Staughton Lynd, Possibilities (Youngstown, Ohio, 1978), 34.
More paradoxically still, Robert Lynd had selected Muncie, indeed sought it out, for its atypicality in one key respect. Whereas the original plan for the study that became Middletown had called for a high level of ethnic and racial heterogeneity at the field site, Lynd settled on Muncie, a town he believed to have a small African-American and foreign-born population. This was not an oversight, but a carefully considered aspect of the research design—one that broke dramatically with the emphasis of both prior social surveys and contemporary studies like those of the Chicago School on urban minority and immigrant populations. Middletown’s authors, however, reasoned that there were scientific advantages to dealing with “a homogeneous, native-born population,” namely fewer “variables” to contend with. Explained Robert Lynd to his sponsoring agency regarding the decision to limit the study to native white American stock: “The reason for this is obvious: since we are attempting a difficult new technique in a highly complicated field, it is desirable to simplify our situation as far as possible. The interaction of the material and cultural trends in the city with our native psychology is problem enough without introducing into this initial study the complicating factor of a psychology molded by a foreign environment.”

What was supremely incongruous given Middletown’s received status as a representative American community, however, was that a population as ethnically homogeneous as Muncie’s was, as the Lynds themselves pointed out, “unusual in an American industrial city.” Subsequent scholars have substantiated this statement, pointing out that the Muncie of the 1920s “was strikingly different” from the majority of American industrial cities because its ethnic diversity was so limited. Populated largely by farm-born factory workers, it was a “demographic curiosity,” more “old stock” (88 percent of the population) than any other Midwestern city of its size apart from New Albany, Indiana (where, interestingly enough, Robert Lynd was born). In contrast, the overall percentage of African American residents in the city more closely matched national patterns. In fact, in contrast to the Lynds’ belief, Muncie’s black population was growing faster than the native white population and was larger, proportionally, than that of cities like Chicago,

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1Jensen, “The Lynds Revisited,” 306; Lynd and Lynd, Middletown, 8; R. Lynd memorandum, October or November 1923, “History of Small City Study,” p. 18, copy from the Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Middletown Studies Collection, Center for Middletown Studies, Bracken Library, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana (hereafter MSC). As Mark C. Smith notes, South Bend, Indiana, was abandoned as a potential site precisely because of its “cultural and religious heterogeneity”; Social Science in the Crucible, 133. For the original plans for the study, see Galen Fisher’s letters to William L. Bailey of January 22 and February 10, 1923, “History of the Small City Study,” 3, 5.
Detroit, and New York. Yet Robert Lynd stipulated in his plan for the study, "the elimination in so far as possible of consideration of the negro element." In flat social scientific language, Middletown's Note on Method—itself a scientific innovation praised by many scholars—announced, "no answers from negroes were included in the tabulations." "Civilizing" anthropology's traditional subjects by turning from exotics to "ourselves" would have the effect of almost completely excising non-white, non-native, non-Protestant Americans from the study's pages.14

If for the Lynds, Muncie's African Americans and immigrants were "complicating factors," not constitutive components of the community, so too were most of the pressing, and even typical, problems of American cities in the 1920s. "The very middle-of-the-road quality about Middletown would have made it unsuitable for a different kind of investigation," announced the Lynds in the opening pages of their first book. Here they reinforced the novelty of their survey, its turn to the normal and average: "Had this study sought simply to observe the institution of the home under extreme urban conditions, the recreational life of industrial workers, or any one of dozens of other special 'social problems,' a far more spectacular city than Middletown might readily have been found." By labeling "spectacular" and "special" the everyday forces reshaping U.S. cities, the Lynds implied that such forces were aberrant, and therefore not truly representative of mainstream American life. Muncie, on the other hand, was sought out precisely because it was sheltered from "extreme," if common, urban conditions. Indeed, the more deeply the Lynds' representative community is probed for signs of representativeness, the more the claim unravels. Historian Richard Jensen has noted, for example, that of all American cities of Muncie's size in 1930, ninety percent had a greater proportion of women in paid employment.15

The exclusion of black and immigrant Muncie from their "total-situation study" suggests that the Lynds' vision of average America was less an empirical than a normative proposition. Even in selecting a small and

14Lynd and Lynd, Middletown, 8. On the question of Muncie's atypical population, see Jensen, "The Lynds Revisited," 306; he points out that Oshkosh, Wisconsin (47 percent old stock) or Michigan City, Indiana (52 percent old stock) would have been more typical cities of the urbanized Midwest. On the African American population in Muncie, see Jack S. Blocker, "Black Migration to Muncie, 1860-1930," Indiana Magazine of History, 92 (December 1996), 297-320. Memorandum from R. Lynd regarding Small City Study, March 28, 1924, copy from the Rockefeller Foundation Archives, MSC; Lynd and Lynd, Middletown, 511. John Madge is one who pointed to the Note on Method as an important innovation; The Origins of Scientific Sociology (New York, 1962), 133-34.

15Lynd and Lynd, Middletown, 9; Jensen, "The Lynds Revisited," 308.
Female workers at a glass factory, c. 1915. Muncie's black population during the early twentieth century was proportionally larger than that of Chicago or Detroit.

Other Side of Middletown Collection, Ball State Archives & Special Collections

Midwestern city for their site, the surveyors (and their sponsoring agency) displayed their presuppositions about what parts of American culture, and which Americans, were truly typical. Robert Lynd's choice of Muncie, historian Richard Wightman Fox argues, was "the product of his belief that the hope for social progress lay uniquely in the spirit and vision of the 'substantial type' of American, the native-born Protestant of the Middle West," rather than the foreign-born industrial workers he would have found elsewhere. That the Lynds began their investigation with a concern for "urban industrial civilization" and wound up in Muncie indicates that, despite their professed interest in contemporary culture, the researchers chased a backward-looking United States. Middletown was a representative community more wished-for than real, its studiers steeped in nostalgia for a purer, simpler, indeed pre-industrial, America.16

The Lynds' rendering of typical America and their assumptions as to what constituted "normality" were seldom noted by either general or

16"Epitaph for Middletown," 119.
academic readers. The few observers skeptical that Muncie could stand in for America were social scientists wary of making claims outside the bounds of a strictly defined scope. A member of Indiana University's Department of Economics and Sociology, for instance, wrote to Robert Lynd regarding the "rather live controversy over the relative merits and limitations" of the "case study" versus the "statistical study," and pronounced Middletown to be an example of the former since it did not permit "generalization beyond the cases studied." Those who noticed the survey's other source of ungeneralizability—its omission of blacks and marginalization of "ethnics"—were rare indeed. Perhaps not surprisingly, such recognition came only from those closely linked to surveyors' old terrain of "social problems": religious and social workers. In an otherwise laudatory review of Middletown, The Christian Century noted that "there is no way of proving that the community which they have studied is typical. In some respects it is not entirely so, chiefly because it is too homogeneous racially, has too few foreigners and Negroes. The typical American city is not so strictly 'American.'" The write-up of Middletown in Social Service Review stated: "one of the unwarranted claims of this investigation is that it is a 'total situation study of a contemporary civilization.' . . . The student of race relations would look in vain for adequate material dealing with this perplexing problem." On the other hand, many reviewers (including this last one) remarked upon and critiqued the Lynds' neglect of any analysis of Prohibition.17

In general, however, commentators, believing the surveyors had found something "as close to the average as could be attained," did not reflect upon what was missing from the Lynds' picture of a representative community. And even when they did, they were more likely to praise than to condemn the Lynds' method, as did one reviewer who described Middletown as a city that "remained 'American'" since it contained "comparatively few foreigners and fewer Negroes." H. L. Mencken caught a key distinction, observing that the Lynds, in selecting a site for the study, "did not seek the one that was most completely typical, but simply the one that was as thoroughly American as possible." His words neatly capture the analytic confusion at work in the term "typical." The same confusion can be

17R. Clyde White to R. Lynd, February 28, 1929, RHL, R4 C7; Winfred Ernest Garrison, "An American Cross-Section," The Christian Century, 46 (February 21, 1929), 265; J. F. Steiner, Review of Middletown, Social Service Review, 3 (September 1929), 508. Even some later accounts, it should be noted, praised the Lynds' "ingenuity" for choosing a homogeneous population and thereby "eliminating the effects of urbanization" on their study of industrialization; Maurice Stein, The Eclipse of Community: An Interpretation of American Studies (Princeton, N. J., 1960), 49.
glimpsed in a report that listed Muncie's defining feature as the "absence of peculiarities—lack of contact with big cities, absence of large foreign or negro elements, and non-domination of one industry." Following the logic of the Lynds' research design, readers not surprisingly concluded that it was Middletown's lack of "peculiarities," no matter how common those peculiarities were, that made it typical.18

It is worth noting that other regions or populations of the United States could not make this same leap from the local or particular to the national. Consider the anonymous community "Southerntown," the field site for John Dollard's 1937 study, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. Southerntown was "much less a 'typical' American community than Middletown," in the words of one reviewer, "typical only of the average small Southern town in a rural county devoted to a staple crop and traditionalized by a black belt history and psychology." Such a historically, economically, and of course, racially distinctive community, it seemed clear, could not represent America. Middletown, on the other hand—small, isolated, Midwestern, industrial, white, native-born—required no similar list of qualifiers. Although as racially distinctive as Southerntown, it could be considered representative because of its already-imagined averageness, a quality that bore little relation to empirical foundations. In a strange transmutation, that which made Muncie particular at the same time made it typical. A general public fascination with social science thus coexisted easily with a decidedly unscientific notion of representativeness. Despite the Lynds' anthropological distance from their object of investigation, their study promoted a vision of the typical that their readers would find quite familiar.19

Uses of the Typical

Middletown's dubious claim to representativeness did not stop the wide circulation of its image as an icon of the typical. National commentators, as we have seen, rushed to affirm Muncie as "average America." And a conjunction of interests—economic and cultural, tangible and intangible—would conspire to maintain Middletown's typicality far beyond the purposes of the original survey.

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This was nowhere more evident than in the enthusiastic embrace of *Middletown* by those who stood to profit from a scientifically derived capsule of the average. That Middletown was becoming a synecdoche for America was clear in the rush of marketers and advertisers who read the Lynds' studies to discover the mind of the typical consumer. *Middletown*'s publisher encouraged this interpretation, telling professional advertisers: "Here is the scientific low-down on how the Average American Citizen lives—what he buys, eats, reads, thinks, does in his spare time—and why . . . it would cost you $50,000 to get this information!" In another instance, Harcourt, Brace publicists vaunted *Middletown* as "just the book that every advertising man has always said he'd go out and make for himself if he only had time." *Business Week* echoed this assessment, calling the study a godsend to marketers and noting that companies "preparing campaigns for refrigerators and automobiles found it helpful in charting the course of prospective buyers' expenditures, habits and desires."

The equation of Middletowners with the general American consumer market only intensified in the years to follow. By the time *Middletown in Transition* appeared in 1937, a sales journal could proclaim that "the only two books that are absolutely necessary for an advertising man are the Bible and MIDDLETOWN!" Scores of marketers were not content to stop there, but made pilgrimages to the site itself, flocking to Muncie to find out what kinds of products "Mr. and Mrs. John Citizen of Middletown, U.S.A." were willing to buy. Trade journals as specialized as *Electrical Merchandising* made trips to Middletown to check on sales figures and buying patterns. Marketers of school products seized upon Muncie—"as nearly the typical U.S. city as any in the country," with a school system "as typical as could be found"—as the ideal place for targeting their customers. When the journal *Sales Management* commissioned a public relations survey on ordinary citizens' view of large corporations, this too entailed a visit to Muncie, specifically to every twentieth residence thereof, to tap into the townspeople's ostensibly representative opinions. Middletown, the journal commented approvingly, was the perfect "testing laboratory." Similarly, *McCall's* magazine visited every Muncie subscriber's home and ran an article picturing

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20Advertisement in *Tide* (May 1929); it noted that the book could be charged to "Office Expense." Advertisement in *Printers' Ink*; the same advertisement quoted reviews in *Advertising and Selling* ("My thought, when I had finished it, was that the Lynds had lifted the roof off every house in town and made an inventory of everything and everybody in it.") and *Sales Management* ("Of great interest to all who sell and advertise."), May 16, 1929, 173. *Business Week* ran a three-part series on "Middletown—Ten Years After," on May 26, June 2, and June 9, 1934; the text quoted is from the first of these articles, p. 15.
“the re-enactment of typical examples” of residents using their products. “Representative” cities like Middletown, noted the writer, “in the aggregate constitute by far the most important group of people sociologically and market-wise in America.”

Other businesses and individuals reaped benefits, albeit less concrete, from the cultural summation that the Lynds had provided. A certain investment in the typical, and in shorthands for the nation, for example, was evident in Margaret Bourke-White’s 1937 assignment to photograph Muncie for Life magazine. The resulting photo essay, published to coincide with the debut of Middletown in Transition, cashed in on the city’s status as “typical America.” Bourke-White’s images—the vice president of a local union giving a member of the prominent Ball family a shave, the orderly rows of middle-class housing plots—were meant to encapsulate mainstream patterns of small-town life, work, and family. “Since Muncie, Ind. is today accepted as the typical U.S. city,” the caption under one photograph read, “this picture is a vital document of U.S. life.” The magazine announced, “Here, set down for all time, you may look at the average 1937 American as he really is.” Readers’ letters to Life included several from admirers of the “set of factual scenes” the photographer had produced, one raving that “in years to come it will be a priceless picture portfolio of the average 1937 town and its people.” Bourke-White, added a complimentary reporter for the Chicago Daily Tribune, had “photographed some of the statistics, human, architectural, and natural of Middletown.”

Journalists, photographers, marketers, and social surveyors all joined the quest to determine “the typical.” This was especially true in the years of economic hardship and domestic instability that followed the first Middletown study’s release. The Depression-era search for national unity,
Margaret Bourke-White and her assistants prepare for a photograph. Her photographic essay on Muncie as Middletown appeared in Life in 1937.
Spurgeon-Greene Collection, Ball State Archives & Special Collections

Historians have shown, surfaced in celebrations of the “common man” and the “American Way of Life.” This imperative helps explain how a social scientific study quite critical of tendencies in modern United States culture—its allegiance to habit, its lack of self-consciousness, its unexamined ideologies—could begin to mutate into something else entirely: an affirmation of the unchanging, essential, and even laudable core of American life.23

In 1929, many commentators had viewed Middletown as a “warts and all” description of a representative community, with a unique ability to

23See Susman, “The Culture of the Thirties”; Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America; and David P. Peeler, Hope Among Us Yet: Social Criticism and Social Solace in Depression America (Athens, Ga., 1987).
clarify the challenges facing the nation. Many reviewers of the earlier volume decried the ill effects of standardized work and leisure on Muncie's existence, and hoped, as did the Lynds, that the study would provoke a reconsideration of cultural habits and attitudes. But as the 1930s progressed and the Depression took its course, the purportedly average American lifestyle that the Lynds described in their survey was slowly revalued, taking on a different, more generous cast. This was most apparent in national coverage of *Middletown in Transition*, which subtly shifted the meaning of the "typical" even as the Lynds' critique of American norms intensified.

*Middletown in Transition* won the same kind of plaudits for its scientific approach to culture as had its predecessor. "Mr. and Mrs. Robert S. Lynd with a large corps of statisticians, investigators, etc., have been measuring, counting, adding, subtracting and multiplying all the happenings, economic, cultural and political, in Middletown for months on end in an attempt to see just how an average town in the nation's Middle West 'look' and survived the late depression years," pronounced one newspaper. Once again, there was glowing praise for the researchers' ability to capture modern America through their capsule study. A writer for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* called "The Middletown Spirit"—the Lynds' 1937 summation of what Muncie believed—the "most brilliant synthesis of the American credo of life and living that has been made in our generation." Middletown, as a headline in the *New York Herald Tribune* put it, was "as American as a Baked Apple." Another reviewer made the point even more adamantly: "Pick a man up from Springfield, Mass., or from Fresno, Calif., and set him in Middletown—and, despite all differences between New England hills, San Joaquin orchards, and Midwest flatlands, he will feel instantly at home."24

The tone of such reviews had changed, however, between the first study and the second. If Middletowners were often a target of reviewers' scorn in 1929, by 1937 some commentators were praising the modal American found in the Lynds' pages. There were those who wondered, in fact, if there was anything wrong with Muncie as the Lynds pictured it. One commentator wrote in *The Christian Century* of *Middletown in Transition* 's cataloguing of "the median American mind" without irony or distaste.

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A writer for the Chicago Herald Examiner went further, closing his review of
the 1937 study with a ringing endorsement of the Lynds' research site.
"More cities like Middletown are needed here—good, sane, substantial,
hard-working communities that breed the best citizens," he proclaimed.
Reversing the surveyors' negative assessment of Muncie as an ostrich with
its head in the sand, the commentator was reassured by their judgment that
"Middletown remains singularly the same."25

In a period ripe with international tensions, the commonality of the
American people and their beliefs, as documented by the Lynds, could also
be marshaled politically. "What Herr Goebbels does not know about
America," editorialized the New York Times as war loomed in the late 1930s,
"is that when it comes down to a test of American fundamentals, Mr.
Roosevelt of Washington, and Mr. Smith of Middletown, and Mr. Smith of
Oliver Street think alike." The social surveyors' microcosm had achieved
symbolic purchase in the culture at large. Moreover, in some quarters it was
being treated not simply as a descriptive account of American life, but a pre-
scriptive one.26

Muncie, Average and Ideal

During the 1930s, the notion that Middletown typified America was
crystallizing. The nearly unanimous praise in the national press for the
"truths" that the Lynds had uncovered in their community studies was one
thing. The reaction in Muncie, the object of the Lynds' endeavors, was quite
another. City residents squirmed under the surveyors' critical scrutiny and
protested their interpretations, vigorously questioning whether the Lynds
could provide an adequate picture of the place they believed they knew best.

Locals' challenges to the surveys ranged from protests over specific
characterizations—of the Rotary Club, the school system, and the clergy, for
example—to wide-ranging critiques of social science itself. Their suspicion
of the impersonal facts that seemed to trump local knowledge and their
insistence on the humanity and fallibility of the researchers countered the
awed reaction of national reviewers who called Middletown "an amazingly
painstaking study," "an extraordinarily objective piece of work," "a gold
mine of social data," "scientific and sociological to the last degree," and gov-
erned by "the austere principles of modern anthropology." Muncie residents
were conscious that their town was becoming a touchstone for America and

25 "Mirror of America," The Christian Century, 54 (May 5, 1937), 575; Charles Hanson Towne,
that the Lynds had "gained considerable fame—and we trust, dollars—by making Muncie a sociological laboratory." Locals found it especially galling that outsiders were willing to take the Lynds at their word and embrace the authors' supposedly scientific impressions of Muncie's practices and values.27

Middletowners' status as typical Americans might have put them in a unique position to challenge that designation. But for all the uneasiness of residents, and despite their rejection of some of the Lynds' findings, something of the allure of the typical seeped into the terms of their arguments. Local reaction to the Life photo-shoot is instructive on this score. Initially, many in Muncie had been flattered by the attentions of a famous photographer. However, Bourke-White's supposedly definitive portrait would stir up plenty of controversy in the city it was meant to represent. As one of the Lynds' correspondents related after the Middletown issue hit the stands, Life magazine had "the town mad as anything." He speculated that Middletown in Transition was meeting a better reception from locals than he had expected, but only "because they have a new villain, Margaret Bourke-White." Another would report that "the LIFE pictures were vigorously resented here, by practically everybody."28

What about the photographs had riled people? In eleven pages of images, two in particular—which pictured four Middletown living rooms of families from different social strata—drew local fire. Muncie residents objected to this depiction of class differences, the stark presentation of the shabby one-room shack in "Shedtown" aside the opulent parlor of the Ball family. One man described Bourke-White's approach this way: "she 'shot' the upper crust and the lower (soaked) crust, but left out the middle filling, which is the most important part of any community-pie." Similarly, a reporter for the


Local reaction to *Middletown in Transition*. The Muncie evening newspaper predicted that its readers would be “unlikely to agree with” the findings of the Lynds' second book.

*Muncie Evening Star*, April 13, 1937

*Muncie Press* wondered where the pictures were of the “good, substantial middle class.” In a letter to *Life*, he echoed the Lynds’ distinction between the “spectacular” and the “middle-of-the-road” and protested that “The most common adverse criticism (and most of it was adverse) of your series on Muncie . . . was: ‘They didn’t show the average Muncie family—only extremes.’” He went so far as to append to the letter his own competing photographs of a truly “typical” Muncie family. This repeated emphasis on the “middle,” whether the “middle filling,” the middle class, the “middle-of-the-road,” or the largely implicit Middle West, illuminates what the “average” and “typical” were coming to mean in Middletown, as in the nation. A panoramic view of the range of Muncie’s people and houses was not considered representative; instead, “important,” “good,” and “substantial” middling people could best stand in for the whole.29

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29Robert H. Myers to R. Lynd, June 6, 1937, RHL, R1 C1; John Lewellen, “Typical Muncie’s Typical Family,” Pictures to the Editors, *Life* 2 (July 5, 1937); the magazine printed his
Sensitive about their portrayal in the Lynds' surveys, many townspeople saw in Bourke-White's photographs yet another distortion of themselves and their community. But if the furor over *Life* magazine and the studies was, on the surface, about accuracy, bias, and the awkwardness of being under the investigator's microscope, it was more deeply rooted in the strange slippage between the typical and the good, the average and the ideal. As we have seen, the two concepts had merged in much of the national coverage of *Middletown in Transition.* Similarly, a 1937 editorial in the *Muncie Morning Star* anticipated that Bourke-White's photographs would demonstrate that Muncie was not only the most typical, but also the "best city of any its size." Just as the Lynds' critical account of Middletown's ever-widening gap between working and business people had been lost in the rush to uphold average America, Bourke-White's documentation of social differences was critiqued as showcasing "extremes." The typical, at least in its idealized form, could not countenance the hard facts of class and poverty in Muncie.30

In fact, the convergence of norms and ideals in the "representative community" had begun very early in the study's career, blurring scientific and common sense understandings of the typical. The very first mention of the Middletown survey in local papers in 1924 announced that the researchers had chosen Muncie for their investigation "because of its being a typical American city, devoid of a large foreign population and having diversified industries and interests." This was of course already a misreading of the Lynds' project, but it was not an uncommon one. The claim, usually with a touch of pride, to Middletown's typicality—often conflated with its being predominantly native-born—was a recurring theme in local reportage of the studies. Muncie's Chamber of Commerce, for instance, declared itself honored to represent "the most typical American City." It then went on to proclaim in its promotional materials that the community had been "selected as the ideal American City," and even mounted a sign on Main Street reading: "Muncie: The Ideal American City." This fusing of the typical and the ideal involved more than a booster's sleight of hand. It demonstrated the ease by which "middleness" or typicality was becoming a worthy aspiration,

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The W. C. Ball house, 1926. The Lynds' treatment of the “X” family—the Balls—in *Middletown in Transition* was controversial, as were Margaret Bourke-White's *Life* photographs that juxtaposed the interior of one of the Ball residences with that of one of the poorest shanties in Muncie.

W. A. Swift Collection, Ball State Archives & Special Collections

and how social surveyors could, even if inadvertently, create new cultural ideals.31

Told again and again over the course of the 1930s that they exemplified the best qualities of average America, even Middletowners began to believe that they were its spokespeople. “We think we are a typical city of typical Americans. We do not mind being in the nation’s spotlight,” announced Muncie’s mayor in 1937. A Muncie-born bishop reflected that because of where he grew up, he had often been characterized as an

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“average American.” His response to such remarks was, “Yes, I am just an average American from an average American city where civilization is at its best.” Local businessmen also understood the label’s worth. One of Robert Lynd’s correspondents let him know that although the local newspapers had at first been angered by their characterization in Middletown in Transition, their advertising departments were mollified by the fact that the book was attracting “some of those profitable ‘test tube’ national accounts.” And the Muncie Star’s editorial page declared itself proud that “business men down East use Muncie as one of their yard sticks.” The editorialist, somewhat defensively, claimed that businessmen “consider Muncie an average American city and their opinion is not based on the book that was written by the bicycle author who visited Muncie some years ago.” He noted that the editorial director of Collier’s magazine “‘made’ Muncie regularly and he learned that the city was made up of average American citizens. [His] opinion is that what is read in Muncie will be read the country over. And he’s right.”

Munsonians, it is clear, could simultaneously be dismayed by their social scientific portrait and eager to be called typical. In this vein, perhaps the strangest offshoot of the Lynds’ work was a contest run by the Muncie Evening Press in 1937 to locate the town’s most “typical American family.” The designation was based solely on the Lynds’ statistics, and had as its prize a trip to Chicago and New York—the latter sponsored by the National Institute for Straight Thinking. Many questionnaires were filed in the competition. The winning family, above and beyond fitting the statistical profile, professed to “believe in every opinion cited by Dr. Lynd as held by the typical Muncie resident.” The national press had been quick to fasten upon Middletown as typical America, paving the way for marketers and Muncie residents alike to employ such claims for their own purposes. Unusually homogeneous, native-born, middle-of-the-road Middletown had become an icon of “average” American life. And this, it seemed, was a title worth competing for.

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32Mayor Rollin H. Bunch, as quoted in “Middletown: ‘Typical American City,’ Muncie, Indiana Has Changed Little in Decade,” The Literary Digest, 123 (April 24, 1937), 32-33; “America Needs Churches, Says Bishop Fisher,” Muncie or Indiana newspaper, n.d., RHL, R7 C12; John B. L. to R. Lynd, May 26, 1937, RHL, R8 C13; “Just Here and There,” Muncie Star, n.d., RHL, R7 C12. The “bicycle author” was Robert Lynd, who, to the amusement of some in town, continued to ride a bicycle even when automobiles were available.

33John Lewellen, “Meet the ‘Typical Family’ of America’s ‘Typical City’; They’re Now in Chicago on an Expense-Free, Two-Day Outing,” Muncie Evening Press, June 5, 1937. Also on the typical family contest, see “Typical Family to Make Trip By Airplane,” Muncie Evening Press, May 22,
The Road from Middletown

*Middletown*’s authors could not have expected this valorization of the average. Robert and Helen Lynd had shied away from labeling Muncie as “typical,” but they saw Middletown almost immediately enshrined as the epitome of American life. The surveyors worried about the corroding effects of a commercial culture but saw their “representative” research site used as a basis for extensive test-marketing and advertising. Perhaps most significantly, they attempted to heighten awareness of what they saw as disturbing tendencies in modern American life, only to watch their critical account reified as “how things are.” Ultimately, the Lynds’ concerns with economic irrationalities and class divides were overshadowed by the all-too-compelling portrait they painted of typical America. This, more than any sort of social critique, would be *Middletown*’s legacy in the public sphere.34

In yet another twist, the Lynds despaired at the lack of self-consciousness and self-knowledge on the part of Middletowners, people they claimed were unable to see their culture for what it was. Yet what they unleashed was a relentless examination of “average” American life with Muncie as the medium. By the 1930s, “Middletown” had become one of social science’s most important entities—its “most studied community”—and the Lynds only the first wave of an invasion by social scientists and others. Muncie, chosen in part because of its atypicality, nevertheless became a scientific “everytown,” subject to one survey or poll after another, whether by marketers, political pollsters, or sociologists. As a local reporter put it several decades later, Middletown “became the place to analyze, to look at, to probe for the ‘typical’ American reaction to almost anything, from Jimmy Carter’s presidency to the impact of divorce on school children to the marketability of a new dog food.” A Muncie resident mused in 1982: “The rest of the world perhaps will pardon us if we express the wish that the Lynds had climbed off the train in some other town.”35

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35“I was always careful to avoid calling Muncie ‘typical,’” wrote Robert Lynd to a reporter for the *Muncie Star* in 1960. “The Chamber of Commerce gave it that name, & since then the advertisers, et al., have carried it on.” He continued, “Esquire wanted me to do a piece on men’s clothing on which they [could] balloon men’s clothing-[consciousness] in the late 1930’s in that ‘typical American city.’ I [wouldn’t] touch that, of course!” R. Lynd to Richard Greene (writer for the *Muncie Star*), April 24, 1960, MSC.

MIDDLETOWN AND "TYPICAL AMERICA"

Nearly all of these successors to the Lynds took it on faith that a town chosen for its purportedly small percentages of racial and ethnic minorities could represent the nation. Even in times more politically attuned to a differentiated America, social scientific rules of longitudinal comparison kept a truly representative Muncie from view. As Theodore Caplow, Middletown's most prolific scholar apart from the Lynds, has acknowledged, re-studies of the town were straitjacketed by the lack of early data on African Americans as well as on Catholics, Jews, and immigrants. Thus a form of social scientific collusion kept Middletown whiter, more native, and more homogenous than it actually was. Replications of the Lynds' original questionnaires and survey schedules in the 1970s and 1980s, perhaps for this reason, uncovered the centrality of traditional family and religious values to Middletown's—and by extension, the United States's—population. In the end, the Lynds had indeed chosen a "representative community." But what it represented was less an empirically typical place than an ideologically-loaded argument about what America and Americans should be.36

In a lecture at Princeton University in 1938, Robert Lynd spent much of his time evaluating Middletown and Middletown in Transition. A decade

The major follow-up studies to Middletown and Middletown in Transition were the "Middletown Man" community study project of 1974, funded by the Indiana Committee on the Humanities; the longitudinal study ("Middletown III") funded by the National Science Foundation and headed by sociologist Theodore Caplow of the University of Virginia, begun in 1976; Peter Davis's six-part documentary film series, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities and aired in 1982; and the collaborative ethnography of Muncie's African American community in Luke Eric Lassiter et al., eds., The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie's African American Community (Walnut Creek, Calif., 2004). On Middletown III, see Theodore Caplow et al., Middletown Families: Fifty Years of Change and Continuity (Minneapolis, 1982); and Caplow et al., All Faithful People: Change and Continuity in Middletown's Religion (Minneapolis, 1983). On the film series, see Dwight Hoover, Middletown: The Making of a Documentary Film Series (Philadelphia, Pa., 1992). A re-study and book under the direction of Caplow were subjects of a Public Broadcasting System documentary aired in 2001, The First Measured Century: The Other Way of Looking at American History, VHS (BJW, Inc., in association with New River Media, 2000). The Center for Middletown Studies, established in 1984 at Ball State University in Muncie, now keeps track of further research on the community.

36Theodore Caplow has noted the "systematic neglect of African Americans in the vast literature of Muncie as Middletown" as well as his own part in continuing that pattern in his replication of the original Middletown study in 1977-1978, using the same questionnaires that the Lynds did; "Afterword," The Other Side of Middletown, 270. An attempt to correct for the omission of African American data in one of the Lynds' surveys can be found in Theodore Caplow, Howard M. Bahr, and Vaughn R. A. Call, "The Middletown Replications: 75 Years of Change in Adolescent Attitudes, 1924-1999," Public Opinion Quarterly, 68 (Summer 2004), 287-313. On the Middletown III studies, see Dwight W. Hoover's discussion in "Changing Views of Community Studies: Middletown as a Case Study," Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences, 25 (April 1989), 111-23.
after the first study was published, he admitted that the overwhelming praise for, and staying power of, the books gave him pause. He noted that he became “uneasy” when people “over-play[ed]” the Middletown books or considered him an authority on American life. The social scientist’s reflections might have offered a useful counterweight to the ways the Middletown studies operated in the public sphere. But it was too late for that. Breaking away from older, reform-oriented survey conventions and acting as anthropologists of contemporary culture, the Lynds—in a particularly authoritative way, and at a critical juncture in national life—had created a new social scientific object: “average America.” Given Middletown’s unexpected arrival on the best-seller charts, the study’s vision of who and what was typical, and equally, who and what was marginal, would be broadly influential.37

Seventy-five years later, the Lynds’ depiction of Middletown still colors popular representations of the nation. And it continues to bedevil contemporary political and cultural discussions, which more often than not excise immigrants, African Americans, and urban dwellers—as well as their “extreme” habits and opinions—from “average America.” The authentic American of Chevrolet advertisements and political campaigns may no longer always be white, but he or she holds firmly to small-town heartland values. In some sense, the imagined typical, even today, is lodged in Muncie. But it would be well to ask in 2005: is Middletown in fact representative of America’s essence and ideals as recent national discourse would have us believe? Or does it remain a myth, one so familiar we cannot see that it represents “us” no better than it did in 1929?

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3Robert Lynd, “Problem of Being Objective in Studying Our Own Culture,” lecture outline for speech at Princeton University, December 9, 1938, RHL, R2 C2. On a later occasion, Lynd related to a Muncie friend: “this is the price one pays for having written a pair of books viewed now as ‘classics.’” R. Lynd to Richard Greene, April 24, 1960, MSC.