

Middletown 3

*A Study of Modern American Culture**

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editor's introduction:

Methodological Significance

In some situations, the significance or special nature of your case study may depend entirely on your theoretical framework. Under this condition, the theoretical issues even may drive the selection of your particular case.

In this third selection of the anthology, the authors deliberately chose a medium-sized city in the Midwestern United States as an *average* city, as “representative as possible of contemporary American life.” The authors are careful to note, however, that the study’s findings can “only with caution” be applied to other cities or to American life in general.

The case study is primarily a descriptive case, taking 550 pages to present the social life in this community. What interest could there be in such an average case? Here, the authors’ theoretical perspective focuses on a significant development in all of American history: the transition from an agricultural

***Editor’s Note:** Excerpted, with light editing, from Chapters I and II, “Nature of the Investigation” and “The City Selected,” from *Middletown: A Study of Modern American Culture*, by Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd. Harcourt Brace, Orlando FL, 1957, pp. 3–9; Copyright © 1957. Originally published in 1929. Reprinted with permission.

to an industrial economy that occurred in the average American city as part of the industrial revolution. Thus, another significant choice made by the authors was to have their case study compare contemporary life (at that time, around 1924) in this average city with life in 1890—an approximately 35-year period also coinciding with the passing of a generation.

Although the excerpt chosen for this selection is of modest length, the excerpt contains the authors' complete discussion of the criteria used to select their single case, their rationale for these criteria, and their rationale for describing the city's social life in terms of six topics.

Substantive Note

Middletown is one of the most famous case studies of all time in American social science. The authors and three other staff members lived for up to 18 months in the city being studied, during the mid-1920s. (The city is not named in the book, but virtually every sociologist knows its identity, which now also appears on the back cover of the paperback version of the book—Muncie, Indiana).

The book was pioneering because no one had tried to provide such detailed and comprehensive coverage of American life in a medium-sized city. The research covered six major topics ("getting a living," "making a home," "training the young," "using leisure," "engaging in religious practices," and "engaging in community activities"). The resulting work was so well-received that the authors returned to the city 10 years later, eventually producing a follow-up book of similar length, *Middletown in Transition* (1965). The second book describes how the original city was adapting to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Together, the two books capture a major slice of American life in the early half of the 20th century. *Middletown* was first published in 1929 and is still in print, some 75 years later. Not many case studies enjoy such an extended life. How long do you think your case study will continue to be of interest to your field?

Nature of the Investigation

The aim of the field investigation recorded in the following pages was to study synchronously the interwoven trends that are the life of a small American city. A typical city, strictly speaking, does not exist, but the city studied was selected because it has many features common to a wide group of communities. Neither fieldwork nor report attempted to prove any thesis; the aim has been, rather, to record observed phenomena, thereby raising questions and suggesting possible fresh points of departure in the study of group behavior.

The stubborn resistance that “social problems” offer may be related in part to the common habit of piecemeal attack upon them. Students of human behavior are recognizing increasingly, however, that “the different aspects of civilization interlock and intertwine, presenting—in a word—a continuum.”¹ The present investigation, accordingly, set out to approach the life of the people in the city selected as a unit complex of interwoven trends of behavior.

Two major difficulties present themselves at the outset of such a total-situation study of a contemporary civilization: *First*, there is the danger, never wholly avoidable, of not being completely objective in viewing a culture in which one’s life is imbedded, of falling into the old error of starting out, despite oneself, with emotionally weighted presuppositions and consequently failing to get outside the field one set out so bravely to objectify and study. *Second*, granted that no one phase of living can be adequately understood without a study of all the rest, how is one to set about the investigation of anything as . . . [complex as] Schenectady, Akron, Dallas, or Keokuk?

A clue to the securing both of the maximum objectivity and of some kind of orderly procedure in such a maze may be found in the approach of the cultural anthropologist. There are, after all, despite infinite variations in detail, not so many major kinds of things that people do. Whether in an Arunta village in Central Australia or in our own seemingly intricate institutional life of corporations, dividends, coming-out parties, prayer meetings, freshmen, and Congress, human behavior appears to consist in variations on a few major lines of activity: getting the material necessities for food, clothing, shelter; mating; initiating the young into the group habits of thought and behavior; and so on. This study, accordingly, proceeds on the assumption that all the things people do in this American city may be viewed as falling under one or another of the following six main-trunk activities:

Getting a living.

Making a home.

Training the young.

Using leisure in various forms of play, art, and so on.

Engaging in religious practices.

Engaging in community activities.

This particular grouping of activities is used with no idea of its exclusive merit but simply as a methodological expedient.² By viewing the institutional life of this city as simply the form which human behavior under this particular set of conditions has come to assume, it is hoped that the study has been lifted on to an impersonal plane that will save it from the otherwise inevitable charge at certain points of seeming to deal in personalities or to criticize the local life. . . .

It [also] is commonplace to say that an outstanding characteristic of the ways of living of any people at any given time is that they are in process of change, the rate and direction of change depending on proximity to strong centers of cultural diffusion; the appearance of new inventions; migration; and other factors that alter the process. We are coming to realize, moreover, that we today are probably living in one of the eras of greatest rapidity of change in the history of human institutions. New tools and techniques are being developed with stupendous celerity, while in the wake of these technical developments increasingly frequent and strong culture waves sweep over us from without, drenching us with the material and nonmaterial habits of other centers. In the face of such a situation it would be a serious defect to omit this developmental aspect from a study of contemporary life.³

The further device has, therefore, been adopted in this investigation: Wherever the available data permitted, we use as a groundwork for the observed behavior of today the reconstructed and, in so far as possible, objectively observed behavior of 1890. The year 1890 was selected as the baseline against which to project the culture of today because of the greater availability of data from that year onward. Also, not until the end of 1886 was natural gas struck in the city under study and the boom begun—which was to transform the placid county seat during the 1890s into a manufacturing city. This narrow strip of 35 years [from 1890 to 1924, the year that the Middletown study was started] signifies for hundreds of American communities the industrial revolution that had descended upon villages and towns, metamorphosing them into a thing of Rotary Clubs, central trade councils, and Chamber of Commerce contests for “bigger and better” cities.

Had time and available funds permitted, it obviously would have been desirable to plot more points in observed trends between 1890 and the present. But the procedure followed enables us to view the city of today against the background of the city of a generation ago—out of which it has grown and by which it is conditioned—to see the present situation as the most recent point in a moving trend.

In summary, the following pages aim to present a dynamic, functional⁴ study of the contemporary life of this specific American community in the light of the trends of changing behavior observable over the last 35 years.

So comprehensive an approach necessarily involves the use of data of widely varying degrees of overtness and statistical adequacy. Some types of behavior in the city studied lie open to observation over the whole period since 1890; in other cases, only slight wisps of evidence are obtainable. Much folk talk, for instance—the rattle of conversation that goes on around a luncheon table, on streetcorners, or while waiting for a basketball game to commence—is here presented, not because it offers scientifically valid evidence, but because it affords indispensable insights into the moods and habits of thought of the city. In the attempt to combine these various types of data into a total picture, omissions and faults in proportion will appear. But two saving facts must be borne in mind: No effort is being made to prove any thesis with the data presented, and every effort is made throughout to warn where the ice is thin.

Since the fieldwork aimed at the integration of diverse regions of behavior rather than at the discovery of new material in a narrowly isolated field, it will be easy to say of much of the specific data presented, “We knew that already.” Underlying the study, however, is the assumption that by the presentation of these phenomena—familiar though some of them may be, in their interrelatedness in a specific situation—fresh light may be thrown upon old problems and so give rise to further investigation.

The City Selected

The city will be called Middletown. A community as small as thirty-odd thousand affords at best about as much privacy as Irvin Cobb’s celebrated goldfish enjoyed, and it has not seemed desirable to increase this high visibility in the discussion of local conditions by singling out the city by its actual name.

There were no ulterior motives in the selection of Middletown. It was not consulted about the project, and no organization or person in the city contributed anything to the cost of the investigation. Two main considerations guided the selection of a location for the study: (1) that the city be as representative as possible of contemporary American life, and (2) that it be at the same time compact and homogeneous enough to be manageable in such a total-situation study.

In line with the first of these considerations the following characteristics were considered desirable: (1) a temperate climate;⁵ (2) a sufficiently rapid rate of growth to ensure the presence of a plentiful assortment of the growing pains accompanying contemporary social change; (3) an industrial culture with modern, high-speed machine production; (4) the absence of

dominance of the city's industry by a single plant (i.e., not a one-industry town); (5) a substantial local artistic life to balance its industrial activity—also a largely self-contained artistic life (e.g., not that of a college town in which the college imports the community's music and lectures); and (6) the absence of any outstanding peculiarities or acute local problems which would mark the city off from the midchannel sort of American community. After further consideration, a seventh qualification was added: The city should, if possible, be in that common denominator of America, the Middle West.⁶ Two streams of colonists met in this middle region of the United States: "The Yankees from New England and New York came by way of the Erie Canal into northern Ohio. . . . The southern stream of colonists, having passed through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky, went down the Ohio River."⁷ With the first of these came also a foreign-born stock, largely from Great Britain, Ireland, and Germany.

In order to secure a certain amount of compactness and homogeneity, the following characteristics were sought: (1) a city with a population of 25,000–50,000. This meant selection from among a possible 143 cities, according to the 1920 Census. A city of this size, it was felt, would be large enough to have put on long trousers and taken itself seriously, and yet small enough to be studied from many aspects as a unit; (2) a city as nearly self-contained as is possible in this era of rapid and pervasive intercommunication, not a satellite city; and (3) a small minority and foreign-born population. In a difficult study of this sort it seemed a distinct advantage to deal with a homogeneous, native-born population, even though such a population is unusual in an American industrial city. Thus, instead of being forced to handle two major variables, racial change and cultural change, the field staff could concentrate on cultural change. The study thus became one of the interplay of a relatively constant native American stock and its changing environment. As such it may possibly afford a baseline group against which the process of social change in the type of community that includes different racial backgrounds may be studied by future investigators.

Middletown, selected in the light of these considerations from a number of cities visited, is in the East-North-Central group of states that includes Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. The mean annual temperature is 50.8°F. The highest recorded temperature is 102°F. in July and the lowest is –24°F. in January, but such extremes are ordinarily of short duration, and weather below zero is extremely rare. The city was in 1885 an agricultural county seat of some 6,000 persons; by 1890 the population had passed 11,000, and in 1920 it had topped 35,000. This growth has accompanied its evolution into an aggressive industrial city. There is no single controlling industrial plant; three plants on June 30, 1923 had between 1,000 and 2,000 employees on the payroll, and eight others from 300 to 1,000; glass, metal, and automobile industries predominate. The census of 1890 showed slightly less than 5 percent of the

city's population to be foreign-born⁸ and less than 4 percent Blacks, as against approximately 2 percent foreign-born in 1920 and nearly 6 percent Blacks; over 81 percent of the population in 1890 and nearly 85 percent in 1920 was native White of native parentage. In the main, this study confines itself to the White population and more particularly to the native Whites, who comprise 92 percent of the total population.

The nearest big city, a city under 350,000, is 60 miles away, nearly a two-hour trip by train, with no through hard-surface road for motoring at the time the study was made. It is a long half-day train trip to a larger city. Since the 1880s Middletown has been known all over the state as "a good music town." Its civic and women's clubs are strong, and practically none of the local artistic life was, in 1924, in any way traceable to the, until then, weak normal school on the outskirts.

The very middle-of-the-road quality about Middletown would have made it unsuitable for a different kind of investigation. 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. But 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.

Notes

1. A. A. Goldenweiser, *Early Civilization*, Knopf, New York, NY, 1919, p. 31.
2. W. H. R. Rivers in his *Social Organization*, Knopf, New York, NY, 1924 sets forth a sixfold classification of social groupings identical with the six types of activity employed here. Clark Wissler presents a ninefold culture scheme, in *Man and Culture*, Crowell, New York, NY, 1923, chaps. V and XII. Frederick J. Teggart criticizes Wissler's use of a universal culture pattern, but himself implicitly recognizes certain activities as common to men everywhere, in *Theory of History*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1925, p. 171.
3. Cf. Rivers' closing sentence in *The History of Melanesian Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1914: "It is because we can only hope to understand the present of any society through a knowledge of its past that such historical studies as those of which this book is an example are necessary steps toward the construction of a science of social psychology."
4. "Function" as here used denotes a major life activity or something contributing to the performance of a major life activity.
5. The relation of climate to the elaborate equilibrium of activities that make up living is suggested by the late James J. Hill's motto to which he is said absolutely to have adhered: "You can't interest me in any proposition in any place

where it doesn't snow," or, more picturesquely, "No man on whom the snow does not fall ever amounts to a tinker's dam." (Quoted in J. Russell Smith's *North America*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, NY, 1925, p. 8.)

6. "The 'Middle West,' the prairie country, has been the center of active social philanthropies and political progressivism. It has formed the solid element in our diffuse national life and heterogeneous populations. . . . It has been the middle in every sense of the word and in every movement. Like every mean, it has held things together and given unity and stability of movement" (from John Dewey, "The American Intellectual Frontier," *The New Republic*, May 10, 1922).

7. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 296–297.

8. The census of 1890 shows 62.1 percent of the foreign-born in the state to have been of German-speaking stock and 24.5 percent British and Irish. Belgian glass workers were prominent among Middletown's foreign-born population in the 1890s.