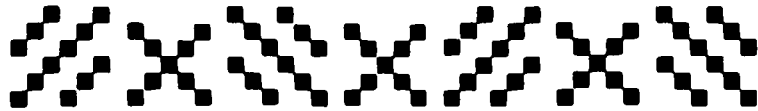


The Lynds Revisited

*Richard Jensen**



*Middletown*¹ was a stunning success. True, America was accustomed to success in 1929, but when the printers were called on six times to rush more copies, the publishers knew this was not a typical sociological treatise. To H. L. Mencken reviewing the book in *American Mercury* this "city in Moronia" was scientific proof of the silliness and self-delusion of the booboisie.² Sinclair Lewis had already exposed the shallowness of babbittry and main street in general; Thorstein Veblen had for decades condemned the pecuniary business culture. Now Robert and Helen Lynd showed in incredible detail how that culture actually worked in the life of typical people in a typical city. Muckracking exposés of big bosses and robber barons had gone out of style by 1929, but here was an exposé of the inner flaws of American society itself.

Middletown can be approached on several levels. It was, and remains, an astonishingly informative description of everyday life in a small city. Like *Main Street* it attained verisimilitude by precise description of routine behavior and by close rendering of actual conversations. *Middletown*, however, was vastly more comprehensive in scope. The Lynds followed the lead of cultural anthropologists who tried to encompass the whole of a primitive society under the six rubrics of getting a living, making a home, training the young, using leisure, engaging in religious practices, and engaging in community activities.³

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¹ Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrill Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York, 1929).

² H. L. Mencken, "A City in Moronia," *American Mercury*, XVI (March, 1929), 379-81.

³ The scheme was borrowed explicitly from W. H. R. Rivers, *Social Organization* (New York, 1924).

Besides their conceptual outline, the Lynds borrowed the technique of participant observation. Five staff investigators spent fifty months in Muncie, attending meetings of all sorts, talking with expert informants and "typical" men and women. Their job was to discover what people did, why they thought they did it, and how all the activity reflected the mainsprings of American culture. The anthropological tone of the final report treated middle America as an ethnologist would treat an aboriginal tribe. Thus the Lynds contrasted the superficiality of Muncie's art clubs with parallel behavior among the Todas.⁴ This style produced not only a detached scientific tone to the book but also allowed cosmopolitan readers to remove themselves from the parochialism of the objects of study. *Middletown* thereby distinguished itself from the hundreds of social surveys of American communities that had already been published. Those surveys reflected the spirit of uplift of the Progressive era and were directed primarily at opinion leaders in the community itself.⁵ The Lynds, in sharp contrast, carefully announced that Muncie had not been consulted about the project beforehand and had contributed nothing to its financing.⁶ There were no "recommendations for civic action" appended.

The methodological innovations of *Middletown* should not be exaggerated. Most of the material came from documentary analysis and standardized questionnaires of the sort that had already been highly developed. The agency that sponsored the study, New York's Institute of Social and Religious Research, an offshoot of Interchurch World Movement and, before that, the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions, was simultaneously sponsoring much more technically sophisticated quantitative studies of the changing place of religion in American society.⁷

Urban sociologists, perhaps jealous of *Middletown's* popularity, were later wont to criticize the Lynds as untheoretical.

⁴ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 249.

⁵ Allen Eaton and Shelby Harrison, *A Bibliography of Social Surveys* (New York, 1930), listed 2775 titles or projects completed before *Middletown* appeared. For a good review of pioneer efforts and techniques, see Pauline Young, *Scientific Social Surveys and Research* (1st ed., New York, 1939).

⁶ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 7.

⁷ See H. Paul Douglass, *How to Study the City Church* (Garden City, N.Y., 1928); H. Paul Douglass, *1000 City Churches* (New York, 1924); and C. Luther Fry, *Diagnosing the Rural Church* (New York, 1924). The latter study was a Ph.D. dissertation at Columbia's sociology department, supervised by Franklin Giddings. Fry worked with statisticians at Iowa State College and Columbia to develop his techniques. The state of the art was well represented by F. Stuart Chapin, *Field Work and Social Research* (New York, 1920). John Madge's excellent discussion of the Lynds' work exaggerates their originality. John Madge, *The Origins of Scientific Sociology* (New York, 1962), ch. 5.

The Chicago school of sociology, in particular, largely ignored the book in their quest for a hard science of society.⁸ In fact the Lynds did have a theoretical perspective—one too broad for the taste of most sociologists and too far ahead of its time to be properly appreciated. Their overarching concern was how the process of industrialization had transformed the values and personalities of Americans. Modernization—as scholars call it now—is a central concern of current social science and history. The Lynds were the first American scholars to explore the impact of modernization on all aspects of everyday life. Those cosmopolitan readers who had an unquestioning faith in modernity and laughed at the Middletown folk who could not comprehend or cope with the changes about them missed the significance of modernization. Apparently the Lynds, their own interests shifting, eventually lost interest in the theme too.⁹

The Lynds' model of modernization involved the shift from a sleepy, rural, preindustrial organic society to a pecuniary culture dominated by the interests of business. The engine of change was high speed machine technology. In classical Marxist fashion, the Lynds assumed that personality and culture were determined by material or economic causes. The intensive study of a typical American city transformed by new industry would, therefore, present a case study of the impact of modernization.¹⁰

The modernization model determined the choice of cities to study. They wanted a place that had experienced rapid growth based on "an industrial culture with modern high-speed machine production."¹¹ To be perfectly "typical" of American life, it should be self-contained and in the Midwest. It could not be

⁸ Louis Wirth, "Meditations on Middletown in Transition," and Malcolm Willey, "Selected Notes and Observations on the Lynds' 'Middletown in Transition,'" in Box 51, folder 9, and Box 55, folder 8, Louis Wirth Papers (University of Chicago Library). James T. Carey, *Sociology and Public Affairs: The Chicago School* (Beverly Hills, Calif., 1975), 161, shows that Chicago graduate students largely ignored the Lynds.

⁹ Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrill Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York, 1937), was originally going to be a one or two chapter addendum; there was no plan for another full length book, let alone a full length study. The research on the second volume, consequently, took only a tenth the time of the first. The theme of the second book was the need for centralized planning to overcome the chaos wrought by the Depression.

¹⁰ The Lynds became more radical in the 1930s; in 1928 they apparently had not read Marx, though Marxist ideas flourished in the political atmosphere Robert Lynd was familiar with. Madge, *Scientific Sociology*, 130; Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams* (New York, 1973). The Lynds did cite radical scholars Thorstein Veblen and R. H. Tawney.

¹¹ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 7.

excessively large nor small—the research team felt they could handle a place of 25,000 to 50,000 population. Finally, the city had to have a “small Negro and foreign-born population.”¹² This was critical because the Lynds wanted to avoid the confounding effects of cultural heterogeneity. A community with complex horizontal compartments would obscure the effects of modernization.

Fast growing Muncie, population 37,000, with the lowest proportion of immigrants of any of the midwestern cities, was an easy choice.¹³ True, the city had a slightly higher proportion of blacks than was usual in the Midwest, but the Lynds solved this problem by totally excluding blacks from all of their observations, interviews, analyses, and write-ups.

The problem with selecting a typical city in this manner was that Muncie was strikingly different from other industrial cities because it had so few ethnics. In urban America, half or more of the population was ethnic. In 1930, 88 percent of Muncie’s people were white and “old stock”—that is, both parents born in the United States. Of the 191 cities of over 50,000 population in 1930, only two (Springfield, Missouri, and Huntington, West Virginia) had a larger native stock proportion. No city in the Midwest with as many as 25,000 people was more old stock than Muncie.¹⁴ Together with its sister gas belt cities, Anderson and Kokomo, Muncie stood out as a demographic curiosity—a fastgrowing factory town whose population growth was drawn almost entirely from nearby farms. Thus the experience of industrialization in Middletown lacked the critical ethnic dimension that was otherwise nearly universal in America.¹⁵

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³ Muncie tied with New Albany in low proportion of foreign born, but Robert Lynd had been born and raised in the latter city. To pick it as typical would be going too far.

¹⁴ At the extreme were Ashland, Kentucky, 92 percent old stock white; Hagerstown, Maryland, Springfield, Missouri, and Parkersburg, West Virginia, at 90 percent; Joplin, Missouri, Amarillo, Texas, and Huntington, West Virginia, at 89 percent. All but Amarillo were Ozark or Appalachian trading centers. Bureau of the Census, *Abstract of the Fifteenth Census of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1933), 101-102, 103-13.

¹⁵ To provide contrast, note that Detroit was 34 percent old stock white; Chicago, 28 percent; Cleveland, 27 percent; Gary, 34 percent; Grand Rapids, 47 percent; South Bend, 55 percent. Urban Indiana, as a whole, was 73 percent old stock white, in contrast to 47 percent for urban Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin combined. Thus, Muncie was quite different from the urban Midwest. Oshkosh at 47 percent old stock white or Michigan City at 52 percent would have made a more “typical” choice.

Choosing Muncie, anyway, the Lynds proceeded to create a mythic preindustrial past.¹⁶ They combed the newspapers and surviving organizational records, supplemented by two curious diaries and haphazard recollections to paint a romantic picture of a happy "gemeinschaft" society of yore, with lively arts, vigorous unions, skilled craftsmen, and contented folk. Then modernization hit:

In the quiet county-seat of the middle eighties men lived relatively close to the earth and its products. In less than four decades, business class and working class, bosses and bossed, have been caught up by Industry, this new trait in the city's culture that is shaping the pattern of the whole of living.¹⁷

The result of this change on human personality was nothing less than devastating:

large numbers of people anxious to get their living are periodically stopped by the recurrent phenomenon of "bad times" when the machines stop running, workers are "laid off" by the hundreds, salesmen sell less, bankers call in loans, "credit freezes," and many Middletown families may take their children from school, move into cheaper homes, cut down on food, and do without many of the countless things they desire.

The working class is mystified by the whole fateful business.¹⁸

Middletown was thus a morality tale. The authors were not poking fun at simple people, they were condemning a civilization. More calmly, they were exposing the contradictions of modernization. The business ethic that dominated America preached progress and prosperity while bringing anxiety, misery, alienation, and despair to the workers who suffered. As the authors repeatedly emphasized, the business class was responsible for all the innovations, and thus all the problems. The working class, although 70 percent of the population, lacked class consciousness, for the system had broken the labor unions.¹⁹ The hegemony of the business class was total, as the churches, politics, the press, and advertising had nearly convinced the confused workers that modernization must march forward.

¹⁶ Luther Fry, Robert Lynd's colleague at the Institute of Social and Religious Research, may have suggested tracing the changes in one community over a forty year span. His *Diagnosing the Rural Church* did this for Windsor County, Vermont. The Lynd Papers are sealed at the Library of Congress, and scholars do not know exactly how the Middletown project was started.

¹⁷ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 87.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* The Lynds were describing the mid-1920s, of course; when they returned to describe the 1930s, for *Middletown in Transition*, their vocabulary of outrage at human suffering had been exhausted, so they turned their wrath on the "X family," who they believed controlled the city.

¹⁹ "From the end of the nineties such laconic reports as 'Strike defeated by use of machinery' mark increasingly the failing status of organized labor in Middletown." *Ibid.*, 78. "But the significant point is that [in the 1890s] labor

If the Lynds had given full vent to their outrage, *Middletown* would soon have been forgotten as another radical polemic. The genius of the book, and its enduring value, was that the Lynds pulled their punches (more accurately, they tucked them into footnotes) and proceeded to explore the ramifications of modernization in every one of the six facets of community life they identified. In *Middletown in Transition*, having abandoned the modernization theme, the Lynds were left with a much shriller book, of permanent interest only in its descriptions of the impact of the Depression on family life and community decision making.

The strongest part of *Middletown* was section two, "Making a Home." Aided by Dr. Faith Williams, an outstanding early home economist, the Lynds undertook a splendidly detailed and suggestive description of the process of marriage, housework, and child rearing. The contrast between this treatment and the dull statistical work then prevalent in home economics research could not be more striking. A strong feminist tone can be detected, especially in the welcoming of new employment opportunities for women.²⁰ Again, however, the selection of Muncie caused problems. Of all American cities of 25,000 or more population in 1930, 90 percent had a larger proportion of women at work than did Muncie.²¹ The actual situation for the typical American woman was thus more "liberated" than the Lynds dared hope.

The evils of modernization were not forgotten, however. The authors deplored the rapid increase in electric washing machines, seeing a dangerous new device to tie women more closely to the home.²² Even more grievous was advertising. Robert Lynd had worked briefly in the New York advertising business and was especially alert to its insidious attraction. The trick was "to make the reader emotionally uneasy, to bludgeon him with the fact that decent people don't live the way *he* does."²³ Then the poor suckers will sacrifice everything to buy, buy, buy. Installment buying ("which turns wishes into horses overnight")²⁴ breaks down the traditional propensity to save prudently, thus forcing the worker ever more into the

was powerful and class-conscious, and the workers apparently gained added stature in many of their vital activities from their membership in this powerful union movement." *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25-30.

²¹ Bureau of the Census, *Abstract of the Fifteenth Census*, pp. 388-91.

²² Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 498.

²³ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

clutches of the modernizing ethic. Advertising was "thrusting new illiteracies" on the housewife, because the home was "an essentially isolated, small-unit purchaser served by an untrained, amateur purchasing agent exposed to competing, highly organized channels of diffusion."²⁵ As a result the home was being ruined. Once "it possessed recreational, educational, and protective, as well as economic functions."²⁶ Now "with the growth of . . . extra-home activities involving money expenditure comes an increased emphasis upon the money nexus between members of the family."²⁷

The dominant factor changing small city life in the 1920s was the automobile. Since the World War the number of cars had tripled, until by 1923 there were two automobiles for every three families in Muncie. The Lynds, however, took a narrow and jaundiced view of this phenomenon. Nearly all the cities, small and large, within a 200 mile radius of Detroit shared in the great auto boom of 1910-1930. Indianapolis, Columbus, Kokomo, South Bend, and Anderson, for example, were major suppliers to the industry, and so was Muncie. By 1935, half of Muncie's manufacturing concentrated on automotive supplies. The Lynds largely ignored the growth of the industry and its entrepreneurial and managerial components. As a social factor, they referred darkly to the relative youth of the auto factory workers, suggesting strongly that the new machine age was chewing up youthful workers and ignoring the employment needs of the middle aged.²⁸

While the economic development spurred by the motor vehicle and its attendant industries hardly interested the Lynds, they were deeply concerned with the pathological effects of automobiles on American society. First was the havoc wreaked by the cost of the machines. They argued (though their evidence contradicted the point) that families mortgaged homes to buy cars; furthermore, ownership reduced saving, and family clothing and food budgets were sacrificed. They found twenty-one car owners who lacked bathtubs. Candy sales were down because of the cost of autos, and, quoting a labor leader, "the Ford car has done an awful lot of harm to the unions," because the men would rather drive around than attend meetings.²⁹ The Lynds dramatized their point by citing seductive advertis-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 32, 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

ing and by indicating that the working man spent one week's pay each month in car payments. Their failure to analyze closely the budget data they collected grossly misled them. Just under half the working class families owned cars, spending an average 9 percent of their annual incomes for automobile purchase, gasoline, and upkeep, not triple this amount as indicated in the text.³⁰

In the restudy, the Lynds dropped their concern with budget damage, but warned more pointedly of the "pounding impact upon the family's standard of living of the commercially manipulated pressure to buy new models"—evidence, they argued, of the extent to which Middletown's life is caught in the grip and forced to do the will of the economic institutions."³¹

The automobile was hurting families in more insidious ways than just draining its budget. Attendance at church supposedly fell because of Sunday outings, while the new generation worshipped speed itself. Youth fought parents for control of the car, then used it for petting and sex crimes. The authors skipped over their evidence that motoring trips were bringing families closer together, but they did acknowledge that the rapid growth of scheduled vacations centered on auto trips. The Lynds did not appreciate the impact of the auto in extending the range of employment and shopping for both urban and rural families, but they did show great concern about the supposed decline of residential neighborhoods. On the whole, they found the automobile an artificial mechanical enticement that brought more evil than good to the people caught in its embrace.³²

Social mobility is a major theme in history and sociology today, and *Middletown* helped bring the question to the fore. Before they came to Muncie the Lynds apparently had not thought much about how society was stratified, or how people moved from one rank to another. They experimented with a variety of classifications (like "upper," "middle," and "lower" class) before deciding, late in their fieldwork, to hinge their interpretation on a working class versus business class cleavage. Their actual classifications make it clear that this was simply a blue collar versus white collar distinction. As such, it

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 253-56, 514-17. The standard deviation of auto expenses was 8.4 percent. The proportion of homeowners and mortgages was virtually the same among worker families who owned or did not own cars.

³¹ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, 267-68.

³² Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 64-65, 273-75; Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, 188, 467.

was perfectly serviceable, though far less subtle than the complex scheme Lloyd Warner and his colleagues devised for the "Yankee City" study in the 1930s.³³ Pioneer studies in social mobility were underway by Pitirim Sorokin at Minnesota, but the Lynds missed both the resulting articles and Sorokin's enormously important *Social Mobility*, published in New York in 1927.³⁴

The Lynds were mystified as to why some people belonged to the business class and others to the working class. At one point they suggested that "the mere fact of being born upon one or the other side of the watershed . . . is the most significant single cultural factor tending to influence what one does all day long throughout one's life."³⁵ Elsewhere, however, they concluded that luck and happenstance were decisive: children "for the most part . . . 'go to work' by taking advantage of some vacancy they or their families happen to hear about and *spend the rest of their lives* doing that thing."³⁶ They did not ask about fathers' occupations and so could not estimate how much intergenerational movement between the classes had occurred.³⁷ Questionnaires on vocational preference given to high school boys showed that the working class youth planned to break radically with their fathers' work—a majority planned white collar careers. The Lynds acknowledged that working class families believed fervently in education as an escape route

³³ W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt, *The Status System of a Modern Community* [Yankee City Series, vol. II] (New Haven, 1942); W. Lloyd Warner, "American Caste and Class," *American Journal of Sociology*, XLII (September, 1936), 234-37. W. Lloyd Warner, Marchia Meeker, and Kenneth Eells, *Social Class in America* (Chicago, 1949), explains the Warner technique in detail. For the intellectual history, see Milton M. Gordon, *Social Class in American Sociology* (Durham, N.C., 1958).

³⁴ The Lynds were largely self-taught. Robert Lynd had a divinity degree and doubtless learned most of his social survey technique working for the Institute of Social and Religious Research. In 1931, Columbia awarded him a Ph.D. (without coursework) on the basis of *Middletown* and gave him its prestigious chair of sociology. *Middletown in Transition* displayed far more sociological expertise; see the analysis of class in terms similar to Lloyd Warner's on pp. 458-60.

³⁵ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 23-24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 50, italics added. See also *ibid.*, 48. Rivers' anthropology, heavily acknowledged by the Lynds, emphasized social groups based on descent—that is, groups that automatically recruit by birth, which are exclusive in membership, clearly bounded, and do not overlap. Rivers, *Social Organization*, 85 ff. The Lynds mistakenly thought of class in these terms.

³⁷ The Lynds noted that half of the *wives* in the working class were farm bred, versus only one in seven of the business wives. *Ibid.*, 30-35. They also compared occupations by surname in 1890 and 1924, finding that relatives in the earlier period were more clustered in the same jobs. *Ibid.*, 51.

for their children, but the authors' skepticism about this actually happening was transparent.³⁸

The Lynds believed that the traditional "rags to riches" pattern of upward social mobility within a single lifetime was being destroyed by industrialization. They calculated that only one factory worker in fifty-three was promoted to foreman in a twenty-one month period.³⁹ Allowing that industrialization was increasing the number of opportunities to own garages, filling stations, electrical shops, and other small businesses, they warned that the opportunity to become a manufacturer was declining. The Lynds were shifting their concept of strata from the business-working dichotomy to a sort of independent versus hired classification and lamenting that industrialization increased the latter category more than the former. The point was underscored in the conclusion in the second volume:

the depression has increased this helpless commitment of a growing share of the population to the state of working for others with a diminished chance to "get ahead" Here is a fundamental alteration in the vaunted American ladder of opportunity.⁴⁰

To make matters worse, industrialization was degrading the status of the honest craftsmen of yore. The Lynds' lovingly detailed description of the craft of glass blowing in the 1890s contrasted starkly with their exposure of the high speed, highly mechanized system of 1924. The new industrial system forced men to work harder and faster, "activity seemingly so foreign to many of the most powerful impulses of human beings."⁴¹ They quoted an executive about one machinist's work: "But it's so endlessly monotonous! That man is dead, just dead! and there's a lot of others like him."⁴² The Lynds concluded:

The shift from a system in which length of service, craftsmanship, and authority in the shop and social prestige among one's peers tended to go together to one which, in the main, demands little of a worker's personality

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 51-52, 187.

³⁹ That is, 1 percent per year. In forty years at that rate, a third of the workers would become foremen. *Ibid.*, 65-66. More careful studies showed that the chance of becoming a foreman was more like 3 to 5 percent per year for younger men, less for older men. White collar workers had much greater promotion rates. Ely Chinoy, *Automobile Workers and the American Dream* (Garden City, N.Y., 1955); James Rosenbaum, "Organizational Career Mobility: Promotion Chances in a Corporation during Periods of Growth and Contraction," *American Journal of Sociology*, 85 (1979), 21-48.

⁴⁰ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, 71; Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 67.

⁴¹ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 73.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 75.

save rapid, habitual reactions and an ability to submerge himself in the performance of a few routinized easily learned movements seems to have wiped out many of the satisfactions that formerly accompanied the job.⁴³

Thus alienation and degradation of the worker were the inevitable results of industrialization.

The Lynds phrased their findings—wild guesses, really—in terms of the fate of the typical worker. Their own evidence showed that the younger factory workers in Muncie were recruited chiefly from nearby farms, *not* from craftsmen stripped of their skills. In the early twentieth century, nationwide, the number of male craftsmen increased every year (at a compound rate of 2.9 percent per year from 1900 to 1920), while the number of unskilled laborers grew half as fast (1.5 percent per year), and the number of factory workers increased at a slightly faster rate (3.4 percent per year). The number of farmers held constant, as surplus farm youth by the hundreds of thousands flocked to nearby towns and small cities like Muncie.⁴⁴ Shifts were even more dramatic in the case of the native white men, because most of the unskilled and semiskilled jobs at the bottom were taken by new immigrants, thereby forcing the old stock workers upward. The Lynds missed this dramatic shift because they studied one of the very few old stock factory towns without European immigrants.⁴⁵

Quite apart from national trends pointing the other way, the Lynds could have supported their argument with living examples of men damaged by industrialization. Their research design, however, destroyed this possibility. They did not interview workers about the jobs they held in 1924 or in the past. Of the thousands of skilled young craftsmen who worked in Muncie and neighboring towns in the 1890s, there must have been hundreds still around in 1924. Yet the Lynds did not attempt to

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

⁴⁴ Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1975), 139. The number of male white collar workers increased at 2.7 percent per year. During the 1920s, craftsmen increased at a rate of 1.3 percent, factory men at 1.3 percent, and white collar men at 2.9 percent per year. On rural migration, see Carmel L. Jones, "Migration, Religion, and Occupational Mobility of Southern Appalachians in Muncie, Indiana," (Ed.D. thesis, Ball State University, 1978).

⁴⁵ For a study of South Bend, see Dean Esslinger, *Immigrants and the City: Ethnicity and Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century Midwestern Community* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1975). A good introduction to the sociological techniques involved is Judah Matras, *Social Inequality, Stratification, and Mobility* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1975).

trace them.⁴⁶ Worst of all, the Lynds did not interview the workers *at all*—they interviewed their wives. Thus, the employment characteristics, such as job titles, job changes, and unemployment that they studied were based on indirect sources. The critical factors of job satisfaction, the work ethic, displacement of skills, and lifetime upward mobility were “explained” through speculation, even though hard evidence could have been obtained just by asking the men directly.

In their restudy of Muncie, the investigators did not bother even to interview wives. This permitted even freer reign to speculation. The Lynds argued that the degradation of craft skills and the blockage of vertical mobility on the part of the working class gave the lie to America’s “exuberant boast of a classless society.” The mythical ladder of success, they pointed out, was “the popular justification of the reigning *laissez-faire* philosophy—as regards the present predatory practices of business enterprise,” the uneven distribution of wealth, and opposition to social reform. As reality and symbol drifted apart, class consciousness should rise. This, the Lynds sadly noted, had not yet happened in Middletown. But when it did, it would “usher in an era of urgent overhauling of conventional American symbols and incentives.”⁴⁷

In the last few years historians have been tracing the careers of individual workers through censuses and city directories, and sociologists have conducted retrospective interviews. The results show a steady rate of upward mobility from blue collar to white collar status, both from father to son and within individual careers. That is, the amount of vertical mobility has been quite constant in industrial America from 1850 to the present.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Their sample of workers was drawn from current payrolls at three plants, where only 11 percent of the workers were fifty-five years of age or older in 1924. They then rejected all families without a school-aged child, which eliminated most if not all the older workers. Only five men in the sample had worked for their present employer more than twenty-five years. Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 507, 511, 512.

⁴⁷ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, 72, 73, 454. The quotation is from *ibid.*, 73. Muncie’s autoworkers refused to join the sit-down strikes in 1937; the workers unanimously assured General Motors of their “loyal support in the present labor crisis.” *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁸ Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), reviews and updates the historical literature. See Robert Hauser and David Featherman, *The Process of Stratification* (New York, 1977), for current sociological findings. The rate of intergenerational social mobility in Indianapolis did not change at all between 1910 and 1940. See Otis Dudley Duncan, “Methodological Issues in the Analysis of Social Mobility,” in Neil J. Smelser and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Social Structure and Mobility in Economic*

Since the original sponsor of *Middletown* was a research institute primarily concerned with the changing status of religion in American life, fully one-fifth of the book focused on this issue. The Lynds interviewed leading ministers and laymen at length and attended hundreds of religious services, YMCA programs, and meetings of social groups sponsored by Muncie's churches. They took copious notes on sermons and examined every relevant document and unpublished record they could find.

The results were thin. The four chapters on religion in *Middletown* were filled with poorly digested descriptions and long, rambling quotations. Perhaps the Lynds lost interest in religion after finishing the fieldwork; perhaps the sponsors would not allow a merciless exposé. The Lynds found that among adults, their parents in 1890, and their children in 1924, striking differences existed across class lines. The business class attended services and meetings more faithfully, but religion played a far less central role in their lives than it did among the working class, regardless of generation. Secularization thus came in two forms: each succeeding generation was less religious than the previous one, and the business class was more secular than the working class. The Lynds made little of this important finding, preferring instead to concentrate on how irrelevant religious credos actually had become in this era of industrialization.

The modernization of society in the previous generation apparently had little impact on religion. The Lynds clearly sympathized with the problems faced by the leading Protestant ministers in searching for new roles to play (Robert Lynd held a divinity degree from Princeton Seminary, and, if a social research job had not opened up, might well have become a Presbyterian minister somewhere). Although the ministers were eager to adopt new techniques for publicity, counselling, and fund raising, they were reluctant to abandon entirely the spiritual heritage they represented, even if the congregation paid no attention. "My people seem to sit through the sermon in a kind of dazed, comatose state," admitted one minister.⁴⁹ The low interest shown by the business class coupled with the

Development (Chicago, 1966), 51-97. Most of the long-term social mobility in Muncie involved movement from farm to city. For the only historical analysis of job mobility of rural youth, see Richard Jensen and Mark Friedberger, *Education and Social Change: An Historical Study of Iowa, 1880-1930* (Chicago, 1976).

⁴⁹ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 371.

refusal of Rotary, the key intellectual and service club for the businessmen, to admit any clergymen showed that modern America had little use for religion. The higher interest shown by the working class, furthermore, suggested that religion was an obsolescent survival of premodern culture, likely soon to lose whatever role it still had.

The Lynds' observation that religion had changed little in a generation could have supported an entirely opposite conclusion from the one reached. Religion might have been the first institution to modernize, and in turn have generated the spirit of capitalism that produced economic changes. In 1905, Max Weber, in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, argued as much. The English translation appeared in 1930, but the Lynds must have had some notion of the thesis since they did cite R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York, 1926). H. Richard Niebuhr, working in the same intellectual environment as the Lynds, published *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York, 1929) the same year as *Middletown* appeared, and used Weberian categories to show how important religion was in the origins of the business ethic that the Lynds made so much of. But the Lynds never made the connection. They were committed to the proposition that technology was the basic causal force in modernization, from which behavior, attitudes, and values flowed. They had to conclude that religion was either a product of modernization, obviously not true in Middletown, or else irrelevant.⁵⁰

In revisiting Middletown, the research staff spent far less time on religion. They quickly concluded that religious practice had hardly changed in the course of a decade. But with fewer reports to digest, the authors turned loose their speculative skills. The single chapter on religion in the second volume (5 percent of the book) also drops the cutesy anthropology of the first volume.⁵¹

The Lynds suddenly realized that the irrelevance of religion was in fact highly functional and necessary for the indi-

⁵⁰ See Richard Jensen, *Illinois: A Bicentennial History* (New York, 1978); and Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896* (Chicago, 1971), for arguments of close links between religion and other forms of social, economic, and political behavior and values, with religion prior to the others.

⁵¹ "Just as this city performs identical services in its homes by processes ranging all the way from the use of primitive hand implements like the broom and the washboard to the use of electrical labor-saving devices, so in this region of its religion one observes many shades of belief addressed to this common purpose of coping with the too-bigness of life." Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 229-30.

vidual to cope with society. The one thing everybody in Middletown had in common—insecurity in the face of a complicated world—made the more fixed aspects of the city's culture into emotionally needed counterweights to change. Middletown's commitment to "Progress" created a strongly instrumentalist attitude, such that pecuniary culture became an end in itself, and even religion was bound to be affected. The authors revealed that the intensely spiritual revival they reported on in the first book was intended as a kick-off for a fund-raising campaign. Going to church had become a "kind of moral life-insurance policy." The function of religion as an emotional anchor in a world of insecurity was itself threatened by the logical unfolding of the pecuniary culture it was supposed to spiritualize.⁵²

The second report on Middletown announced a city in transition. Modernization had largely run its course; the Lynds found no new manifestation that had not been apparent in 1924. The city had grown and was approaching 50,000 population. Sheer size, the authors speculated, was undercutting the old sense of belonging and emphasizing formal structures at the expense of neighborhoods and small groups. Size also enhanced the power of a small elite tied into the national corporate system.⁵³ But in terms of values, Middletown was unchanged—it had learned nothing from the trauma of depression. The working class, in particular, still showed no evidence of class solidarity. Unions were weaker in Muncie in 1935 than they had been a decade earlier, despite the enormous upsurge of militant unionism elsewhere in the industrial Midwest. The Lynds attributed this to the single-minded, anti-union policy of the upper business class and to the distinctive rural origins of Muncie's workers.⁵⁴

The Lynds expected that the bitter experience of economic collapse would have destroyed Middletown's blind faith in modernization—at least in the belief in inevitable, continuous progress.⁵⁵ Their careful search found little evidence of this. The only indicators were a supposed decay of faith in education⁵⁶ and a dark undertone of fascism among some businessmen.⁵⁷ Why was the spirit of modernization so resilient?

⁵² Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, 303, 311-18.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 466-68.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 451-55.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 485, 489.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 387, 505-506.

The need for security, more urgent than ever before, forced both businessmen and workingmen to cling "to tried sources of security rather than venturing out into the untried."⁵⁸

One bright hope had appeared. The sheer scope of calamity had proven that local resources were shallow and had forced the city to rely heavily upon outside aid. The New Deal did far more than pump money into the stricken city. It brought municipal improvements that had long been needed but which "prosperous" Muncie never thought it could afford. The city was noticeably more attractive in 1935. Most important, the New Deal brought planning to a culture that prided itself on individual initiative and distrust of government. The Lynds showed that Muncie businessmen strongly distrusted the New Deal, even to the point of sabotaging the Home Owners' Loan Corporation in the city.⁵⁹ The Lynds fervently believed in the necessity of national planning and saw the modernization ethic as the chief obstacle that had to be overcome.⁶⁰

The in-depth anthropological studies of American communities, typified by the *Middletown* books and a series of projects sponsored by W. Lloyd Warner in the 1930s, constitute a unique genre in American studies. They moved sociology away from the reform-oriented community survey toward a scientific study of culture. While it is impossible to agree with the Lynds' contention that "consideration of Middletown in terms of 'good', 'bad', 'better' or 'worse' is, obviously, irrelevant to the purpose of the study,"⁶¹ there can be no doubt of the importance of their work in forming America's self-image. The historian is astonished that this style of sociology has virtually died out. The Lynds contemplated a third report on Middletown in the 1940s but never carried it out; they also began fieldwork on yet another community study but never finished it. Intellectual styles in sociology changed, and Robert Lynd was overshadowed at Columbia by more theoretical and more quantitative sociologists who lost sight of the community midway between microscopic technical studies and grand macroscopic theories. Sociologist Theodore Caplow has been replicating the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 492-93.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁰ Robert S. Lynd, *Knowledge for What?* (Princeton, N.J., 1939), ch. 6. Robert Lynd participated in President Herbert Hoover's "Recent Social Trends" project. *Recent Social Trends in the United States* (2 vols., New York, 1933), 857-911. Several of Lynd's Columbia colleagues formed the nucleus of the New Deal "brain trust."

⁶¹ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 496. "Neither field work nor report has attempted to prove any thesis." *Ibid.*, 3.

Lynds' research in "Middletown: Fifty Years Later." But it is a task more suited for the historian to examine other cities—and, yes, Muncie again—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to discover exactly how the process of modernization affected life in America.