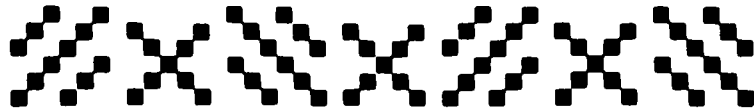


## The Measurement of Social Change in Middletown

*Theodore Caplow\**



Robert and Helen Lynd accomplished the field work for *Middletown* during 1924 and 1925, and wrote *Middletown in Transition* after another field study conducted in 1935.<sup>1</sup> The Lynds attempted to retrace the processes of urbanization and modernization that had changed Muncie, Indiana, from a country town in 1890 to an industrial city by the 1920s. Their two books describe in detail the accompanying transformation of the division of labor, the conditions of work, family life, education, the use of leisure, religious practice, and community politics, together with the attitudes and values sustaining those activities. They discovered massive changes in all areas.

The research team that returned to Muncie in 1976-1978, some four decades after the Lynds finished their work, failed to find any fundamental transformations since the publication of *Middletown*, although there had been numerous quantitative changes and many variations of detail. Middletown is an industrial city now as it was then, stratified in much the same way, professing the same varieties of denominational Christianity, and alternating control of the local government between the same two parties with about the same degree of corruption. When a particular sector of community life is examined, such as the social activity of adolescents, the resemblance between today's youth and their grandparents<sup>2</sup> is almost disturbing.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York, 1929); *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts*, (New York, 1937).

<sup>2</sup>Metaphorically speaking. By careful estimate, only about one in three of the Middletown high school students surveyed in 1977 had grandparents among the Middletown high school students surveyed by the Lynds in 1924.

High school basketball still provides the community with its occasions of collective excitement. Adolescent social life still depends on access to the family car. Parents and adolescent children still agree on basic values and disagree about fashions. The continuum from conformity to nonconformity is about the same now as it was then, and both ends of the continuum are as well populated now as then.

The great changes discerned by the latest study seem peripheral to the inner life of the community. The federal government, represented in Muncie of the 1920s by the post office and a few agricultural technicians, has now become a major presence, operating more than fifty different programs that affect the lives of every Middletown resident in one way or another. Television, nonexistent in the 1920s, now claims a substantial part of the waking time of both children and adults. It is impossible to ignore the effect of influences emanating from metropolitan centers, but these outside influences are somehow held in their peripheral position and kept separate from local institutions. Pornographic magazines, for example, are freely available to the entire population and indeed constitute the most popular recreational reading for male adolescents, who also have unlimited access to pornographic books and motion pictures; there is a "sex shop" on Middletown's new downtown mall. The clandestine fantasies of the 1920s have become public entertainment in the 1970s, but no corresponding revolution in sexual norms has occurred. The same rules of conduct still prevail, although they are somewhat less strictly enforced. The resistance to outside influence appears in other institutional sectors. Local norms and values appear to change much more slowly than those promulgated by government agencies and the mass media, and many of the behavior patterns observed in Middletown's homes and work places are indistinguishable from those observed by the Lynds a half century ago.

One piece of evidence for the stability of social values and norms in this community is provided by an attitude questionnaire administered to the entire high school population of Muncie in the winter of 1977. It included twenty items taken from a questionnaire administered by the Lynds to the high school population fifty-three years earlier.<sup>3</sup> The twenty value

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<sup>3</sup>For a fuller report of this replication, see Theodore Caplow and Howard M. Bahr, "Half a Century of Adolescent Attitudes: Replication of a Middletown Survey by the Lynds," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Spring, 1979), 1-17; and H. M. Bahr, "Changes in Family Life in Middletown, 1924-1977," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (forthcoming).

statements with which Middletown youth were invited to agree or disagree included statements about religion, international affairs, patriotism, social justice, civil rights, and sources of information.<sup>4</sup> Table I shows the percentage of Middletown students in 1924 and 1977 who agreed with each of the attitude statements presented to both groups.

<sup>4</sup>Most of the 1924 items were presented verbatim.

Table I  
Proportion of Middletown High School Students  
Agreeing with Statements on  
Various "Public Questions," 1924 and 1977<sup>a</sup>

Topic and Item	Percent Answering "True" (1924) or Agreeing (1977)	
	1924 <sup>b</sup>	1977
<i>Religion</i>		
1. The theory of evolution offers a more accurate account of the origin and history of mankind than that offered by a literal interpretation of the first chapters of the Bible.	28% (372) <sup>c</sup>	50% (843) <sup>c</sup>
2. Christianity is the one true religion and all peoples should be converted to it.	94 (521)	41 (1,410)
3. The Bible is a sufficient guide to all the problems of modern life.	74 (480)	53 (900)
4. Jesus Christ was different from every other man who ever lived in being entirely perfect	83 (526)	67 (904)
5. The purpose of religion is to prepare people for the hereafter.	60 (493)	56 (929)
6. It is wrong to go to the movies on Sunday.	33 (556)	8 (964)
<i>International Affairs</i>		
7. The recent labor government in England was a misfortune for England (1977: The labor governments in England have been a misfortune for England.)	36 (240)	53 (758)
8. The United States was entirely right and England was entirely wrong in the American Revolution.	40 (435)	48 (499)
9. The Allied Governments in the World War were fighting for a wholly righteous cause (1977: In the Viet Nam War the United States was fighting for a wholly righteous cause.)	83 (471)	39 (425)

10. Germany and Austria were the only nations responsible for causing the World War (1977: North Viet Nam, China, and the Soviet Union were the nations responsible for causing the war in Viet Nam.)	32 (413)	54 (445)
11. The Russian Bolshevik government should be recognized by the United States (1977: The Chinese Communist government should be fully recognized by the United States government.)	9 (422)	42 (840)
<i>Patriotism</i>		
12. The United States is unquestionably the best country in the world.	92 (484)	75 (501)
13. Every good citizen should act according to the following statement: "My country—right or wrong."	61 (478)	50 (492)
<i>Social Justice</i>		
14. It is entirely the fault of a man himself if he does not succeed.	47 (478)	46 (1,446)
15. The fact that some men (1977: people) have so much more money than others shows that there is an unjust condition in this country which ought to be changed.	30 (522)	39 (901)
<i>Civil Rights</i>		
16. A pacifist in war time is a "slacker" and should be prosecuted by the government (1977: A pacifist or conscientious objector in war time is a "slacker" who doesn't do his share and should be prosecuted by the government.)	55 (380)	35 (437)
17. A citizen of the United States should be allowed to say anything he pleases, even to advocating violent revolution, if he does no violent act himself.	20 (504)	50 (897)
<i>Information Sources</i>		
18. The Middletown newspaper presented a fair and complete picture of the issues in the recent election (1977: . . . picture in covering the issues and the candidates in the recent presidential election.)	60 (318)	72 (496)
19. Voters can rely upon statements of fact made by political candidates in campaign speeches.	5 (512)	23 (470)

20. It is safe to assume that a statement appearing in an article in a reputable magazine like the <i>Saturday Evening Post</i> or the <i>American Magazine</i> is correct. (1977: . . . like <i>Time</i> or <i>Newsweek</i> is correct.)	50 (441)	42 (500)
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<sup>a</sup> We did not offer respondents a "no opinion" option but they took it anyway in some cases. The Lynds' format included the option of "Uncertain" as well as "True" and "False." Because of the ambiguity of the "Uncertain" response, we have recalculated the Lynds' published percentages to show the number of respondents who agreed with the item as a proportion of the total who indicated either agreement or disagreement. Thus the percentages and percentage bases in Table I do not agree exactly with those published in *Middletown*. The 1977 questionnaire allowed four responses, "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," "strongly disagree," which were regrouped into "agree" and "disagree" for the present analysis.

<sup>b</sup> Sources for the published figures for 1924 used to compute the percentages and *n*'s in this table are the following pages in *Middletown*: religion, pp. 204-205, 316, 318, 319-20; international affairs, pp. 200-201; patriotism, p. 200; social justice, pp. 65, 201; civil rights, pp. 200-201; and sources of information, pp. 419, 477.

<sup>c</sup> The number of responses—shown in parentheses—varied from question to question because of differential exposure and small differences in rates of nonresponse. Additionally, for reasons of economy, only 50 percent of the 1977 responses were tabulated. The *n* of responses to individual questions varied in 1924 from 240 to 556; in 1977 from 425 to 1446.

The Lynds reported that the Christian fundamentalism of late nineteenth-century Middletown had been severely eroded by 1924, and they apparently expected secularization to continue until religion disappeared. As Table I shows, secularization did continue but in a curiously selective way. The decline in religiosity has been negligible with respect to the essential purpose of religion but has been somewhat greater with respect to the basic tenets of Christian fundamentalism (items 3 and 4). A 20 percent decline over half a century, however, is not spectacular, and about half of the change observed in item 3, a tenet basic to Protestant rather than Catholic doctrine, is probably attributable to the increased proportion of Catholics in the 1977 population.<sup>5</sup>

The proportion of students saying that the theory of evolution offers a more accurate account of the origin and history of mankind than the literal interpretation of the Bible rose from 28 percent in 1924 to 50 percent in 1977. It is equally notable

<sup>5</sup>When the 1977 responses to item three are retabulated for Protestants only, the fifty-three-year decline shrinks to 11 percent.

that one half of the 1977 respondents still disagreed with the statement. Only with respect to item 2, which might be designated as religious chauvinism, and item 6 (the Puritan Sunday) were there major changes. Only 41 percent of Middletown students now say that Christianity is the one true religion, and only a tiny minority still regard Sunday movie-going as sinful.

Although the numerical differences between the sexes are quite small in both sets of responses, female respondents in 1924 showed more religiosity on every item than male respondents, whereas in 1977 the small differences by sex in the individual religion items balance each other out.

The Lynds did not provide a breakdown of responses to their high school questionnaire by social class, but elsewhere in *Middletown* they described at length the greater religiosity of the working class compared to the business class. The close association they observed between fundamentalist religion and working class status has been echoed repeatedly in later studies. Yet, a breakdown of the 1977 responses indicated that high school students with fathers in white collar occupations expressed about the same degree of religiosity as students whose fathers followed blue collar occupations. In contemporary Middletown, the religious values of the business class and the working class, at least as far as they are reflected in high school student responses, seem to be nearly indistinguishable.

The five items under international politics are the least satisfactory of the set for comparative purposes since, with one exception (item 8), the original statements had to be revised to take into account a current international scene far different from that of the 1920s. In item 7, the translation from 1924 to 1977 was oddly plausible. This was the Lynds' statement that "The recent labor government in England was a misfortune for England." The statement was applicable to 1977 with only a minor change of wording and commanded a higher degree of agreement among students than it did in 1924. Parallels between World War I and the Vietnam War attempted in items 9 and 10, however, were obviously weak, and it is doubtful whether the responses tell anything at all about changing social values. It is curious that a much lower proportion believed in the righteousness of the American cause in the Vietnam War than in World War I, but a significantly higher proportion attributed total responsibility to the enemy in the Vietnam War than in World War I. Additionally, the finding that few students thought the Soviet Union should be recognized by the United States in 1924, while 42 percent favored the recognition

of China in 1977 (item 11) is inconclusive since the situations are not closely comparable.

Responses were more comparable between 1924 and 1977 on item 8. The proportion of students agreeing that the United States was entirely right and that England was entirely wrong in the American Revolution was slightly higher in 1977 than it had been five decades earlier. Almost half of the students agreed with this expression of national chauvinism. The strength of this attitude is confirmed by responses to other items concerning patriotism.

The two items that tap conventional patriotic attitudes each show small declines from 1924 to 1977 in the proportion of respondents agreeing, but it is striking how high a proportion of agreement remains. Some readers may find it surprising that after all the political episodes of recent years and the disillusion supposedly created by them, three out of four Middletown high school students believe that the United States is unquestionably the best country in the world and that half of them accept the slogan of "My country right or wrong" as a categorical imperative. Interestingly enough, the female respondents of 1977 were somewhat less likely to express patriotic attitudes than male respondents, whereas the female respondents of 1924 had been more inclined to the dominant beliefs.

The impression that the basic political values of 1924 have persisted remarkably into the present era is further supported by the pattern of response to items 14 and 15. Item 14 is a capsule version of the Protestant ethic—"It is entirely the fault of the man himself if he does not succeed." The proportion of students agreeing with the statement in 1977 was the same as in 1924, although once again this constancy was achieved by a significant increase in the proportion of males, and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of females, who agreed. Fathers' occupation had no discernible influence upon student responses to this item.

There was a slight increase between 1924 and 1977 in the proportion of students who favored a change in the existing distribution of wealth (item 15). Neither in 1924 nor 1977 was there much difference between males and females in response to this item. However, fathers' occupation was highly significant here: children of business class families were much less likely to favor a change in the distribution of wealth than those of working class families.

The above discussion of responses about religion noted that Middletown's adolescents held much the same religious beliefs

as their grandparents and held them almost as strongly but appeared less inclined to impose these beliefs on others. The same drift toward tolerance appears in the responses to the two items on civil rights. The proportion of students who would prosecute war-time pacifists or conscientious objectors was much lower in 1977 than in 1924, and the proportion favoring unlimited free speech was much higher although still falling short of a majority. The male/female differential increased for both items. Social class evidently exerted an ambiguous influence, with students from white collar families more likely to support the rights of conscientious objectors but less inclined to favor unlimited free speech.

The questions included three items about students' confidence in sources of information on public issues: one dealing with Middletown's principal morning newspaper (which has changed very little in format and editorial posture since 1924); one about the campaign speeches of political candidates; and another about national magazines, substituting *Time* and *Newsweek* in 1977 for *Saturday Evening Post* and *American Magazine* in 1924. Again the results controvert the common expectation. The students of 1977 expressed significantly more confidence in the newspaper and campaign speeches as sources of information than did the students of 1924. They were less sure about the correctness of statements appearing in national magazines, which may have something to do with the particular examples selected.

These data, of course, are sparse and incomplete, but they are quantitative data of reasonable quality and probably more reliable than the surmises about the attitudes of our grandparents on which we usually rely when assessing the force and direction of social change. The fifty-three year interval between the two surveys is just about the length of two generations in Middletown and, indeed, about 30 percent of the respondents in the 1977 sample were in fact the grandchildren of one or more respondents to the 1924 sample. Few of them appear aware of the similarity between their own religious, political, and social attitudes and those of their grandparents. That similarity, so contradictory to current popular beliefs about "future shock" and "the disappearance of traditional values," calls for explanation.

The principal motor of social change in the twentieth century is modernization, assisted here and there by social revolution and population shifts. Middletown has not undergone a revolution and its population has been relatively stable. It may

be inferred, therefore, that the prevailing rate of social change has been determined by the rate of modernization and, if there has been a deceleration of social change during the past fifty years, it is probably attributable to the slowing down of the modernization process. The next step then is to measure the rate of modernization in Middletown during the past half century to determine if there was, in fact, a deceleration. This procedure sounds straightforward, but in practice it involves a number of problems.

Modernization may be defined as the process whereby a contemporary society improves its control of the environment by means of an increasingly competent technology applied by increasingly complex organizations. Note that the process of modernization is held to occur only in nineteenth- and twentieth-century societies and that the definition assumes modernization to be continuous and unidirectional, leaving no room for the possibility that an increasingly competent technology might be applied by decreasingly complex organizations, or the possibility that control of the environment might deteriorate in the presence of increasingly complex organizations. These assumptions have been reasonable up to and including the present, but they can no longer be projected into the future with much confidence.

To measure the rate of modernization in Middletown from 1925 to 1975, it is necessary to devise quantitative measures for the implied variable "control of the environment." To do this is to abandon the broad concept of "control of the environment" in favor of specific indicators that report particular kinds of controlling activity but that probably do not tell the whole story about the relationship of man and environment and how that relationship evolved in a high energy social system.

The statistical measures of modernization used here are not designed to take account of the possibility that the improved control of the environment associated with the unique historical process called modernization works effectively in some but not all sectors of the man-environment relationship. The indicators of modernization do not take account of one important aspect of the history of modernization, namely that a short-term improvement in environmental control may be directly responsible for a long-term deterioration in environmental control. The whaler's control of the environment improves as he progresses from a rowing boat and a handthrown harpoon to a fast motor boat and an explosive lance, but within a few decades his control of the environment deteriorates dra-

matically as the whales disappear. Similarly, control of the social environment is greatly enhanced by the intense bureaucratization of governments and other large-scale organizations, but the vulnerability of such organizations to natural and contrived disasters may eventually make them unworkable.

These dangers are real and serious, but they should not frighten us into denying the ubiquity of technological progress in the modern world and the still increasing availability of a still increasing supply of goods and services to a still increasing population. As Jean Fourastié protested:

A man who, two centuries ago, would not even have learned to read, if he had survived to maturity, profits by his windows, the central heating of his apartment, and the 300,000 copies of the newspaper for which he writes, to announce that humanity has arrived at the last stage of barbarism.<sup>6</sup>

Although that sentence was written before the industrialized countries of the Western world had worked themselves into a position where the continued operation of their central heating depends on the uncertain good will of oriental potentates, Fourastié's conclusion remains valid:

We may summarize the effect of technical progress on the material life of man by saying that technical progress liberates men from servile labor, increases the length of their life, enlarges their autonomy with respect to physiological needs and the external environment, permits them to pass from a vegetal phase to a mobile phase, allows the average man to have advanced education, and opens to him the path of intellectual civilization.<sup>7</sup>

In order to estimate the level of modernization enjoyed by a given society at a given time, Kurt Finsterbusch and the author—in studies of modernization at the Columbia Bureau of Social Research during the 1960s—experimented with many indicators,<sup>8</sup> combined them into a variety of indexes, and finally settled, for methodological convenience, on telephones per capita as our principal measure.<sup>9</sup> This measure is obtainable from nearly all countries in reasonably reliable form and tends to put centralized and uncentralized economies on a more even footing than measures of consumer goods such as automobiles or housing. Moreover, its correlations with other indicators of modernization—we identified more than a hundred plausible

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<sup>6</sup>Jean Fourastié, *The Causes of Wealth* (New York, 1960), 229.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>8</sup>See also Theodore Caplow and Kurt Finsterbusch, *A Matrix of Modernization* (New York, 1964); and *Development Rank: A New Method of Rating National Development* (New York, 1967).

<sup>9</sup>Theodore Caplow, "Are the Rich Countries Getting Richer and the Poor Countries Poorer?" *Foreign Policy*, I (Summer, 1971).

ones—are astonishingly high. Among other indicators are energy consumption per capita, agricultural productivity per acre, industrial productivity per man hour, life expectancy at birth, infant mortality (inverse), physicians per capita, all measures of formal education, the intensity of occupational specialization, calories consumed per capita, durable goods consumed per capita, per capita readership of printed media, per capita exposure to mass media, passenger miles traveled per capita, the ratio of paid vacation to work time, the proportion of the population urbanized, the proportion of the labor force in tertiary occupations, and the inverse of the proportion of the labor force in strenuous occupations.

Although most indicators of these come in handy quantified form, they suffer from many defects. It can never be safely assumed, for example, that an increase of  $n$  units from time period one to time period two has the same social or psychological impact as an increase of  $n$  units in the same indicator from time period two to time period three. The indicator may have less, or more, or be incommensurate, depending on the overall shape of the curve and a variety of qualitative factors. To take two examples at random: an increase of 1 or 2 percent in literacy when a society's literacy rate stands close to 100 percent is much more significant than the same percentage increase would have been at an earlier point in the society's history when illiteracy was prevalent. Likewise, a decrease in energy consumption per capita may signal more technological progress than an increase once the supply of energy has begun to run short.

It is much easier to measure changes in the level of modernization from one period to another than to link such measurements to the subjective experience of participants. The question whether the generation born in 1880 experienced more or less modernization than the generation born in 1930 invites a comparison of the subjective experience of one set of persons at one time with the subjective experience of another set of persons at another time, and it is difficult to see how any conclusion drawn from such a comparison could be convincingly verified. The exercise may be worth attempting but not until analysis of the hard data about rates of modernization is completed and the subjective reactions of participants are placed within a solid informational framework.

Such a framework must take into account the curious arithmetical relationship between absolute and relative increments in a growth curve, especially that:

(1) A constant *increment* of growth maintained through a series of equal, consecutive, time-intervals results in continuous growth at a continuously declining rate. This is the arithmetic that underlies the law of diminishing returns, the Malthusian theory of food supply, and the history of industrial productivity in the United States.

(2) A constant *rate* of growth maintained through a series of equal, consecutive, time-intervals results in increasing increments of growth from each time-interval to the next. In the early stages of growth at a constant rate, the increases are small but they soon become so large that continued growth at the same constant rate becomes literally impossible. This is the arithmetic behind the Gompertz curve and the numerous curves for the growth of populations, artifacts, and symbols that accelerate for a while and then flatten out.<sup>10</sup> It is also the basis of what may be called Khrushchev's fallacy, the expectation that a less modernized society with a high growth rate will soon overtake a more modernized society with a lower growth rate.

Taken together, these two principles suggest that when persons living in a society that has been modernizing for several generations compare their later experiences with their earlier experiences, or their own experiences with those of their parents or grandparents, they will be influenced by two trends that are arithmetically inseparable but psychologically divergent: decreasing rates of change and increasing increments of change. For example, the population of Middletown increased by 15 percent in the decade ending in 1910 and by only 12 percent in the ten years ending in 1975, but only three thousand people were added to the population in the decade ending 1910 compared to nearly nine thousand people in the later period.<sup>11</sup> The increase in motor vehicles in Middletown from 1960 to 1970 was fourteen thousand while the increase from 1925 to 1935 had been only five thousand, but the increase in the earlier decade represented an annual growth rate of about 6 percent in the stock of vehicles compared to about 3 percent during the later decade.<sup>12</sup>

The sensation of accelerating social change may be stimulated by focusing on multiplicity. We see a greater number of new vehicles each succeeding year. The sensation of decelerat-

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<sup>10</sup>Derek J. de Solla Price, *Little Science, Big Science* (New York, 1965).

<sup>11</sup>Geoffrey K. Leigh, *Updated Middletown Trends* (Charlottesville, Va., 1977), Table I.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, Table 56.

ing change may be stimulated by attention to proportions and ratios. If we have a roughly constant number of friends, relatives, and acquaintances, the number who acquire a car for the first time will decline from year to year. People whose ambience is composed of a relatively small number of people in relatively fixed roles, like stockbrokers and barbers, are likely to be less aware of social change than people whose ambiances are fluid and amorphous, like salesmen and sociologists.

The foregoing discussion is, of course, grossly oversimplified inasmuch as the changes in social experience associated with modernization are qualitative as well as quantitative. They include new varieties of experience, like television and space travel, and old experiences that acquire new qualities by virtue of scale or technological intensity, like travel on freeways or problem-solving on a computer. Moreover, every sustained growth process affecting human experience has points of inflection at which a small quantitative change is equivalent to a significant qualitative change; for example, that point in the growth of a small community beyond which new settlers no longer attract general notice. These are not trivial phenomena, but in view of the inherent tendencies toward distorted perception we have been reviewing (and others that remain undiscussed, such as the tendency for perceptions of change to be affected by political preferences) we are again well advised to build any qualitative description of social change on a firm foundation of quantitative measurement.

When these tactics are adopted with regard to the half century of social change between the Lynds' administration of the high school survey in Middletown in 1924 and the 1977 survey the results are unequivocal. Every quantitative measure of modernization shows an overall deceleration from the 1920s to the 1970s. For example, there were .216 telephones per capita of the Middletown population in 1925. By the mid-point of the period, 1950, this had increased to .359 telephones per capita, equivalent to an un compounded annual increase of 2.6 percent for the first twenty-five years. From 1950 to 1975 there was a further increase from .359 to .448, an average annual rate of just under 1 percent. From 1970 to 1975, there was actually a slight decline in the number of telephones per capita.<sup>13</sup>

The trend in hospital admissions—another good indicator of the level of modernization—shows sharper deceleration.

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<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, Table 45.

Hospital admissions per capita in Middletown rose from .033 in 1925 to .156 in 1950 and to .292 in 1975. The average annual increase was 15 percent during the first half of the period and a little over 3 percent during the second half. This particular trend is especially notable in view of the enormous volume of public funds appropriated for hospital construction and medical care during the second half of the period.

Passenger automobiles provide a nearly perfect illustration of one of the situations described above—a constant increment of growth resulting in continuous growth at a continuously declining rate. The number of passenger automobiles per capita in Middletown increased from .266 in 1925 to .487 in 1950 to .747 in 1975, in nearly constant increments of around .010 per year but at an annual rate declining from an average of 4 percent in the first half of the period to 2 percent in the second half.

Another good indicator of modernization in advanced societies where most young children attend school is the number of adolescents in school compared to those gainfully employed. In the decade 1920 to 1930, this ratio for Middletown increased from .158 to .365 at an average rate of 23 percent per year. In the decade 1960 to 1970, it increased from 1.71 to 2.47 at an average rate of 4 percent per year.

These measures could be multiplied almost indefinitely, but the general finding would in nearly every case be the same. The people of Middletown have been experiencing decelerating social change. This sober fact, which stands in such glaring contrast to the fevered stereotypes of the "future shock" theorists, goes far to explain the stability of attitudes and values described at the beginning of this essay. Middletown's adolescents have experienced less social change than their parents and much less than their urbanized grandparents, without taking any account of the cataclysmic transformation experienced by their great grandparents—from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban society and from an economy based on muscular effort to one dependent on mechanical power.

As its population growth slows down and as relatively constant increments to the various indicators of modernization show up more clearly as declining rates of change, Middletown is becoming, for the first time in its history, a place where the present resembles the past and prefigures the probable future. If nothing more, the contemplation of this specimen community may help to quiet some of the apprehensions aroused by futurists whose images of the past are as arbitrary and speculative as their images of the future.