The Legacies of *Middletown*

Introduction

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When Robert and Helen Lynd chose Muncie, Indiana, as the site of the social investigation that would produce *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, the city was an uncommon place. Like many small eastern and midwestern cities, it had industrialized rapidly over the preceding fifty years, particularly during and after the northeastern Indiana gas boom of the 1890s. Yet its social composition was unusual for a factory town. It was home to families from both the upland South and the northeastern U.S., but, unlike most urban settings outside the South, it had relatively few immigrants. At the same time, African Americans were settling there at a rapid rate—more rapid than that of white newcomers. Muncie during the 1920s was a demographic oddity, proportionately more black and less ethnic than the average northern city and more industrialized than most southern towns.¹

Despite these idiosyncrasies, the Lynds helped make Muncie "Middletown," a "spectacularly undistinguished" community that has

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served as a bellwether for social scientists and journalists seeking to discern trends and patterns in modern American life. The Lynds did not intend for their work to have such an effect. Indeed, they chose Muncie in part for its distinguishing social characteristics. Although they noted the “middle-of-the-road quality” of the city, chose the generic name of Middletown, and added the subtitle “a study in modern American culture,” they also insisted that it was not a “typical” city and that the findings could be applied to the rest of the country “only with caution.” Nevertheless, Americans quickly began to view the city as a representative slice of the nation, and scholars, including the Lynds themselves, repeatedly returned to the city to measure the degree of change in American culture and society over the course of the twentieth century.

The articles collected in this special issue help explain this unintended outcome and consider the tensions connected with it. They were first presented in November 2004 at the fourth Small Cities Conference, held in Muncie by the Center for Middletown Studies at Ball State University.


E. Bruce Geelhoed, “The Enduring Legacy of Muncie as Middletown,” in The Other Side of Middletown, ed. Lassiter et al., 27.

Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture (New York, 1929), 9.
The conference marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the publication of the Lynds' first book. It featured scholars from a variety of disciplines who presented recent work on Middletown and who reflected on the origins and development of research on Muncie as Middletown. Included here are Staughton Lynds keynote address, which links the ideals and experiences of his parents with their choice of Muncie; a revised version of Sarah Igo's provocative paper explaining how "Middletown" came to be seen as the quintessential American community; and John Straw's catalog of the rich set of resources that continue to attract investigators of the Middletown experience. Together they help us understand the legacies of the Lynds' original investigation, including both the difficulties created by the selection of an apparently homogeneous white Protestant community and the reasons why those seeking to understand modern America continue to return to Muncie despite its demographic quirks.

The question of typicality has been at the center of Middletown studies from the start. The Lynds addressed it in the first pages of Middletown, and virtually every researcher who has followed in their footsteps has acknowledged it to some degree. A few observers, mostly journalists, have accepted the notion uncritically. But academics have usually been more cautious, promising to construct "a chain of inference" before generalizing from Middletown to the nation. Nevertheless, the same scholars have felt compelled to defend the idea that the city was representative. As the foremost successor to the Lynds recently declared, in response to a question about Muncie's typicality, "if you look at the divorce rate, the robbery rate, the number of books taken from the public library, whatever, Muncie does come out very close to the national average."

To grasp how Muncie became a barometer of American life requires an understanding of the origins of the first Middletown research. The Lynds were executing a "small city study" commissioned by the Institute for Social and Religious Research (ISRR). Launched with the financial support of oil magnate John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the ISRR sought religious solutions to the social problems of industrial America. Rockefeller was alarmed by escalating class conflict in the early twentieth century. He believed religious activism offered the most likely means of reducing the tensions of industrial life and so funded the organization that would become the ISRR. After

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1Theodore Caplow, Howard M. Bahr, Bruce A. Chadwick, and Dwight W. Hoover, All Faithful People: Change and Continuity in Middletown's Religion (Minneapolis, 1983), 5; Caplow quoted in Geelhoed, "Enduring Legacy," 42.
One of Robert Lynds research letters, written in May 1924 on ISRR letterhead to a Muncie resident. Lynd describes Muncie as "a typical healthy American small city."

Middletown Studies Collection, Ball State Archives & Special Collections

sponsoring a series of traditional surveys of church life in various communities, the agency commissioned the more in-depth analysis of social and religious life in a small urban setting that would become Middletown.5

The Lynds were the second choice to direct the project, and a surprising one in some respects. In 1923 the ISRR tapped Northwestern University sociologist William Louis Bailey but soon rejected him as unsuited to the participant-observer-style research they sought. In his place they selected Robert S. Lynd, a native Hoosier, Princeton alumnus, and former divinity student. That Rockefeller accepted Lynd was surprising, given that Lynd had sharply criticized Rockefeller and Standard Oil for its treatment of workers in a 1922 article published in The Survey Graphic, a reform magazine that mixed empirical analysis and illustrations of social problems. The article recounted Lynd’s experience as a preacher and laborer in a Wyoming oil field during the summer of 1921 and blamed Rockefeller for the poor working conditions there. The ISRR nevertheless chose Lynd, in part to imply that it was independent from Rockefeller, its chief financial backer.6

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6Hoover, Middletown Revisited, 3-4; Robert S. Lynd, “Done in Oil,” The Survey: Graphic Number, 49 (November 1, 1921), 136-46, 175; Charles E. Harvey, “Robert S. Lynd, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Middletown,” Indiana Magazine of History, 79 (December 1983), 349.
The choice of Muncie, though often questioned by those who perceive *Middletown* as the study of a typical community, was less surprising given the Lynds’ agenda. Robert Lynd originally selected South Bend, Indiana, from a list compiled by Bailey, but decided not to conduct the study there for fear that the size and cultural variety of the city would make a fine-grained analysis impractical. After further consideration, he picked Muncie, a smaller and considerably less diverse community that would allow a more thorough and complete investigation. The choice of a more ethnically uniform city was intentional. The Lynds explained in the opening section of *Middletown* that “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.” As for the growing black population, they simply ignored it, making “Middletown” a whiter community than was 1920s Muncie. This would permit the investigators to deal with just one major issue—the impact of modernization on the community—“instead of being forced to handle two major variables, racial change and cultural change.” In the parlance of 1920s America, the phrase “racial change” meant not only shifts in the ratio of blacks and whites in the city, but also the growth of immigrant populations. By eliminating racial and ethnic complexity, the Lynds aimed to concentrate on the issue of class conflict that had inspired the ISRR project in the first place.7

Muncie was certainly an industrial city. The site along the White River that would become Muncie was first peopled by Delaware Indians forced westward during the late eighteenth century. The first white settlers arrived during the 1820s, and the village they established grew slowly, remaining a sleepy market town of 5,000 into the 1880s. The discovery of natural gas in nearby Eaton, Indiana, in 1886, along with the efforts of local boosters, drew manufacturers such as the Ball Brothers’ glass jar company to Muncie during the last decade of the nineteenth century, and the population grew dramatically. By 1890 there were 11,345 people in the city; a decade later the federal census reported a population of 20,942. The natural gas supply ran out in the early twentieth century, but the city continued to attract new factories, most notably automobile plants, and the population grew steadily. It had climbed to 36,524 in 1920 and reached 46,548 a decade later.8

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8 Blocker, “Black Migration to Muncie,” 303.
The central purpose of the Lynds' research was to gauge the impact of this dramatic transformation on the values and habits of local residents. Robert Lynd, his wife Helen Merrell Lynd, and a three-person staff arrived in the city in January 1924 and spent almost two years there. Although none was a formally trained social scientist, they employed anthropological methods, particularly a framework devised by W. H. R. Rivers. It divided human experience into six areas: getting a living, making a home, training the young, using leisure, engaging in religious practices, and engaging in community activities. These became the organizing categories of the book, which in turn became far more than the survey of religious life that the ISRR had commissioned. The Lynds also structured the volume as a comparison between life in Muncie in 1890 and life during the mid-1920s. To complete the project they conducted surveys, participated in and observed community activities, clipped newspaper articles, and examined archival materials before returning to New York to write.

What the Lynds produced was a sharply observed portrait of a community not entirely aware of the changes wrought by industrialization. The fairly harmonious city of 1890 had given way to a community split into two groups, the business class and the working class, each of which led significantly different lives. But the conflict such divisions might be expected to produce had not developed in Middletown, largely because the availability of consumer goods made the prospects for material success and improved social status seem real to workers and their families. This critique of American society was accompanied by an impressive array of detail about work experiences, family life, gender roles, reading habits, the social impact of the automobile, and a host of other topics, large and small.

In departing so dramatically from the original concept of the project, the Lynds lost the support of the ISRR. After reading an early draft of the manuscript, Rockefeller's lawyer wrote to Galen Fisher, the director of the Institute, that "it is very scopey and its range of ideas positively bewildering." He was particularly hostile to the Lynds' emphasis on class differences and expressed doubt as to whether they would ultimately produce a publishable manuscript. In the end, the Institute's staff concluded that the book was not publishable, and the Lynds were given permission to market it on their own. They sent the manuscript to Alfred Harcourt, who quickly agreed to issue it under his Harcourt and Brace imprint. The book appeared in 1929 and was a huge success. It was widely reviewed and widely praised, and became a best seller and sociological classic that has remained in print ever since.9

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9Harvey, "Robert S. Lynd, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Middletown," 350, 352; Caccamo, Back to Middletown, 41.
One legacy of *Middletown* was the slew of follow-up studies it generated. The Lynds themselves produced a second book on Muncie in 1937, after a shorter investigation by Robert Lynd alone. *Middletown in Transition* found a community that still clung to tradition and resisted the efforts of New Deal planners despite the hardships of the Depression. Robert Lynd's politics had become more overtly radical by this time, and the second Middletown book reflected this shift. A chapter on the distribution of power claimed the city was dominated by the “X family”—the Balls—and another chapter on the “Middletown Spirit” stressed the stubborn persistence of individualistic values even in the face of the current economy. These chapters gave the book a sharper, more critical tone than the first volume, and it never achieved quite the same status or popular resonance as its predecessor.¹⁰

Others picked up where the Lynds left off, although often from a different political perspective. During the 1970s, a team of sociologists led by Theodore Caplow, Howard Bahr, and Bruce Chadwick came to Muncie to replicate and expand upon the original studies in a project they labeled *Middletown III*. They produced two books, *Middletown Families* and *All Faithful People*, along with numerous articles in academic journals. The first book reported optimistically that family life had remained stable in Middletown, impervious to the modernizing changes that were supposed to have undermined it. The second contended that institutional religion remained a strong element of American life, but that tolerance of religious differences had increased. Caplow and Bahr returned in the late 1990s, along with sociologist Louis Hicks, to conduct *Middletown IV*, once again finding significant continuities in the values and beliefs of Middletowners. Filmmaker Peter Davis came to the city in 1979 and commenced a critically acclaimed documentary film series that was broadcast on public television during the early 1980s. Interspersed among these larger projects have been dozens of smaller academic and journalistic inquiries, all of which testify to the enduring power of the proposition that research on Muncie tells us about something more than just one community.¹¹


Belief in Muncie's typicality, always more a matter of faith than empiricism, made it the most well-documented, thoroughly studied community of its size in the nation. There is undoubtedly more sociological research about Chicago than Muncie, but the comparative sizes of the two cities makes Muncie the more completely examined community. As John Straw's article shows us, scholars have produced an enormous amount of data and analysis, much of it preserved by the Archives and Special Collections Center at
Ball State University.11 This intensive, enduring follow-up work distinguishes Muncie from the subjects of other major community studies conducted during the early and mid-twentieth century, such as W. Lloyd Warner's Yankee City series on Newburyport, Massachusetts, or Hortense Powdermaker's and John Dollard's books on Indianola, Mississippi.12 Researchers, writers, filmmakers, and photographers were drawn to Muncie because they could treat it as a representative American community, a conceit unavailable to students of a "Yankee City" or a "Southern Town." In turn, they built a body of scholarship and data that repays further visits. As Theodore Caplow

11For more on the Middletown collection, in addition to the article by John Straw in this issue, see John M. Glen, John B. Straw, and Thomas D. Hamm, "Indiana Archives: Archival Holdings in Eastern Indiana," Indiana Magazine of History, 95 (September 1999), 284-301.

has noted, on numerous topics the survey responses collected by the Lynds and their successors constitute the world’s longest set of time-series data.\footnote{Caplow, Bahr, and Wattenberg, The First Measured Century, xiv.}

The breadth and depth of the Lynds’ studies also made them relevant to a wide range of scholarly inquiry. Historians and social scientists have turned to Middletown and Middletown in Transition for data about the rise of consumerism, shifts in gender roles, the impact of the automobile, and many other trends at work in 1920s and 1930s America. Mark C. Smith and Richard Wightman Fox, for instance, have both credited the Lynds as being among the first to grasp the significance of the rise of a consumer culture. Still others have challenged the couple’s findings. Nelson Polsby and Carrolyle Frank took up the analysis of the X family’s power offered in Middletown in Transition. Frank argued for modifications of the Lynds’ claims; Polsby argued for a more pluralistic understanding of the distribution of power in Muncie and the nation as a whole. Stephan Thernstrom, in a study of Newburyport, site of Warner’s Yankee City studies, argued that the Lynds underestimated the degree of social mobility in American society.\footnote{"Hoover, Middletown Revisited, 17-18; Mark C. Smith, “Robert S. Lynd and Consumerism in the 1930s,” Journal of the History of Sociology, 2 (1979-1980), 99-120; Richard Wightman Fox, “Epitaph for Middletown: Robert S. Lynd and the Analysis of Consumer Culture,” in The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, (New York, 1983), 101-42; Nelson Polsby, Community Power and Political Theory (New Haven, Conn., 1967), 14-24; Carrolyle M. Frank, "Who Governed Middletown: Community Power in Muncie, Indiana, in the 1930s," Indiana Magazine of History, 75 (December 1979), 321-43; Stephan Thernstrom, Poverty and Progress, Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century City (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 216.}

Through all of the research and commentary on Middletown, the question of the relationship between Muncie and the nation has remained open. Two of the articles published here directly address the issue of how a small eastern Indiana city became a microcosm of America. Staughton Lynd’s “Making Middletown” offers insights into his parents’ political commitments and personal experiences and their connection to the choice of Muncie as the site for their research. The younger Lynd, a respected but controversial historian of American radicalism whose anti-Vietnam War activism led him to leave the academy to become a lawyer and advocate of working-class causes, stresses the sympathy his parents held for the downtrodden and their belief in the capacity of white Protestant Americans to create a just community. He suggests that along with the baseline rationale for selecting Muncie that is offered in the opening pages of Middletown, his parents’ backgrounds, particularly his father’s upbringing in predominantly
white parts of southern Indiana and Louisville, Kentucky, shaped their choice. Their experiences and preconceptions steered them to a familiar setting. Their intent, he argues, was not to report on a typical American community but "to excavate [the] experience of genuine religiously based community from the provincialism and crass materialism with which that experience was encrusted."6

Sarah Igo's article shows us that it was not so much the Lynds as their audience who made Middletown a typical American community. Some of the Lynds' techniques, most notably their studiously scientific language and the choice of title, contributed to the tendency of Americans to accept Middletown as a representative slice of American life. But there were larger forces at work as well. The demand to identify the typical in America—"part empirical quest, part cultural obsession" as Igo puts it—intensified sharply during the 1920s and 1930s. Several decades of immigration and industrialization fueled this demand and Middletown was soon caught up in it, despite the Lynds' explicit disavowal of any claims of typicality for Muncie. Journalists, marketers, and social scientists flocked to the city in the ensuing decades, all confident to one degree or another that they were examining a quintessentially American community.

As the articles by Lynd and Igo imply, the most significant challenge to assertions of Muncie's typicality revolves around the question of cultural diversity. The Lynds' decisions to choose a city with few immigrants and to ignore the city's black community have long been the chief impediments to claims that Muncie was or is a representative community. While Middletown in Transition discussed African Americans more than its predecessor, blacks remain largely invisible in both studies. Criticism of their absence is more than a matter of political correctness. As Jack Blocker has noted, the presence of a growing number of black workers may well have hindered unionization in Muncie. The city was a relatively hospitable place for blacks in part because of the local elite's racial tolerance, a stance that may have been fueled by a desire to keep the working class divided. Since the city had few immigrants, the ethnic obstacles to worker unity that were so common in other industrial communities did not exist in Muncie. Without a significant pool of black labor for employers to draw on, workers would have been less divided and perhaps more likely to act collectively. While the Lynds

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6Rita Caccamo offers a similar explanation of the Lynds' purpose in selecting Muncie: they chose it "because they were convinced that the hope for social progress and moral reawakening resided wholly within the original American spirit, the adventurous, strong spirit of the Protestant pioneers of the Midwest." Caccamo, Back to Middletown, 4.
African American military recruits on the steps of the Delaware County courthouse, August 24, 1918. *Middletown*, published a decade after this photograph, excluded African Americans from its study of Muncie citizens.

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

Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Muncie's first African American congregation. Bethel AME was organized in 1868. The building pictured was erected in 1914.

Other Side of Middletown Collection, Ball State Archives & Special Collections
detected, and lamented, a lack of working-class consciousness, they may have overlooked a key reason for its absence by constructing an artificial racial homogeneity in Middletown.17

In their zeal to replicate the original studies, Middletown III investigators once again ignored the racial diversity of the community. Middletown Families has a three-page section on the “growth of the black population” and scattered references to blacks elsewhere. All Faithful People briefly notes that African Americans now make up 12 percent of the city’s population, but makes no other reference to them except to note that black Muslims were “known in Middletown” (presumably by whites). The Middletown IV team has begun to remedy this absence by surveying African Americans as well as whites and comparing the two patterns of social experience. But the bulk of Middletown work has been a whites-only enterprise, ignoring not only the presence of blacks but the very real impact they have had on the community.18

The recent publication of The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie’s African American Community marks a major step toward remedying this neglect. An exercise in collaborative ethnography conducted by Ball State students and members of the African American community in Muncie under the leadership of Eric Lassiter and Hurley Goodall, The Other Side of Middletown offers an account of how Muncie’s African Americans experienced the various categories of human experience identified by the Lynds. Not surprisingly, the project’s results indicated similarities between blacks and whites in some areas but substantial differences in others, differences that force a reconsideration of at least present-day Middletown culture and society. The authors do not claim to have recovered the experiences of the entire local black community, nor do they offer an in-depth historical analysis of black Muncie, but their efforts make it all the more difficult for scholars engaged in Middletown research to ignore racial variations in the city.19

The Other Side of Middletown offers a second challenge to the bulk of the scholarship on Middletown as well as to community studies in general. As a collaborative ethnography, it involved community members to a far greater degree than any of the survey research or other analysis conducted by the Lynds or their many successors. Chapter drafts were reviewed by

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1Blocker, “Black Migration to Muncie,” 325, 316.


3Lassiter et al., eds., The Other Side of Middletown. For an earlier history of blacks in Muncie, see Hurley Goodall and J. Paul Mitchell, A History of Negroes in Muncie (Muncie, Ind., 1976).
community members and revisions made based on their comments. While many Middletown researchers have employed the participant-observer method, none have had the degree of input from their subjects that Lassiter and his colleagues had. The detached, social scientific narration that has characterized writing on Middletown from the Lynds onward muted the voices of community members. In The Other Side of Middletown, local collaborators had a far greater role in how the book developed. This controversial technique not only gave black Middletowners a significant role in defining their own experience, but offered a different model of a community study with implications for ethnographic research generally.

While The Other Side of Middletown helps reconfigure our understanding of contemporary life in Middletown, the portrait of Muncie as a homogeneous white Protestant community during the era of the Lynds remains intact. Jack Blocker's analysis of black migration to the city offers a valuable starting point for a consideration of the black experience in Middletown and of the role of race in the community during the early twentieth century. Middletown Jews: The Tenuous Survival of an American Jewish Community, a collection of oral histories edited by Dan Rottenberg, documents the experience of another minority group and the impact of anti-Semitism during the 1920s and 1930s, but other experiences remain unexplored. The Catholic community of Muncie receives modest consideration in the Lynds' studies, although it gets more in later Middletown research. We know relatively little about how the city's early Catholic community carved out a place in local civic life, beyond the Lynds' report that it "pursued . . . a quiet, resolute and inconspicuous course" and their claim that it had no impact on the city's public life. Perhaps even more significantly, we also know little about the importance of cultural differences between the upland southern migrants and those tracing family roots back to the northeastern United States. These two groups constituted the core of Muncie's white population through most of the twentieth century. But the Lynds' emphasis on cultural homogeneity and class differences all but erased the religious, social, and political variations among white Protestants. Early twentieth-century Muncie was hardly a polyglot community, but the Lynds' desire to eliminate racial and ethnic variables and to stress common values unjustifiably flattened their picture of the city.

As a culturally plural understanding of American society has gained ascendance, the notion that Muncie is "Middletown," the typical American community, has grown harder to sustain. But the tradition of Middletown

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Mass at St. Lawrence Catholic Church, 1943. The Lynds gave only modest consideration to Muncie Catholics in the 1920s and 1930s.

Richard Greene Photograph Collection, Ball State Archives & Special Collections

research remains valuable, if for no other reason than its breadth and depth. Despite the problems and limits of an original study formulated by enthusiastic amateurs, the richness of *Middletown* has drawn researchers and observers back to the city again and again, creating a wealth of analysis, interpretations, and empirical data about an otherwise modest community. That abundance continues to attract scholars and journalists seeking to understand America.

What they find may not be the typical American city in purely demographic terms, but rather a deeply explored slice of middle America. Middletown research offers a window into the distinctive history, politics, and culture of the non-metropolitan, non-coastal America, a segment of the nation that has gained increasing attention in the wake of recent election results. Investigators returning to idiosyncratic Muncie should approach it in those terms, rather than seeking a mythical average American community. In doing so, they would hew more closely to the Lynds’ original intentions.