

ROBERT AND HELEN LYND: MIDDLETOWN and MIDDLETOWN IN TRANSITION

The Lynds began studying "Middletown" (their code name for Muncie, Indiana) in the 1920s to find out about its religious activities, but the study soon expanded to include all the major institutions in the city. They participated fully in community life and utilized a wide range of records and questionnaires. Middletown was the first sociological bestseller. Though H.L. Mencken called it "A Study of Moronia," the leaders of Muncie liked it. They were pleased to be Middle Americans.

In 1935, after the Great Depression hit, the Lynds went back to Muncie for another study, which they published as Middletown in Transition. As an illustration of how one's values and intellectual predispositions can color one's findings, the Lynds had moved from social views more in keeping with the Presbyterian ministry, for which Robert had been trained, to a much more Marxist interpretation of social structure. During their second (and much briefer) stay in Muncie, they noticed poverty areas, prostitution and alcoholism, prejudice, and environmental pollution -- all of which had escaped their attention ten years earlier. They also noticed the great degree of influence a single family, the Balls, had on Muncie, and that this influence had been strengthened rather than weakened by the Depression. They had, interestingly, decided that they would not study the town's most elite families in their earlier work, also an example of how predispositions can affect selectivity. (The Balls made Mason Jars -- still used for canning fruits and vegetables. They are also the Balls of Ball State University in Muncie.) In Marxist fashion, the Lynds emphasized the differences between social classes much more sharply than they had in their earlier book, although they did not foresee inevitable class war.

In the 1970s, Theodore Caplow and a whole team of sociologists revisited Muncie for a "50 years later" look at the city. They wrote a series of papers and monographs on the family, the pace of social change, the growth of government, and other aspects of social life. They also commissioned films on various aspects of civic life. As studies, the Caplow monographs demonstrate gains in research technique, but certainly do not have the power and intellectual excitement of the first and second studies. Apparently there will be a new restudy of Middletown in the early years of this century, and it will certainly be an impressive resource for sociologists in the future.