



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN
UNIVERSITY**

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 28

Issue 3 September - Special Issue: Evaluation of
TANF

Article 17

September 2001

Review of *Back to Middletown: Three Generations of Sociological Reflections*. Rita Caccamo. Review by Robert D. Leighninger Jr.

Robert D. Leighninger Jr.
Arizona State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons, and the Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation

Leighninger, Robert D. Jr. (2001) "Review of *Back to Middletown: Three Generations of Sociological Reflections*. Rita Caccamo. Review by Robert D. Leighninger Jr.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 3 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol28/iss3/17>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



the intensity of love brought on by an intimate relationship. Yet in spite of her experience, her knowledge of the problems associated with foster care, and her proscriptions for national change, she goes on to say: "However, my experiences convince me that transracial adoptions should be last resorts." (p. 93). If the conundrum of race relations is likely to be resolved primarily through "transformative love," and such love can only be experienced through intimacy, then narrowing opportunities for transracial adoptions will do little to forward her stated goal.

Rush's book is important for those who work with children. It reminds us of the special efforts that should be made early in life to teach children of all racial and ethnic groups about equality of experience and opportunity. It also raises an awareness of the impact of racism, even among the young. Awareness is a start; "transformative love" may be helpful along the way; we have a long way to go before our nation crosses over.

Jill Duerr Berrick

University of California at Berkeley

Rita Caccamo, *Back to Middletown: Three Generations of Sociological Reflections*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. \$45.00 hardcover.

In his introduction to this book, Arthur Vidich states that, although Robert and Helen Lynd wished to approach Muncie, Indiana (the location of their classic community study Middletown) as ethnologists would enter an undiscovered tribe, they could not really carry it off. They were "embedded" in the culture of the people they were studying. So Rita Caccamo, an Italian sociologist, could finally bring a true outsider's perspective, presumably seeing things the Lynds could not.

Would it were so. Caccamo wrote her book in the Center for Middletown Studies at Ball State University, but she could have done most of it without leaving Rome. If Caccamo ever set foot outside, ever bought groceries, sipped a latte', attended a football game, pumped gas, ordered a burger, or watched *The Simpsons* in Muncie, alone or in the company of the natives, we are none the wiser for it.

Nor do we benefit from any introspection, usually expected of ethnographers, about her assumptions and values in relation to those of the tribe. She eliminates the problem in a single sentence. "We European scholars need to look at these phenomena without our European points of reference; although Italian or French urban realities may seem similar, there are in fact no points of contact, either symbolically or materially (118)."

However, Caccamo does not claim to be an ethnographer. So, to criticize the book she wrote in those terms is unfair. It has enough problems without this comparison. Vidich's comment, however, suggests what the book might have been. What we have instead is an analysis, or in many cases a summary, of texts. We are taken through Middletown and its sequel Middletown in Transition as well as Robert Lynd's 1939 work *Knowledge for What?* We also have treatments, largely dismissive, of two books that came out of the Middletown III studies directed by Theodore Caplow in the late 1970's. We find out what some other writers thought of them, but original insights from Caccamo are hard to find. When they appear, they pop out and just hang there. The Lynds, she says, engaged in an "enormous, and perhaps pointless, effort of providing universal solutions [to cultural contradictions] that they often simply invented on the spot (7)." No examples of these feverous inventions are offered. The summaries are similarly disjointed. John Dillinger never robbed a bank in Muncie, "but his influence was certainly felt in a dramatic way (72)." But the drama is all in the assertion; no details follow. Important judgments seem to rest on the shoulders of others. Caccamo's attack on Caplow (Ch. 5) appears to originate in the work of Mark C. Smith.

We learn that the "Midwest is, of course, geographically (more or less) central (121)," that "the story of Middletown [has] no guaranteed happy ending (118)," and that Middletown is neither a society nor a community "because its weaknesses have never really been sufficiently blended with its strengths (117)." We are also told that the Lynds hoped that planning would "impede the hegemony of blind fortuitousness (7)."

The most interesting chapter in the book concerns the discovery that Lynn Perrigo, a Middletown teacher, had written a doctoral dissertation on Middletown and changes that had occurred

in Muncie in the ten years after the Lynds left in 1924. When he heard that Robert Lynd was planning to return to Muncie, Perrigo sent him a copy of the manuscript and requested anonymity if Lynd were to cite it. The question of how much Lynd did rely on it was raised by Howard Bahr, one of the Middletown III field directors. He tried to publish an evaluation of this influence in the *American Journal of Sociology*, but Lynd's colleague at Columbia, Robert Merton, headed off the effort.

Caccamo says she will present all the arguments in the case, but does not, and perhaps cannot. She claims Bahr accused the Lynds of "shoddy procedures," "inadequate methods," and "sloppy work," but does not quote him doing any of this. Bahr compared excerpts of Perrigo's work with the Lynds' book in "a sort of trial," but did not accuse them "directly" of plagiarism (97). Caccamo does not show us of these comparisons. She believes Merton's ten-page letter to Bahr, with a copy to the editor of *AJS*, persuaded Bahr to tone down his argument when it was finally published in a state history journal, but the original ms. is not quoted. Presumably, it is not in the Muncie archives. So we are unable to evaluate what really happened and are left only with Caccamo's convictions that Bahr was unfair to the Lynds and Merton was right to keep the matter out of a major sociological journal.

Among the disquieting notes in this murky affair is that part of Merton's charge against Bahr is his "non-historicity." Bahr, he says, should have known that in the summer of 1935, the "Depression had come and gone (100)." This is not a direct quote from Merton but part of Caccamo's precis. She has already reported the same conclusion (57, 79) and is perhaps projecting it onto Merton. In any case, both should have known that at this time the Depression was still alive and well. An understanding of *Middletown in Transition* requires a better understanding of the course of the Depression.

I expected this book to be fascinating; instead I found it annoying. A reader with different expectations may be better able to appreciate its worth.

Robert D. Leighninger Jr.
Arizona State University