

The real story of the Middle West

Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s. By Robert Wuthnow, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2011, 358 pp., \$35/hardback

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow used to subscribe to the view of the American Middle West (referred to as Middle America in the book's title) as a region in long-term decline, and he decided to write a book explaining the decline as evidenced by ghost towns, reports of joblessness, and other signs of decreasing vitality. But after doing a great deal of research, he realized that the true story of the Middle West, or heartland, from the 1950s to the present was considerably different from the conventional story that he had accepted. With an overall approach that "treads the line between history and social science," Wuthnow argues that, rather than declining, the Middle West has been remade in a way consistent both with its traditional values and with modern changes in society and technology. Pain tends to accompany any large transformation, and the transformation of the heartland is no exception to that tendency: the region certainly has experienced its share of economic pain. And it is sometimes stereotyped as culturally backward. But Wuthnow asserts that, on the whole, the region is both economically and culturally vibrant.

In *Remaking the Heartland*, the Middle West is defined as the traditional U.S. Census Bureau West North Central Division states of Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota,

Missouri, North Dakota, and South Dakota, together with Arkansas and Oklahoma. To research this region, Wuthnow chose to use multiple methods. He analyzed statistical data from sources such as the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics; studied media reports, books, and other documents; and, with the help of research assistants, conducted in-depth interviews with people who live in or grew up in the heartland. Wuthnow's use of mixed methods is easily justified: it is hard to imagine one method being sufficient to tell the full story of the transformation of an entire region of the country.

The Middle West used to be a region known for small towns, a strong dependence on agriculture, and little ethnic diversity. Small towns are still a very important part of the Middle West, but there are now a greater number of large cities and suburbs, a more advanced agriculture industry, many new industries, more overall economic prosperity, and increased ethnic diversity. What brought about the transformation of the Middle West? Wuthnow contends that the change was not imposed from the outside but instead came from within the heartland—certainly a believable contention given that history has shown that positive changes are far less likely to last when they are imposed from outside. Still, part of the story of the Middle West's transformation is its increasing economic links with other parts of the United States and other countries as well. But in Wuthnow's opinion, the primary source of the heartland's metamorphosis is the strength of the social institutions that were in place even before the 1950s. These institutions

include "the market towns, the farmsteads, the one-room schools, the townships, the rural cooperatives, and the manufacturing centers that gave the region its identity."

Another source of strength in the Middle West is the ability of its people to adapt when faced with adverse circumstances. To understand the Middle West of the 1950s, it is of course necessary to look back further in time, and one of the best examples of adverse circumstances with long-lasting effects is the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Throughout the 1940s and even into the 1950s, times continued to be tough. There is a romantic view of the 1950s heartland as "prospering from good crops, with happy housewives preparing luscious meals on modern kitchen appliances," but Wuthnow notes that most families did not live in that way at the time. Many homes still did not have electricity or telephone service, for example. Crop yields tended to fluctuate dramatically. Both in the past and today, one of the ways that people have adapted to adverse circumstances is by moving. Another misconception that Wuthnow points out is the idea of the Middle West as a place where most families have put down roots in a particular town or county and remained for generations. In fact, the heartland has always been a place where people tend to be quite mobile. Today, there are large flows of people moving both into and out of the Middle West; for example, in 2006, about 40 percent of the residents of Kansas were originally from another state. One of the main reasons that the Middle West has been seen as a region in decline is the fact that numerous small towns have been shrinking in population.

Despite these declines in population, Wuthnow points out that many people who leave small communities in the Middle West simply move to larger towns that also are in the Middle West.

Remaking the Heartland tells a number of interesting stories about Middle Western literature, films, television shows, and other entertainment. For example, Wuthnow discusses *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and Buffalo Bill's *Wild West* shows. Wuthnow notes that the location of the Wild West in people's imaginations started shifting westward in the 1800s. During the lifetime of Buffalo Bill (1846–1917), the Wild West came to be associated far more with the Southwest of the United States than with the Middle West.

One of the chapters of the book is dedicated to a discussion of education in the Middle West. Ever since the 1800s, most of the heartland states have had particularly strong schools. Most of the early migrants to the Middle West were from states with high levels of education, such as New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Moreover, those who migrated were more educated, on average, than those who remained behind. Today, Middle Western communities still tend to place a high priority on public education. However, they struggle with brain drain, especially among people who graduate from college in the Middle West and then move elsewhere. In addition, given a history of oppression by Whites, it is not surprising that Blacks in the heartland have historically been much less educated than Whites.

The Middle West obviously is well known for agriculture, but another key part of its economy—one that has grown immensely over the past few decades—is agribusiness. Companies like Tyson, ConAgra, and Iowa Beef Processors provide many thousands of jobs. Many of these jobs go to immigrants, which has increased ethnic diversity. However, given that meat processing is an industry with notoriously dangerous working conditions, the impact of agribusiness has not been completely positive. The rapid growth of “edge cities” is another topic that the book discusses at length. Many people from these large suburban cities commute to the central city to work, but a large number of government agencies and private companies have chosen edge cities for their offices. It was not obvious that edge cities would develop as much as they have, because it was hard to imagine enough jobs in the central cities to support populous suburbs. But companies such as Garmin in Kansas and General Mills and Medtronic in Minnesota have provided jobs.

The book ends with an afterword. Wuthnow himself is from the Middle West, and here, for the first time, he discusses several of his own connections to the region. Wuthnow performs admirably in his mission to write from an objective standpoint throughout the main chapters. After more than 200 pages of objectivity, it is actually a bit of a treat to read something more personal.

Although Wuthnow does not state it explicitly, an underlying part of his central argument is that, taken altogether, the people of the Middle

West are not much different from people elsewhere. They adapt to adverse circumstances, they change with the times, and their social institutions help to push them forward. This implicit point, though not surprising, is an important one given the many negative stereotypes of the heartland that tend to persist. In addition, the book does a good job of mixing statistical analysis with interesting stories of individuals, towns, and institutions.

Despite the many strengths of *Remaking the Heartland*, the book could have been improved by telling the story of another region (in the United States or elsewhere) to serve as a point of comparison with the story of the Middle West. It is a bit difficult to fully accept the argument of social institutions and adaptability remaking the heartland without an analysis of the history of at least one other region and how the same variables in that other region affected its outcome. Even just one chapter discussing one other region could corroborate the thesis of the book (or perhaps weaken it!). Notwithstanding this weakness, it is clear that a great deal of time and care went into the research for the book. Although I take its conclusions with a small grain of salt, I do believe *Remaking the Heartland* to be a trove of interesting and important information about a region of the United States that too often is ignored. □

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