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Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s. Robert Wuthnow. Princeton: Princeton UP., 2010. p/bk. 376 pp. ISBN 9780691158020. Price $30.95.

The landscape is flat, sparsely populated, and about as awe-inspiring as a bale of hay. The few who still live here obstinately hold on to outdated values and traditions; they have lost touch with the progressive coastal areas of the US due to a stubborn conventionality, which, according to the stereotype, leads to an uneducated, unsophisticated perspective. Nothing really moves, change only comes gradually and so slowly that it is barely perceivable. These are some of the conventional notions about the American Middle West that Robert Wuthnow sets out to challenge in his book *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s*. Instead of a region in cultural deadlock, paralyzed by economic and ideological changes it could not keep up with, Wuthnow founds his study on the basic assumption that the heartland states have seen a "positive transformation" since the 1950s and views the region as a "vibrant contributor" to the US economy (ix).

The book is grounded in thorough archival research and the author has gathered a substantial amount of data that covers the entire 20th century and at times even goes back to the period of early settlement. The bare facts of numbers and statistics alternate with anecdotes taken from the same archives or from extended interviews conducted by the author himself. Each chapter begins with an exemplary excerpt from a Midwesterner's life that illustrates the development the respective chapter sets out to discuss. Those anecdotal accounts of individual lives get a little out of hand at times and take up much more space than scholarly thoroughness requires. It is mostly in these passages that an overly positive and almost nostalgic picture of the region and its inhabitants shines through.

Wuthnow pragmatically avoids any larger discussion about the exact location of the Middle West and its borders. He briefly mentions different perceptions and opinions in the first chapter and then delimits his notion of America's heartland states to Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, Minnesota, the Dakotas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. The history of the town of Smith Center in Kansas, from the first settlers through the beginning

of agriculture and the Great Depression until today, serves as an example of the development in the Middle West. In Wuthnow's view, economic recovery from the Dust Bowl era in the 1940s and 50s, of which he paints a much less glamorous picture than the national media did at the time, set a new ground stone for the region's economic and cultural significance for the rest of the country. Comparison with other towns and counties in the region contrasts the history of Smith Center and provides a more differentiated perspective. Particularly the connections between income inequality and migration illuminate how statistics often give a distorted, overly positive image of life in the Middle West during and after World War II.

Another point highlighted is the immense importance of widely accepted institutions and well-established institutional and social structures in those communities that managed to survive and sometimes even profit from demographic changes and the consequences of scientific progress. Due to economic depression, families had become considerably smaller and many had to relocate. During the 1940s it was more and more common to rent a farm instead of buying or inheriting it. Sidewalk farming, suitcase farming, and off-farm jobs to supplement the family income increased. At the same time, scientific and technological development, such as stronger tractors and more resistant crops, let farms grow in size, which often meant living even farther away from one's nearest neighbor. Communities with stable institutions and long-grown social networks were much better equipped to adapt to the structural changes this brought. The Middle Westerners Wuthnow interviewed for his book emphasize the meaning of family and neighbors, of traditions and established structures. They take pride in their resourcefulness, their particular ironic take on life, and most of all in the land they inhabit. The relationship between the land and those who live on and from it plays a central role in Wuthnow's observations. "*Land* can take on an almost mystical quality as part of a family's identity," as he points out (90). As opposed to *ground,* which is what is being farmed, *land* also refers to notions of home and of landscape. And yet, the negative stereotypes of a rural and rustic life persist, even though it seems less acceptable nowadays to express them in print publications. Quotations from internet forums prove this point.

Wuthnow mentions many of the infrastructural, economic, and socio-cultural changes that come with population decline, new forms of

agribusiness, and the shift from many distinct small towns towards a large mesh of outspread suburbs and satellite towns attached to the few large cities. However, one would have wished for a little more critical analysis that can bring to light how all the aspects mentioned in the seven chapters interlock. When the text mentions how institutions such as a teachers' college or the vicinity of large industries can help small towns to withstand the economic threats of population decline, this provides an opportunity to draw some heretofore unobserved connections between the individual topics of the book's chapters. The large quantity of data gathered for each of the chapters could easily substantiate a more holistic view. Unfortunately, the text rarely seizes this opportunity. The study would have profited from some additional theoretical insight. When it comes to the shifting relationship between rural and urban areas, particularly the socio-economic consequences of declining rural population and the growth of suburbs that depend in a different way on large cities, David Harvey's theoretical groundwork seems imperative to consider. For the historical context of systemic and institutional developments, Norbert Elias' theory of the civilizing process might have provided a better basis for critical analysis than some of the details of individual lives.

Wuthnow presents an impressive amount of data and has researched sources and archives that many others might have overlooked. His interviews provide a number of helpful insights into the very practical and palpable effects of the changes in the heartland states during the past decades. The initial assumption that the Middle West has seen an overall positive development since 1950, however, cannot be confirmed by the study. Most passages that attempt to prove such a positive development must be read as the interpretation of an author personally and somewhat sentimentally attached to this claim and to his topic. This is a highly informative volume about the recent history of the Middle West and the re-shaping of most of its institutions and businesses. Readers interested in a comprehensive overview of the recent socio-economic history of America's heartland will find its wealth of data a valuable source of information.

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