

The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public. By Sarah E. Igo. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007. ix + 398 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0-674-02321-5.

Reviewed by Stephen Mihm

In 1940, an interviewer for the newly formed Gallup Poll noticed that “eight out of ten [respondents], after answering a question, will either ask directly what most people said about it or will remark indirectly, ‘I suppose nobody else said that.’” She observed, “They are delighted if told that everybody said it. It makes them feel that they were right” (pp. 162–63).

It’s a revealing anecdote, and like many that appear in Sarah Igo’s scrupulously researched and deftly argued study of the rise of “scientific” surveys in the twentieth century, it highlights the rise of a new kind of citizen in the United States: the “averaged American” of her title. “In the statistics, surveys, and spectra now available to them,” writes Igo, “citizens could see themselves as part of a new collective, one constituted by and reflected in data compiled from anonymous others.” Her book provides a first-ever history of these new ways of knowing, as well as the struggles over their legitimacy, meaning, and power.

Though surveys had been used in marketing research earlier in the twentieth century, it was only after Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd had descended on Muncie, Indiana, in the 1920s and then emerged a few years later with the study known as *Middletown* that scientific surveys burst on the American cultural scene. The Lynds seized upon Muncie as “a ‘representative’ community meant to stand in for the nation,” she observes, and in this they succeeded: their curious blend of anthropological research techniques and social-science quantification yielded one of the best-selling books of the twentieth century (p. 29). In the process, *Middletown* became in many Americans’ minds what Igo describes as “a synecdoche for America” (p. 88).

As Igo notes, this was a bizarre fiction: *Middletown* lacked the large immigrant populations found throughout the nation, and tabulations from its black population were deliberately excised from the published study. For all the Lynds’ claims to have been objective, detached, and disinterested, they produced a study that was nostalgic, biased, and marginally representative. These flaws went unnoticed, drowned out in the torrents of praise that greeted the Lynds’ achievement, and Igo dissects how so many of these surveyors’ claims to objectivity—whether the Lynds or the sex researcher Alfred Kinsey—belied deeper ideological agendas.

It is one of the strengths of Igo’s study that in each of the three survey subjects she takes up—the Lynds’ community study, the statistical sampling of political pollsters like George Gallup and Elmo Roper, and the quantifiable sexual histories that made up Alfred Kinsey’s work—she treats claims of objectivity with considerable skepticism. Better still, she devotes nearly half the book to assessing what the people being surveyed thought of these new ways of knowing. In a thorough review of “crank” letters written to

Gallup and Kinsey, Igo dissects the discomfort and dismay that many ordinary Americans felt about these iconic surveyors' methods.

But critics were in a minority. As the new ways of divining public opinion and behavior took hold, older ways of imagining the nation writ large fell by the wayside. It was no longer sufficient to extrapolate from the opinions and behaviors of one's neighbors: a statistical sampling of strangers by a Gallup or a Kinsey was necessary to know what people really thought or did. As the public came to accept polling data, many individuals, Igo argues, "internalized the numerical notion of the people's will—that single majoritarian strand pollsters distilled from the bewildering chaos of citizens' voices—and wanted to make sure, somehow, that they belonged to it" (pp. 179–80).

Kinsey's research pushed this process to a new level, fracturing the public into a variety of distinct groups, enabling, for example, a working-class unmarried Catholic woman to see how her sexual mores compared with those of others from a similar background. Igo's chapters on Kinsey are among the most interesting in the book, and not because of the subject matter. It is here that the citizenry's embrace of their statistical selves is most rigorously documented, as thousands of otherwise ordinary people clamored to have the most intimate details of their private lives counted, quantified, tabulated, and, most important of all, *included* in Kinsey's studies. In the process, Americans came to embrace the notion that they might gain "membership in a community of potentially similar, although anonymous, others" (p. 277).

If there is anything missing from this otherwise splendid book, it is the role of market research. Though Igo devotes a few scattered pages to discussing how the survey techniques originated in marketing and advertising—Gallup, for example, worked as director of research at Young & Rubicam before launching his political surveys—she pays less attention than might be expected to the interplay between ostensibly "disinterested" social-science surveys and political polls and the more crass, commercial attempts to divine the wants, needs, and desires of the average American. That omission is understandable: Igo's book is a study of the creation of a statistical public, and the results of marketing surveys generally did not become public knowledge. On the other hand, if, as Igo suggests, surveys were "crucial to the making of a self-consciously mass society," her analysis would have benefited from a more thorough examination of the interplay between the sorts of surveys she profiles and the mass consumer culture from which they first emerged, and which they ultimately shaped (p. 12).

But such an undertaking may more appropriately belong in another book. As it is, Igo has produced an exceptional and illuminating look at what she aptly describes as the "peculiar tensions of life in a 'mass' society: between being 'oneself' and being known as a member of a group, between being an individual and being a statistic" (p. 282).

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