The masses “are always the others, whom we don’t know and can’t know. Masses are other people,” British cultural theorist Raymond Williams famously declared. Sarah Igo’s investigation of landmark social research projects in mid-century America presents an intriguing counterpoint to Williams, showing that social surveys offered a technology that encouraged Americans to see themselves as members of mass society. The masses are not other people, her study insists; the masses are us.

The story of *The Averaged American* unfolds in three steps as Igo explores the development and gradual (if often reluctant) acceptance of social research as an instrument of self-understanding. Bringing together Robert and Helen Lynd’s studies of Muncie, Indiana, published as *Middletown* (1927) and *Middletown Revisited* (1933), the establishment of public opinion polling by George Gallup and Elmo Roper, and the reports on male and female sexual behaviour published by Alfred Kinsey and his staff in 1948 and 1953, Igo argues for a broad shift in collective consciousness. The cumulative impact of this work, she proposes, was more than the sum of its parts, offering a new way of seeing and being American. The tensions between a tradition of individualism and pressures of modern mass society were not resolved, but they could co-exist in statistical projects that represented America as a mass society of opinionated people.

The selection of three projects offers the opportunity to explore the development of the social survey in considerable depth as well as breadth. Beginning with the Lynds, social scientists turned away from projects of social reform, promising instead the neutral collection and recording of social facts. The absence of moralizing was associated with the advance of scientific knowledge. Improvements in sampling technique and increasingly intimate questions produced detailed “statistical portraits,” apparently able to bring the people of America into focus.

At the same time, it is clear that, regardless of the authors’ professed commitment to an objective science of statistical inquiry, each study systematically and deliberately skewed its sample in the effort to represent the American norm. The Lynds selected Muncie as prototypically American in part because of its unusually small immigrant population and did not include members of the city’s sizable African American population in their analysis. Gallup and Roper presented their polls as exercises in democracy, but devised their samples to represent those they believed were most likely to vote and spend. Kinsey devised the “hundred percent method,” claiming that intensive interviews with every member of a targeted social unit allowed him to produce a true cross-section of normal American sexual behaviour. In conducting his research, however, Kinsey heavily over-sampled college students, professionals, mid-westerners, and gay men, ignored African Americans, and drew nearly all of his working-class data from persons in prisons. The result of each of these efforts was a statistically skewed and incomplete image of American society, “more wished-for than real” (p. 59).
While one thread of *The Averaged American* is the increasing authority of science as the expert progressively displaces the man in the street, these studies addressed and found a large audience. All three attained best-seller status, surprising publishers and generating considerable interest in the authors, who became celebrities in their own right. Individual Americans may have challenged aspects of each study, but their representations of the national norm resonated with a public curious and apprehensive about mass society.

The concerns of the academic community are noted, but the voices of Americans as they “talk back” to the surveyors, challenging the principles of representative sampling, questioning the appropriateness of prying into private lives, and disputing the ability of outsiders to understand the nuances of the local community, are captivating. Igo presents the public’s reaction as it appeared in magazines and newspapers and in correspondence directed to the Lynds, Gallup, Roper, and Kinsey. We meet a sales representative for Squibb Pharmaceutical, concerned that he could not locate anyone who had been interviewed. Although he claimed to have no interest in being interviewed himself, he urged pollsters to consider that his 500 colleagues were positioned to hear many opinions and would make for excellent polling material. Others wrote to explain how they would have spoken on issues, if they had been asked. The failure of polls to predict the outcome of the 1948 presidential elections elicited a letter of apology from one correspondent. “Perhaps I had one small part in causing that error,” he wrote, explaining that he had indicated to the field interviewer that he would vote for Dewey but in the end had voted for Truman. “I didn’t deliberately try to deceive. I changed my mind in the last week of the campaign” (p. 161). The concerns advanced by ordinary Americans may have been scientifically unsophisticated, but they could be astute. Setting the claims of first-hand experience against the depersonalized techniques of the social survey, observers asked, in effect, who produces true knowledge?

Igo builds on these concerns to offer a fuller critique of the methodologies of social investigation. In what ways, she asks, is society changed by the tools employed to represent it? The rhetoric of the mass survey, she notes, privileges the aggregate, the national, and the average over the individual, the local, and the unique, rendering some behaviours visible while leaving others invisible. At the same time, by permitting individuals to discern the norm and to measure themselves against it, the production of social statistics helped to forge a self-consciously mass society. As a technique for social research, the importance of the survey was not simply in the characteristics of the communities imagined, but also in the power of the process to capture the imaginations of so many Americans.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that *The Averaged American* is a pleasure to read, thoughtful as well as thought-provoking, qualities that were recently recognized in presentation of the President's Book Award of the Social Science History Association.

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