Community Studies and the Sociology of Religion

“The traditional community study is a protracted in-depth analysis of a life space that is produced after the social scientist has lived in or been immersed there” (Williams and Maclean 2006: 370). While this is a description rather than a definition, it communicates well what is meant by community study. The genre of research has been controversial insofar as those interested in exposing the power of such macro-level forces as globalization and multinational capitalism note that many community studies fail to do that precisely because they are oriented to localities. On the other hand others favor community studies because they treat the people under study as proactive humans rather than mere recipients of outside influences. The two imperatives—exposing macro-level impersonal or even depersonalizing forces and revealing the humanistic side of social life—are not intrinsically incompatible; rather the effort to be “scientific” on the natural science model led and still leads to an avoidance of fixing blame or responsibility or seeming to be partisan on the one hand and a reluctance to subject the worldviews of persons under study to a critique. So while community studies have their foibles as a whole, they need not succumb to such and in a few cases have not done so.

When sociologists were establishing their field as a scientific discipline in the academy in the 1930s, they were embarrassed by the reformist intentions behind the early community studies. Warren E. Gettys observed unappraisingly that community study “arose out of a great reform movement for the reorganization of neighborhood and community life” that “gave the community study much of its early impetus and in a great measure determined its scope and methodology” (1934: 67). It started, he maintained, in 1908 with the Pittsburgh Survey, after which there were numerous other studies “to learn the facts” preliminary to the inauguration of practical programs of community organizations. These surveys were incomplete or slanted because they dwelt on “glaring evils and startling injustices” and overlooked the general structures and processes within communities. Most social surveys “have dubious value for sociological generalization” (1934: 69). Some of these “pre-sociological” studies came out of the social settlement movement, among which he cites Hull-House Maps and Papers (about which we have something to say below). Not all from the past was darkness and ignorance, however; Gettys credited Warren Wilson, whose dissertation Quaker Hill (2009 [1907]) I described in Chapter 1, with beginning the genuinely sociological study of the community.
(Gettys cites Wilson’s *Evolution of the Country Community* (1912), followed soon after by C.J. Galpin’s *The Social Anatomy of an Agricultural Community* (1914) and Robert E. Park’s essay “The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment” (1915). What impressed Gettys was the concept of “natural areas” in the ecological approach to communities, though he noted that it was necessary to go beyond the mere spatial organization of human communities. He cites *Middletown* by Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd (1929) as an example of the use of the “cultural approach” to conducting research into the industrial life of a city. We will have more to say about the Middletown study below.

Jesse F. Steiner says much the same in an essay that appeared in the same volume as that by Gettys. The early humanitarian-driven studies could not be trusted: “These localized studies of social problems did not always present facts collected in a systematic manner…” (1934: 303). However, they were at least “based upon a first hand knowledge of the situation and stand in striking contrast to the more general and abstract discussions that had hitherto been the vogue” (1934: 303). Still, the social surveys of the first two decades of the twentieth century were mere journalistic and social work endeavors seeking to use scientific methods in the interests of social reform. Because they focused on one or two problems rather than the whole array of community phenomena, they were insufficiently comprehensive. “The social survey has seldom, if ever, attained the ideal of a comprehensive community study in any accurate use of this term. It has primarily been a study of social problems as they appear in the various fields of community life” (1934: 305). What was distinctive about the community surveys, he noted, was that they employed local people to collect the data. As does Gettys, Steiner cites some pioneering early works—Galpin’s *Social Anatomy of an Agricultural Community* (1914) and Park’s essay (1915). He gives a good summary of *Middletown* and notes the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s studies of regions, as opposed to merely local communities. We will have more to say about both in a later chapter.

What is interesting about this view of the community study tradition of research is not only its almost allergic response to reformist impulses but its almost total neglect of the real pioneering work in community study, W.E.B. DuBois’s *Philadelphia Negro*. There is also a neglect of the large number of church studies of communities (more on this below), perhaps because these latter were too tainted by reformism. This worked two ways, however; the twentieth century literature in the sociology of religion neglected the community studies, with at most a few citations here and there. There were actually a large number of community studies that studied churches; it is the relative neglect of the sociology of religion literature in these that is so remarkable.