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Illustrations

INTRODUCTION

America in Aggregate

The committee will study the American people, their jobs, the insides of their houses, what they do evenings and holidays, what they learn in school, what they think of their neighbors, what is wrong with their health, and so on. It may even track down that slippery spectre, the average American, so long pursued by novelists with kodaks and fountain pens.

—*Outlook and Independent,* on the Committee on Social Trends, 1930

This is the great age of confession . . . We tell Dr. Gallup how we are going to vote and Mr. Hooper what we propose to listen to on the radio. Our psychiatrist delves into our sex dreams and Dr. Kinsey into our actual performance along those lines.

—*New York Herald Tribune,* 1948

The 1947 James Stewart film *Magic Town* tells the story of Grandview, an American community so perfectly average that the views of its citizens mirror those of the national population. Stewart's character, Rip Smith, is a struggling opinion pollster who discovers this statistical shortcut and hopes to profit from it. Posing as an insurance agent, he arrives in Grandview determined to keep its typicality a secret, its ways just as they are. Naturally, however, the secret gets out, and the townspeople become too self-conscious about

their own opinions to make them representative. Further undermining Grandview's ordinariness is the fact that Americans from all over the country flock to the town, aspiring to live in this most normal of communities.

Appropriately enough for a Hollywood movie, *Magic Town* played upon two sorts of fantasies in the modern United States. One was the promise of empirical surveys to disclose the society to itself. The other was the possibility of locating a definitive midpoint in an infinitely heterogeneous nation, whether through a typical community like Grandview (almost certainly modeled on an actual social survey, *Middletown*) or through more elaborate techniques of scientific sampling. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, this core America was the elusive target of social scientists but also marketers, commentators, and politicians. As *Magic Town*'s fascination with statistical normality suggests, average America could be an alluring entity for ordinary moviegoers as well. But how could they know what the average was, or what typical Americans did or believed? New social scientific techniques of polling, sampling, and quantifying the nation developed in these same years would provide compelling answers. Bound up with citizenship in ways obvious and subtle, surveys demarcated lines of inclusion, exclusion, and affinity in a national public. As such, they sat in complicated relationship to both social reality and mass culture. In the pages that follow, I explore the ramifications of this knowledge about "ourselves" in the public sphere.

Americans today are accustomed to a seemingly endless stream of questions from survey researchers, political pollsters, marketers, and census takers. They are equally familiar with the battery of results flowing from social scientific investigation, of knowing that the majority of the nation supports the death penalty or that half of all marriages end in divorce. Public life is awash in statistics docu-

menting phenomena as diverse as consumer confidence and religious faith. None of this will surprise twenty-first-century readers. *Of course* experts tabulate buying habits, political tendencies, and attitudes toward work and family. *Of course* we rely on statistics to gauge our economic status and follow polls to know whether we swim with or against the aggregate tide. Being studied, and being privy to the results, is an understood and unexceptional feature of modern life. It is perhaps the principal way that we know ourselves to be part of a national community.

Despite our daily immersion in social data, we generally do not inquire into how certain kinds of facts have achieved their prominence, their stability, and their seeming inevitability in public life. What is surprising about this intimacy between social scientific inquiry and U.S. culture is that it is so new. Only in the years after World War I did mass surveys telling Americans "who we are," "what we want," and "what we believe" enter the public domain. Over the next several decades, they would transform it. But this was a fitful, if relentless, transformation. It was not obvious in the 1920s that citizens would accept prying questions from market researchers or opinion surveyors, or that they would trust the assembled answers as either trustworthy or true. Even those who stood to benefit from such data gathering were not convinced of its value. It took considerable work, for example, to persuade business owners in the 1910s and 1920s that collecting information about their customers' buying habits was worthwhile. And as one historian has noted, in the 1930s "it was a commonplace that the United States had better statistics on its pigs than on its unemployed people."[1]

If it is nearly impossible for us to imagine a world without such facts—what a journalist called the "nuggets of knowledge that have replaced anecdote, hearsay, imagination and history as the fodder of so much modern discourse"—Americans in the middle decades of the twentieth century were clear-sighted about their novelty. For them, "surveys" were a catch-all category containing a multitude

of modern information-gathering techniques: market research, academic surveys, opinion polls, community studies, and quantitative reporting. Social critics and commentators, but also ordinary individuals, were alert to the gradual infiltration of new kinds of questions and new kinds of data into everyday life. As a journalist remarked in 1948, "Our living—so poll-minded has it become—has reached such a state of public and private inquisitiveness that taboos of even a previous decade are rendered obsolete." Mused another just a few years later, "Today, unless you can say 'According to the Poop-A-Doop survey, Umpty-ump percent of the people chew gum while they read Hot Shot News!' you fail to make an impression." Such observers commented quizzically upon the modern mania for data and complained about being "statisticized." Whether they welcomed or decried it, they recognized a culture of surveying—and a surveyed culture—coming into being.[2]

Surely an awareness of these social facts altered citizens' views of the American public and their place within it. But how? In what ways is a society changed by the very tools employed to represent it? In the modern United States, such tools were increasingly those of empirical social science: graphs, percentages, and curves professing faithfully to reveal the nation to its members. There were, of course, many other ways to envision America, beginning with works of literature, photography, and history. But the modern survey, as one commentator has noted, is "an instrument of special power for viewing mass populations in industrial societies, especially in their character as social facts, political publics, and economic markets." Scientific surveyors—bolstered by newfound authority and armed with new knowledge-making techniques—would assert a unique ability to measure and express the nation. Crucially, the information their techniques yielded was not intended solely for experts. It was for the citizen as well. Surveys are a peculiar sort of social investigation in which the public is simultaneously object, participant, and audience. In the twentieth century, Ameri-

cans would take part in, and depend upon, social scientific surveys as never before. Many learned to offer up information about themselves to strangers. And masses of new facts about national habits, practices, and attitudes found their way into public forums. Social data, freely divulged and widely broadcast, would come to bear profoundly on how Americans understood their society and themselves.[3]

Professional statisticians, government bureaucrats, academic social scientists, and all manner of planners claimed that survey methods, newly "scientific," were essential for understanding the changes sweeping the United States and for managing a complex industrial society. Carefully collected data could be used to assess economic conditions, tap efficiently into public opinion, guide national policies, and perceive social reality more clearly. In 1939 Henry D. Hubbard, a spokesman for the National Bureau of Standards, put it this way: "There is a magic in graphs . . . Wherever there are data to record, inferences to draw, or facts to tell, graphs furnish the unrivalled means whose power we are just beginning to realize and to apply." Scientific surveys were trumpeted as both a sign of, and a route toward, a modern culture that prized empirical investigation over faith, tradition, approximation, common sense, and guesswork.[4]

Many contemporary observers thus viewed surveyors' aggregating techniques as the inevitable product of a "mass society." But national polls and surveys, we shall see, were as much responsible for creating a mass public as they were reacting to its arrival. Social data were not, of course, the only force driving in this direction during the peculiarly cohesive era marked by the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. A truly national public was bolstered in this period by the popular culture of radio and film, the joining together of different ethnic groups in the unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the spike in citizenship rates after the curtailing of immigration in 1924, wartime bond drives, and

anticommunist rhetoric. We know much about these forms of national glue. What, however, of the impact of knowledge about "ourselves"—all the more potent for its status, not as entertainment or propaganda, but as truth? Ways of knowing, although less visible than memberships in civic associations and labor unions, are equally critical resources for fashioning public identities and political communities, and for structuring people's encounters with the social world.[5]

Midcentury surveyors' depictions of the population were at once the essential means by which individuals could perceive a mass society *and* the incontrovertible evidence for its existence. That is, in the statistics, surveys, and spectra now available to them, citizens could see themselves as part of a new collective, one constituted by and reflected in data compiled from anonymous others. This book offers a history of Americans' encounter with modern surveys, and especially these surveys' bid for legitimacy, their popular diffusion, and their cultural power. It documents the emergence of novel ways of knowing society as well as the sharp controversies they provoked. Along the way, it charts the deeply entangled fates of mass surveys and the U.S. public. And it highlights a little-noticed transformation: one whereby statistical majorities, bell curves, and impersonal data points came to structure Americans' social imaginations.

Survey data did not arrive out of the blue in the twentieth-century United States. Social statistics themselves have a much longer career, emerging originally as a "science of state"—that is, the gathering of information useful for governing. Rulers have counted, administered, and made "legible" populations for military service and taxation stretching back at least as far as William the Conqueror's Domesday Book of 1086. Modern nation-states have depended on the systematic collection of demographic data to manage public health, assess economic progress, and craft social policies. In the

United States, the official census initiated in the 1780s was coincident with the nation itself. Too, already by the turn of the eighteenth century, a variety of nonstate enterprises were tabulating birth and death rates, or "vital records," in order to track epidemics and devise insurance tables. Western countries in the nineteenth century witnessed a wave of surveying by private citizens and philanthropists, producing a veritable "avalanche of numbers" in the service of industrial and social reform. This latter sort of information gathering about national bodies, whether to track fertility or poverty, is what Michel Foucault so provocatively called the "bio-politics of population," a distinctly modern mode of governance more attentive to regulating individual persons than territorial claims.[6]

Clearly, social information encased in numbers is not, in and of itself, a recent invention. But the purposes and effects of gathering such data shifted dramatically in the twentieth century, and nowhere as rapidly as in the United States, where, as Olivier Zunz points out, "new ideas about statistical distribution . . . were to flourish in ways unfathomable in Europe." Not only did efforts to collect social facts intensify in all corners of American society. Surveyors also probed more deeply into the character of the citizenry, tallying not just observable characteristics but less visible behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. New individuals—notably, white middle-class Americans—were targeted for investigation as old strictures guiding whom and what could be asked were loosened and then discarded. These changes were related to the new status of social science in the early twentieth century. Shedding an older language of reform, social investigators proclaimed that their goal was to provide neutral descriptions of, rather than prescriptions for, society. Yet, again especially in the United States, they also billed their methods as democratically useful, instruments of national self-understanding rather than bureaucratic control. For this reason, the gatherers of facts and figures sought not to restrict their data

to elite decision makers but to disseminate their findings widely. Indeed, they proclaimed the special relevance of aggregate data in a representative democracy. Modern surveys had an egalitarian ring to them, purporting to discern just who Americans were and what they wanted. Relying on voluntary rather than state-mandated cooperation, surveyors emphasized the participatory aspect of their work, as well as the virtues of contributing information for the good of the whole. All of this would permit social data to play a novel role in the public sphere as well as individual lives.[7]

How and why did these survey technologies arrive on the scene when they did? Several streams—scientific, institutional, commercial, and cultural—converged to permit survey data to take on a new prominence in the twentieth-century United States. These ranged from innovations in sampling techniques to the professionalization of social science, and from the waging of war to the expansion of the national media.

One stream was scientific: the invention of new or newly precise methods for calculating change and measuring variability across populations. Standardized questionnaires and formal interview schedules had been pioneered in the nineteenth century. Refinements of these techniques, but especially the development of scientific sampling, would be of central importance in extrapolating from small numbers to national publics in the twentieth. A related current was the advance of social scientists into the academy. Sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, and psychology—not yet truly separate disciplines—gained sharper definition after the Civil War, answering calls for a "science of society" from across the Atlantic by Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, and in the United States by William Graham Sumner and Lester Frank Ward. A loose tradition of social investigation crystallized at the turn of the century as universities carved up intellectual inquiry into discrete departments, and professional societies such as the American Economic Association and the American Sociological Society codified legitimate social scientific practice.[8]

Still other streams were bureaucratic. Statistical information answered the demand of an advanced industrial society for ways to order a diverse and swelling population. The federal government had sponsored the U.S. census as well as labor statistics bureaus and the ethnographic surveys of the Smithsonian in the nineteenth century. But it was during World War I that bureaucrats would discover a broader utility to social scientific knowledge, especially in the areas of motivation, morale, and persuasion. The war era itself saw new techniques of evaluation, such as army intelligence tests, employed on a national scale. Architects of the "technocratic" state of the 1920s, with its managerial charge and emphasis on planning, took a further step, seizing upon social statistics as objective, seemingly nonpolitical instruments for decision making. Government and foundation support for the social sciences was crucial to surveyors' growing cultural authority. In President Herbert Hoover's two ambitious information-collecting projects of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Committee on Recent Economic Changes and the Committee on Social Trends, official statistics were elevated as ends in themselves, tools for expressing facts about the population and capable of giving shape to the nation. The Great Depression and World War II would bind surveyors and the state even more tightly, as federal agencies tapped academic social scientists to advise the government directly.[9]

Emerging alongside academic, foundation, and state investment in statistics was a corresponding private and commercially based commitment to social scientific practices. This much is evident in the sheer range of enterprises devoted to quantifying and sorting the stuff of American life in the early decades of the twentieth century. Modern market research arrived in 1911 with the establishment of the Harvard Bureau of Business Research. Intelligence measurement began in earnest in the years just before World War I, and standardized achievement assessments were launched by the Carnegie Corporation beginning in the late 1920s. In that decade, some four million schoolchildren submitted to mental tests annu-

ally. Management science and "human relations" came of age with efficiency and productivity experiments such as those at the Hawthorne Plant in Chicago between 1924 and 1932. Widespread personality testing was soon to follow, as would systematic newspaper and radio audience research. A broad array of corporate, educational, and media interests in these years created a market for evermore-precise social indicators, embedding survey techniques in far-flung corners of American society.[10]

Scientific innovations, accredited experts, statecraft, and commerce were all critical to the circulation and use of new social scientific facts. But there was also a broad cultural demand, palpable by the early twentieth century and generated by a complex of worries about modern industrial society, for new ways of visualizing and making sense of the nation as a whole. As historian Robert Wiebe observed, "It seemed that the age could only be comprehended in bulk," and so "people everywhere weighed, counted, and measured it." Americans in this period confronted a new corporate order, rapid rates of urbanization, and at least early on, a heavy flow of immigration. It was an era whose commentators invented the phrase *mass society,* a capacious term used to denote the transition from local communities to a national one, and not usually for the better.[11]

Anxious public discussions about the ebbing of traditional social bonds raised urgent questions. How, with diverse peoples clashing in cities, would the nation summon unity and stability? How, given accelerating bureaucratic organization and economic consolidation, could it remain democratic? How, amidst a dazzling array of new commercial entertainments, might common mores be determined? Many commentators in the new century sensed a crisis in older notions of the American public, and particularly the breakdown of conventional religion, culture, or morality as regulating ideals. Social surveyors were among those who searched for a replacement, for new definitions of community, citizenship, and norms when the old moorings no longer seemed to hold. The alignment of

national introspection and social scientific description across the first half of the century was thus not accidental. Surveyors' questionnaires and statistics were tightly intertwined with the distinct challenges facing the society in which they lived.

Crucial to the intersection of pressing questions and new techniques that aimed (however imperfectly) to answer them were the actions of information gatherers themselves. Here it was not so much government agencies like the Census Bureau but entrepreneurial pollsters, marketers, and academics who aggressively expanded the terrain of social investigation. Surveyors thereby hoped to arrive at a more robust and trustworthy knowledge of the contemporary world. They aimed to explain the workings of mass culture, to discern more accurately public opinion, and to provide detailed accounts of actual rather than idealized social behavior. They did so, most significantly, by turning to empirical descriptions of the mainstream, designing instruments to measure everything from what citizens were buying, to what they believed, to what they did in the privacy of their homes.

Scientific characterizations of "average" or "typical" Americans were a striking phenomenon of the new century. This constituted a shift away from the almost exclusive study of "degenerates, delinquents, and defectives" that had marked nineteenth-century social investigation: "the numerical analysis of suicide, prostitution, drunkenness, vagrancy, madness, crime, *les miserables*." To be sure, an understanding of the "normal" had informed earlier medical practice and social theory; otherwise pathologies and deviants could not have been classified as such. Too, statisticians across the nineteenth century plied their tools to establish demographic medians and outliers. But rigorous inquiry for its own sake into the typicality of everyday practices and opinions was a twentieth-century enterprise. Investigators would successfully colonize new realms, from routine habits to social and political attitudes to the most intimate areas of personal experience.[12]

Surveyors' turn from the margins to the presumed center of

American life engendered popular fascination. By bringing "normal" behaviors, beliefs, and personalities into their orbit, surveyors found new consumers for their facts. But their studies did not make their way to the lay population unmediated. The demand for social data was fueled by a revolution in mass communications, a dramatic expansion of the media that by the end of the 1920s "formed a new constellation of power . . . visible to a vast public, national in scope." Media establishments were themselves in need of the kind of information surveys supplied, their audiences invisible and too large to "know" otherwise. Surveyors were thus abetted by print and broadcasting networks that saw a profitable market in reports about "average" Americans and were ready to transform aggregate data into news. This merger between new facts and new outlets for them meant that ordinary people now had access to sorts of data once reserved for a few. It also meant, in a powerful fashion, that the public could now find out who "the public" *was*. As Diana Mutz writes, "What media, and national media in particular, do best is to supply us with information about those beyond our personal experiences and contacts, in other words, with impressions of the state of mass collectives."[13]

But media coverage alone cannot explain the rapt attention many paid to detailed surveys about mainstream America. There was a keen interest in surveyors' tabulations in segments of the public itself. Over the course of the century, this appetite for social facts would lead more and more individuals to participate, either as research subjects or as consumers of information, in a dense traffic of social scientific numbers, knowledge, and norms.

Surveyors' modes of representation were ubiquitous in the twentieth century, and crucial to the making of a self-consciously mass society. Yet this is a theme strangely absent from discussions of American nationalism, mass culture, and public life. Apart from those

interested in public policy, scholars of the modern United States have barely registered the movement of social data into everyday life as a question or problem. This is true even as they regularly treat survey results as historical or sociological evidence. Those who have studied the rise of the modern social sciences, on the other hand, have focused first and foremost on professionalization and disciplinary consolidation. By foregrounding the producers rather than the consumers of new knowledge, they too have missed the key role that social facts played as they moved out of research institutions and into popular venues. Even those attentive to the uses of social scientific authority have generally asked how elites—whether states, corporations, or courts—mobilized empirical data for particular ends. Few have paid attention to what ordinary people, "the studied," did with the same kinds of information.[14]

At the turn of the twentieth century, surveys were the province of statisticians, social reformers, the federal Census Bureau, and scattered businessmen and entrepreneurs. By the century's end, social scientific methods, findings, and vocabularies were omnipresent. What had been quite unfamiliar several generations earlier had become as natural—and invisible—as the air Americans breathed. To understand how ordinary individuals grappled with the ascendance of social scientific ways of knowing, we need to look closely at several formative surveys of the first half of the century: Robert and Helen Lynd's Middletown studies of 1929 and 1937; George Gallup's and Elmo Roper's public opinion polls beginning in 1935; and Alfred Kinsey's sexual behavior reports of 1948 and 1953. The Middletown studies, the Gallup and Roper polls, and the Kinsey Reports were among the most successful purveyors of quantitative facts about "average" Americans, and the best-known and most talked about social scientific productions of their day. They attracted surprising amounts of publicity, cropped up in radio broadcasts and comedy sketches, and became household words.

Neither these surveys, nor the individuals who conducted them, were "representative" of their era. Their very prominence suggests the opposite. Yet they reflected a new strain in American social inquiry. Unlike earlier reform-oriented efforts and many contemporaneous studies, these were not aimed at specific social problems or "marginal" populations—whether racial or ethnic minorities, southerners, immigrants, gang members, or the poor. Nor were they engaged in sorting or grading the population for bureaucratic ends, as were parallel enterprises in intelligence, personality, and achievement testing. Each aimed instead to sketch the collective whole of society, to profile the mainstream. The Lynds made a midwestern town the archetype of a supposedly typical American community. Pollsters publicized the "average American's" viewpoint on subjects ranging from cereal brands to presidential nominees. Kinsey professed to investigate and portray for the first time "normal" citizens' sexual behavior. In fact, it was from such promises that these studies derived their popular appeal. Surveys of typical communities and majority opinions piqued national interest—and provoked intense protests—because of their claims to represent not just their research subjects but the entire U.S. population.[15]

"The behavioral and social sciences," write two observers, "have undoubtedly found a more receptive market in the United States than anywhere else in the world." Certainly, social scientific inquiries into the contents of the "average" were undertaken in industrial nations beyond the United States. The British Mass-Observation project, begun in 1937, was akin to *Middletown* in its attempt to capture ordinary people's lives and create an "anthropology of ourselves" on topics ranging from wartime rationing to pub sociability. After establishing his polling operation in Princeton, New Jersey, George Gallup swiftly set up affiliates to measure opinion in England, Australia, Canada, Sweden, and France. Similarly, a "little Kinsey" research effort was undertaken in Britain to replicate the scientist's work on sexual behavior in the United States. Readers

around the world were transfixed by the *Sexual Behavior* studies, which were quickly translated into German, Swedish, and French and found admirers as far away as Japan. Each of these projects, however, arrived later and was received less enthusiastically than its American counterpart. Public opinion polls were especially resisted by other national governments, which perceived surveyors as infringing upon the prerogatives of traditional decision shapers, namely, political leaders and journalists. Polls would not become a crucial aspect of public life in Britain until after World War II, and in France until the 1960s. Surveys had a distinctive career in the United States, not simply because of Americans' often-remarked-upon fascination with data about themselves but because of the extensive, entrepreneurial, and unrestricted character of American-style social investigation.[16]

Close attention to surveys like *Middletown* and the Kinsey Reports allows us to trace just how social data entered twentieth-century Americans' lives. Investigators' private papers and the raw materials that underpinned their studies permit a view into the production of survey knowledge: how conclusions were fashioned out of empirical results and unarticulated assumptions, science and conventional wisdom. But it is also critical to examine how ordinary citizens encountered such knowledge. This part of the story can be gleaned from media reports on social scientific findings, interchanges between researchers and subjects, correspondence between surveyors and their audiences, and the passage of social scientific concepts into everyday language. The publicity surrounding the Middletown studies and the Gallup Poll, the adoption of their techniques in magazine articles, radio broadcasts, and self-help literature, and the very experience of being studied—an increasingly common fate—all helped usher social data, and statistical thinking, into the mainstream.

The new surveys were the subject of widespread fascination. But they also generated abundant conflicts, surprises, and suspicions.

Consumers of social data did not always readily accept the conclusions of survey research. On the contrary, competing claims of authoritative knowledge and personal experience regularly greeted surveyors' facts, especially investigators' claims to speak for "average" Americans. Behind collections of seemingly dry and neutral data lurk stories of criminal charges, religious outcries, and congressional investigations. Social information may have flowed fast and thick, but it was never accepted passively or wholesale.

It was not just survey data but survey methods that were controversial. Listening to the Americans who first answered the Lynds' questionnaires, found an opinion pollster on their doorstep, or submitted to one of Kinsey's interviews exposes how unsettling the new modes of investigation were, and how wide-ranging was the opposition to something we now take for granted. Particular techniques—from participant observation to statistical sampling—could seem strange, offensive, or even illegal to the people who were first subject to them. As the reaction to Robert and Helen Lynd's community study shows, some residents of Muncie, Indiana, in the mid-1920s protested furiously about being placed under a social scientific microscope. Decent people, local critics insisted, would not "permit this peeping into the deepest recesses of their lives." Many Americans similarly resented the intrusiveness of opinion polling and consumer surveys, not to mention the detailed personal interviews that Alfred Kinsey would conduct during the next three decades. If some were bothered by surveyors' invasions of privacy, others worried about the implications of quantifying the details of human existence, or the destruction of old values (and the creation of new ones) that might come simply from knowing what others did or thought. Fierce debates over everything from what questions citizens could be asked, to what dangers might lie in publicizing their answers, reveal how much was at stake in social scientific representations.[17]

Yet, despite challenges from all quarters, it is undeniable that a new relationship among social scientific facts, their creators, and

their consumers was emerging as the century progressed. Even as statistics like Gallup's and Kinsey's were challenged, commonsense notions about "average Americans" based on their findings were legitimized. Moreover, surveyors' peculiar ways of collecting and displaying information were coming to define the social landscape. Individuals complained bitterly about the depersonalization that came along with the torrent of statistical information. They could not always resist its lures, however. Some gave new weight to aggregate data, willingly and even eagerly submitted to surveys, and found themselves in social scientific categories. By midcentury, it was clear that impersonal techniques and facts about strangers could penetrate the most private domains of individuals' lives. Americans were in effect speaking a new language, one they could not unlearn. But it is also true that the individuals who wrestled with and adapted social scientific ways of knowing were joint authors of the statistical public they had come to inhabit.

The word *survey,* Jean Converse has observed, carries at least three distinct meanings, one being to measure or count. Two other definitions point in opposite directions. On the one hand, surveying means to *oversee,* or examine closely. On the other, it refers to *seeing over* in order to gain a broad perspective. This book takes up all three meanings of the term. It inquires into the specific techniques surveyors used to characterize Americans. It explores the probing scrutiny of individuals that surveying entailed. Finally, it considers the new representations of the national public that surveys made available. It asks: What were the ramifications of surveyors' questioning presence, as they reached more deeply into people's lives for information? How did the influx of facts and figures purporting to describe "average Americans" shape understandings of the collective and of possible social identities within it? And what were the political and social effects of an aggregated America?[18]

Social data have a reputation for being dull and dry, the inconse-

quential means (or even the only means) by which we know things about populations, economies, and societies. But the figures marshaled to portray American beliefs and behaviors have been anything but inert pieces of information. Because they appeared not to interpret or opine—but instead to offer "just the facts"—questionnaire findings and poll results moved into public life with considerable authority. This characteristic of the factual, its seemingly unassailable neutrality, is what makes it so very powerful. Surveyors like the Lynds and Kinsey may have purported to depict social reality with unprecedented transparency. But always, they offered more than simple summaries of data: they encouraged new ways of seeing, perceiving, and imagining. In so doing, surveyors subtly transformed the entities under investigation. Ultimately, it would become nearly impossible to know the nation apart from their charts and curves.[19]

A self-consciously modern society was in this respect as much an outgrowth as an object of survey techniques. To begin with, aggregate data gave shape and substance to a "mass public." Midcentury social scientists were covert nation-builders, conjuring up a collective that could be visualized only because it was radically simplified. Investigators' task, after all, was to generalize broadly from a small number of data points so as to make sense of a messy social world. (After gathering "millions of social facts" over five years of fieldwork in one community, for example, anthropologist Lloyd Warner was able to distill 5,800 "symbolic activities" into 284 "forms" and nineteen "types," and to determine that there were a total of eighty-nine possible "behavioral situations" or "statuses" within its relational system.) But theirs was a patterned incompleteness. Proclamations about "Americans" could not be made without suppressing the voices and experiences of some, and here surveyors more often perpetuated than challenged the assumptions of their day. Their presuppositions about who constituted the public meant that some Americans—African Americans, immigrants, and poor

people, among others—were systematically excluded from their statistics, and that the nation surveyed was always a partial one. None of this, however, prevented Gallup's and Kinsey's facts from exercising a forceful sway over perceptions of the social body.[20]

Surveyors' aggregating technologies, by their very nature, placed new cultural emphasis on the center point, the scientifically derived mean and median. They helped shift the ground under the concept of normality, so that its meaning increasingly lined up with quantified averages—although not without a fight from those who feared this would upend religious, ethical, or cultural values. This was a tendency perhaps inherent to statistical techniques, evident as early as the 1830s in the Belgian Adolphe Quetelet's famous search for "the average man," that "fictitious being, for whom every thing proceeds conformably to the medium results obtained for society in general." The drive to determine the average was part empirical quest, part cultural preoccupation. Its calculators did not always take care, as did Quetelet, to highlight its fictional qualities. In 1947, for example, *Newsweek* could announce that there was a "shadowy figure beginning to emerge" from the day's public opinion polls, which it promptly labeled the "American Majority Man." Such composite types, placeholders for the nation itself, flowed easily from social scientific tables and graphs. And they took root in places far afield from statisticians' counting machines. Especially during decades of economic crisis and war, social scientific findings about "typical Americans" and the search for a coherent Americanism in the culture at large were symbiotic. Even if it was never particularly accurate or representative, invoking a "mass subject" to stand in for the whole could play a vital role in consolidating the national public.[21]

This figment of surveyors' imaginations could work to highlight and regulate differences, permitting individuals not only to discern an aggregate norm but also to measure themselves against it. As such, the flood of data on majority beliefs, average communities,

and mainstream Americans afforded individuals a new means of relating to the collective. The rhetorical turn from studying "others" to studying "ourselves" in this era's social scientific practice carried with it both a confessional mode and a voyeuristic stance. What did it mean, for example, for a woman to respond to a thirty-four-page family survey that asked for intimate details of financial, marital, and social adjustment to the Depression? Her personal information, once disclosed, was made the property of experts, merged with others', and then returned to the public, transformed, as data. Transmitted far beyond the initial exchange, such statistics enabled Americans to peer into their neighbors' lives, and, sometimes, to look at their own differently. Access to information about others enabled individuals to filter their experiences through tables and percentages, to fit themselves into social scientific categories, and to identify with strangers. To borrow a phrase from philosopher Ian Hacking, surveyors' facts could in this way remake "the space of possibilities for personhood." Indeed, many sought out and were changed by such knowledge.[22]

As did an earlier generation of social scientists, contemporary historians have vigorously debated whether a mass society existed in the twentieth-century United States. Those who have argued for the emergence of a modern national culture, however defined, have linked it to one of several developments: the triumph of a corporate-industrial order, the growth of national politics and labor unions under the New Deal, the effects of standardized advertising and consumption, or the emergence of the mass media itself. Others have underscored instead the resilience of local, ethnic, religious, and familial affiliations in the face of homogenizing trends. Emphasizing either the tangible institutions of mass society or the particular social bonds that endured despite it, what most of this scholarship neglects is the *consciousness* that many individuals in the

midcentury decades had of living in a new kind of public. To a great extent, this consciousness was the product of newfound, widely available, scientific data about "average" Americans. By proclaiming the necessity of their impersonal techniques, by presenting collections of facts as more authoritative than individuals' perceptions, by publicizing cumulative data about strangers, and by fostering communion with abstract others, surveyors helped to manufacture the idea and perhaps even the experience of "the mass."[23]

Americans' engagements with the scientific facts meant to represent them reveal a process at work that we have not yet fully grasped: a broad shift in consciousness linked to the technologies of social surveying. Immersion in a mass-information economy necessarily conditioned citizens' thinking about their ties to other people and to the nation. Some twenty years ago, historian Benedict Anderson described the nation-state as an "imagined community." Taking seriously the possibility of not just imagined, but *statistical*, communities will help us uncover the knowledge regimes and intellectual frameworks that allowed Americans to relate in new ways to "the public." That many believed they lived in a mass society does not mean that this was so. However, if we are to understand how this new society operated—at the level of perception, if not of fact—we will need to put aside questions of reality for more ephemeral, although hardly less important, ones of thought and belief. The answers are extremely important if we are to know anything about the kind of public that evolved in tandem with opinion polls and sex surveys. We will also, against at least a half century of scholarship and commentary, have to rethink "the mass" itself: as a social experience distinguished as much by connection as conformity, and composed of actors better described as self-conscious than submissive.[24]

Why care about the sort of public that social statistics projected, or the arguments triggered by composite data? To realize that our poll-saturated culture is of recent vintage is of course a reminder

that our present is an historical artifact. More significantly, a history of surveyors' instruments helps us appreciate how influential they have been in bounding and enforcing perceptions of social reality across the last century. We need to understand social scientific representations—of "typical communities," "majority opinion," and "normal Americans"—not as reflections of the body politic but as an index to political and epistemological power. We also need to reckon with popular modes of knowing in the twentieth century, the social thought not of masses but of ordinary people using the tools at hand to make sense of the world. Only then will we begin to see that a particular form of modern consciousness is anchored in the practices of social surveyors.