

Main Street and Empire: The Fictional Small Town in the Age of Globalization, by Ryan Poll. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012. xii, 223 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$72.00 hardcover, \$24.95 paperback.

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Despite the centrality of rural living and the predominance of small towns in the history of Iowa and of the United States more generally, the nature of small-town life has not been a frequent subject of study, perhaps because of its sheer ubiquity until the mid-twentieth century or the relative absence of drama to the story. There were exceptions, of course, including books such as Lewis Atherton's *Main Street on the Middle Border* (1954), Richard Lingeman's *Small Town America* (1980), and, most recently, John Miller's *Small-Town Dreams* (2014), but these exist as exceptions to the general rule. Those earlier but infrequent works on American small towns genuinely sought to analyze and explain their history; Ryan Poll's *Main Street and Empire* seeks instead to minimize and transcend their influence. The book is an attempt to, as the author sees it, cleanse American culture of the pervasive and continuing presence of small towns and the "ideology" they represent.

From the beginning of *Main Street and Empire*, there is little doubt about the basis of Poll's analysis. Early on, he declares his adherence to "Marxist literary and cultural criticism," or what is more generically known as "critical theory," a line of thinking that first took form with the work of the Frankfurt School during the early twentieth century (18). Throughout his book, Poll relies on the now familiar band of Marxist/critical theoreticians and their allies who have strongly influenced academic discourse in recent years: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser, Frederic Jameson, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Eric Hobsbawm, Judith Butler, etc. Unlike historians such as Atherton, Lingeman, and Miller, who grew up in the small towns they studied, Poll has no personal connection to his object of study. He grew up in Chicago, attended college in Atlanta, and earned a Ph.D. in English at the University of California–Davis, where he absorbed Marxist critical theory. His view of small towns is determined by the lens of critical theory, which is purposely designed to promote the transformation of the existing order and the "emancipation" of the oppressed, not by more traditional and nonactivist theorizing, general empiricism, data collection, or personal experience.

Poll thinks, in short, that the small town has developed into a perverse ideological force in American culture. Too many people are attracted to the small-town ethos and small-scale communal living, he

argues, and that has caused a social blindness to widespread social oppression. The small-town marketing of Walmart, for example, obscures capitalist exploitation, and nice images of small towns obscure racism and exclusionary practices. Notions of innocent small towns also make it impossible, Poll argues, to see America's imperial domination of the world. Films such as Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, plays such as Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Walt Disney's theme park, and people like Donna Reed and Andy Griffith are all sources of oppression, in his view. To equate small towns with the nation's "heritage" or "traditions" is to promote fascism, according to Poll.

Poll does not dwell on the American small town as a "real, material place"; he focuses instead on its ideological implications or its impact on society and politics. There is an important connection, however, that Poll ignores: the reason people are attracted to small towns—and therefore not ready to man the barricades and spearhead a revolution—is that many people grew up in them and found them desirable. The novelist and screenwriter Diane Johnson, in her recent memoir, *Flyover Lives* (2014), recalls with great fondness her childhood of love and community in Illinois. Such recollections and myriad others cannot be reconciled with critical theory, however, so they are pressed into the category of false consciousness. If, from Poll's perspective, empirical evidence and actual human testimony conflict with theory, then so much the worse for the evidence and testimony.

Another central component of Poll's book is its heavy reliance on the notion of a "revolt from the village," the idea that some writers in the 1920s finally rebelled against their small-town heritage and wrote scathing attacks on small-town life. Poll begins his book with a chapter on this idea and ends it with a rallying cry to perpetuate the unfinished revolt against small-town life. But the existence of a "village revolt" was vehemently denied by the writers who supposedly triggered it and was instead based on one tossed-off magazine article that passed into literary history as fact and remains, therefore, a largely imaginary "revolt." (See Jon K. Lauck, "The Myth of the Midwestern 'Revolt from the Village,'" *MidAmerica* [2013]). Given this misreading of the "revolt" and Poll's more general obeisance to critical theory and the distortions that result, it would be best to look for the history of American small towns in other works.