With a Critical Eye
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An Intellectual and His Times

By Arthur J. Vidich

Edited and introduced by Robert Jackall
For My Children & My Grandchildren
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Author’s Acknowledgments

I began this autobiography some years ago as a personal memoir not knowing who its readers might be. I intended it as a set of recollections of a boy of immigrant Slovenian parents who tried to make his way in the brawling reality that is America that I have spent my life trying to understand. The early chapters of the book reflect on my origins. As I continued to write, the book became a record of my intellectual development and my reflections on it. I offer it to readers as the story of an intellectual who grappled with the problems of his times.

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Introduction

On Marginality and Creativity
Robert Jackall

Art Vidich began to write this memoir in the late 1990s “as a set of recollections of a boy of immigrant Slovenian parents who tried to make his way in the brawling reality that is America that [he spent his] life trying to understand.” It became not only a remarkable record of an immigrant childhood and boyhood, but a self-portrait of a singularly important anthropologist/sociologist of the twentieth century. This essay focuses on Vidich’s stance as an outsider, a habit of mind initially fostered by his family’s social situation and later embraced by him as essential for the kind of understanding he wished to achieve and impart to others. I begin in the middle of the story.

Small Town in Mass Society

Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman published Small Town in Mass Society in 1958. The book describes in close detail the social and cultural situation of “Springdale,” a rural, mid-century American small town in upstate New York, complete with telling portraits of Springdale’s class structure, its myths and ideologies, and of some key individuals charged or self-appointed with maintaining the town’s moral cosmos. The book moves freely between an analysis of Springdale’s social structure and the social psychology of its several groups. Such a close examination revealed how deeply a number of structural trends had penetrated even the furthest

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reaches of American society. These trends included the following: the growing dominance of large organizations; the concomitant bureaucratization of every key occupational group; the ascendance of the new middle class of managers and professionals attached to the big organizations; the decline of the old middle class of free professionals, small entrepreneurs, artisans, and farmers; and the glaring discrepancy between small town ideologies extolling a glorious, home-made past and the hard cultural reality of a mass society that continually recycles second- and third-hand images of community and self from the metropolis back to the provinces. Springdalers’ images of their town’s past were largely fictive; the town’s future was controlled by forces outside its influence. But many Springdalers, including gatekeepers of the larger society who resided in or near the town, preferred to live with comforting self-images and illusions fabricated either by distant experts with symbols who, though they did not know Springdale itself, knew a hundred towns like it, or by local boosters who constructed and propagated the town’s upbeat self-presentation.

Every major structural trend that Vidich and Bensman discerned in Springdale has accelerated. Work is more bureaucratized. Power is more centralized. Old theodicies provide even less private comfort or public guidance than they did fifty-plus years ago, and, despite ingeniously manufactured fictive public realities, our contemporary communities are rarely holistic, well-knit social organisms, but instead they resemble patchworks of common interest, need, and desire stitched together as circumstances require. Our social psychological ambivalence about almost everything is a typical cast of mind for many people, at least in the middle classes. Moreover, our civic culture and public discourse are both dominated by the perspectives, techniques, and ethics of public relations. As substantive expertise
In every arena of our society becomes more specialized and more arcane, our society comes to resemble a checkerboard with impassable moats around each square. What happens in one square is, for the most part, unintelligible to those in other squares. But, in fact, as the substantive expertise that underpins our civilization proliferates, so too does the demand for interpretive expertise to fashion the verbal and visual images of complex, substantive realities that can resonate with broader audiences and thus recreate the legitimacy substantive expertise needs to flourish. Once fashioned, images assume a life and reality of their own. And once internalized, in an increasingly specialized society, they often become the only realities that matter. When sociologists probe behind public masks to find out how social reality is really put together, as Vidich and Bensman did in *Small Town*, they almost always encounter hostility not only from those who wear the masks, but perhaps especially from those who have been fooled by the performance.

*Small Town in Mass Society* is a classic work precisely because it penetrates the placid, banal surfaces of everyday life and reveals powerful undercurrents in American society. Moreover, its framework emerges directly out of its presentation of concrete details gleaned in intensive fieldwork. The 1968 edition of the book contains a series of illuminating papers about fieldwork, and the relationship of theory to field data, some of which were written before the book’s original publication. These essays are not only the best in the literature on the virtues and dilemmas of fieldwork itself, but they also provide the key to understanding how *Small Town* penetrated the myths of Springdale so well. At the core of these essays is an insistence on cultivating a stance of intellectual marginality—the ability to stand at the edge of social situations and observe and report both routine and chaos with dispassion—as the prerequisite for sociological understanding.
The Roots of Marginality

Vidich’s autobiography provides rich material to understand his ability to adopt an outsider’s stance to the social world. This habit of mind came only slowly and by fits and starts, beginning with growing up as a first-generation child of an ethnic immigrant family in an industrial suburb of Milwaukee in the 1920s and 1930s. His book recounts in full detail the cultural puzzles he and his family faced in bridging the old world and the new, but with none of the sentimentality and laments that mark much of the ethnic coming-of-age genre. The early chapters of his book are filled with examples of the resourcefulness and caginess of his and his family’s attempts to apprehend the opportunities that American society offered to its newcomers and their success in seizing them.

Indeed, Vidich’s initial response to his station of origin was to seek success in America on its own terms and in a vigorous way. His tales of his boyhood recount his developing leadership skills. His outgoing and engaging personality made him exceptional in his cohort. Later, in college, he plunged into student politics and became a big man on campus at the University of Wisconsin. He aspired to become Wisconsin’s governor or one of that state’s United States senators. He was prepared to tailor himself in any way necessary to achieve these goals.

But immediately after Pearl Harbor, he joined the Marine Corps, a commitment that he later called his last patriotic act. Ironically, before being sent to the Pacific Theater, the Marine Corps gave him the opportunity, in ways he did not fully understand at the time, to develop habits of mind that became defining intellectual characteristics. In his Marine uniform, he took courses at the University of Michigan in piano and in anthropology. He struck up a friendship with the anthropologist Leslie White and read, for the first time, a
great deal of ethnography, particularly the work of the great British social anthropologists. That tradition stresses immersing oneself in the social worlds that others construct. By coming to know others from the inside out, one comes to know aspects of oneself that might never be glimpsed if one attends only to the self-rationalization requisite for worldly success.

Vidich was a good and faithful Marine. He rose to the rank of lieutenant (though he mustered out as a sergeant because he did not re-enlist), but he never internalized that institution’s semper fidelis ethos. He became a scrounger in the American occupying forces in Kyushu, the southernmost island of Japan, a role that gave him the opportunity to explore the island’s depleted resources and housing for incoming brass. As such, he went on his first “field trip,” one that foreshadowed later interests. He commandeered a jeep to drive up to Kagoshima Bay to see the small town of Suya Mura because, at Leslie White’s suggestion, he had read the ethnography of the town written by John Embree, a Yale anthropologist. He also commandeered a small craft to fly over the city of Nagasaki where he took a remarkable photograph (available on this book’s website), one that documents the devastation of the city by “Fat Man” on August 9, 1945. The experience made him an opponent of nuclear weapons for the rest of his life. He left the Marines with pride, but without the nostalgia for camaraderie and action that characterizes many of the organization’s veterans.

After returning to Wisconsin, Vidich got involved in an extended field project in Viroqua, a small town in western Wisconsin. His part of the study, which later became his master’s thesis, was a sobering examination of the mobility aspirations of young men between the ages of twenty and thirty. He discovered that, by the age of thirty, men are acutely aware of doors that they once thought entirely open being
slammed shut. While engaged in the study, he met and interviewed Gerald L. K. Smith, a native of Viroqua who achieved some fame as an American fascist during the 1930s. Vidich asked the controversial Smith some very blunt questions and discovered, much to his surprise, that, in our era, one can ask other people almost anything. The ethos of self-promotion so pervades our society that most people rarely get asked questions about themselves. The chief limitation to good field research, he learned, is the fieldworker’s self-consciousness and consequent self-doubt. These produce an anxiety about possible social rejection that inhibits deep inquiry. The researcher who has made himself marginal, by contrast, is free to seek the truth without internally imposed constraints.

Vidich then got involved in a research project called the Micronesian Investigation that took him to Palau, an island nation in the South Pacific. There, he did eight months of anthropological fieldwork, a defining experience in his intellectual life. He studied in particular Modekngie, an “indigenous resistance movement that cut across clan loyalties and was a result of the revolutionary economic and social changes introduced by … colonizers.”

Vidich returned to Wisconsin, where he studied with Hans Gerth. Although Gerth influenced Vidich in myriad ways, he remembered with particular vividness a seminar in which Gerth taught his students how to deconstruct public statements to discern the interests of competing groups, that is, how to recognize that virtually all public reality in a competitive, pluralistic society is a form of propaganda. Later, at Harvard, Vidich’s fieldwork in Palau became the basis of his doctoral dissertation called The Political Impact of Colonial Administration. The work describes how different Palauan groups responded to the successive colonial administrations of the Spanish, the Germans, the Japanese, and the Americans. It is a detailed portrait of