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Region in crisis

A superb analysis of the Midwest's economic decline and a plan for a comeback

By Peter A. Coclanis, associate provost for international affairs and Albert R. Newsome professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
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Reading Richard C. Longworth's riveting new book, "Caught in the Middle: America's Heartland in the Age of Globalization," immediately got me thinking about my childhood growing up in Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s. More specifically, the book brought back memories of my years at William H. Prescott Elementary School on Wrightwood and Ashland Avenues, particularly of kindergarten and of the day I graduated from 8th grade. The author's many discussions regarding the stranglehold of manufacturing on the Midwest made me recall that all we really did in 10 long months of kindergarten at Prescott, a public school catering exclusively to kids of blue-collar parents, was learn how to tell time, spending hours on the task each and every day. And at our 8th-grade graduation, I still recall, the key honoree was not the kid who had compiled the best academic record, or even the toadie who had rung up the best record of service, but the student who had the best attendance record over the years. With the Midwest in crisis these days, a result in large part of globalization, my Prescott memories are instructive and fully consistent with Longworth's thesis, for the school's emphasis on industrial discipline -- that is, on the clock, on reliability and on punctuality -- supported and reinforced the heavy-manufacturing regime that over the first half of the 20th Century made the Midwest one of the economic powerhouses of the world. Get used to life on the assembly line, kids, trade your freedom and your dreams for union wages and good

"benes." It will come as no surprise to anyone who hasn't been in a coma over the past few decades that industrial discipline is no longer enough to make the region tick. Unfortunately, though, the Midwest, enthralled to and with manufacturing for generations, isn't adjusting too well to economic change, suffering, as it does, from what Longworth calls an "industrial hangover" that just won't go away. It's not hard to understand why that hangover lingers, given the intoxicating growth heavy manufacturing, along with agriculture, made possible in the Midwest for well over a century. As Longworth points out in vivid detail, the region, much of which seems so rusty and shopworn today, was, from about 1850 to 1950, the humming engine of America, the center of American innovation, the Silicon Valley of its day. Indeed, the Midwest, often dismissed as flyover territory by the coastal jet set today, was not only the world's manufacturing dynamo but also the most dynamic agricultural zone in the world during its heyday. The agro-industrial complex created in the region constituted a one-two combination few other areas could rival, and Midwesterners, now seen as conservative and risk-averse, were busy inventing new products, creating new industries and making the diversified family farm a model of agricultural efficiency. But that was yesterday. Beginning in the 1970s, or even earlier, the industrial economy of the Midwest began a decline, which turned into free-fall during the globalization wave of the past two decades. Why? For many reasons, according to Longworth: the integration of world markets and increased global competition; managerial failures; high costs associated with unionized industries; declining innovativeness; and a business climate marked increasingly by entrepreneurial lethargy. At the same time, the other pillar upon which the Midwest was built, the heavily commercialized family farm, began to collapse as well, leading to a rural crisis of quasi-biblical proportions. This crisis was caused by some of the same factors that brought down heavy industry in the Midwest, most notably increased global competition. Such competition wreaked havoc throughout the Farm Belt, leading over time to a massive weeding out of the agricultural sector,

bankrupting many smaller, less-efficient farmers and consolidating farm ownership and farm income more and more into the hands of a small agribusiness elite. Thus the Midwest has been affected by a double whammy over the past few decades, as the tides of globalization pounded the region's agro-industrial complex, the platform upon which the region was made. Ironically, then, the economic relationship responsible in large part for the Midwest's will to power during its golden age -- the close interaction between town and country, between factory and field -- now exacerbated and intensified the region's economic decline, for the region had bet the farm, as it were, on belching smokestacks and bleating livestock for a long time. Whatever technical terminology one wishes to invoke in explaining the Midwest's predicament -- lock-in mechanisms, path dependency, the winner's curse, for example -- it's all the same to the millions of Midwesterners who have lost their jobs or their farms, have seen their communities sundered and have had their hopes dashed, their futures seemingly taken away. "In Caught in the Middle," Longworth, a senior fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and distinguished journalist who spent many years with the Tribune, provides a superb analysis of the crisis in the Midwest and sober advice on how to alleviate, if not eliminate, the region's pain. Moreover, he captures the flavor of the Midwest today, the nuevo Midwest -- replete with immigrants, urban/suburban/rural ghettos, hollowed-out cities, abandoned small towns, failing schools and feckless politicians. But it is still breathing and not without assets -- rich farmland, a plethora of fresh water, agricultural and industrial expertise and excellent research universities -- and a few success stories, a reborn Chicago, most notably. Such assets and successes might, according to the author, form the basis for a strategy of economic renewal for the region as a whole, one based perhaps on bioscience and biotechnology. But in order for such a strategy to work, the region will have to change in fundamental ways. First, those in the region must learn to work together. Longworth's Midwest -- defined not by state lines but by history, economic structure and states of mind -- runs across that swath of America's

midsection from east-central Ohio to the eastern slivers of Kansas and Nebraska, but without the southern thirds of Ohio and Illinois, the southern halves of Indiana and Missouri, the rest of Kansas and Nebraska, and the Dakotas, all of which, according to Longworth, belong more properly to other regions, either the South, the Ozarks, or the Great Plains. His Midwest rose and fell as a unit, and it will come back, if it does, only with a unified development strategy. Indeed, Longworth's most important point about how to stanch the bleeding in the region is to get the Midwest and Midwesterners to think and act regionally, which in his view would not only be more efficient by reducing redundancies and tamping down internecine competition but also more effective by establishing the area as a discrete and readily recognizable geographic entity. Second, the Midwest and Midwesterners must shake off the cobwebs and begin to innovate, take some risks and begin the process of economic reinvention, whether in biotech or some other new, new thing. Third, the Midwest and Midwesterners must be realistic: The golden age is over and is never coming back. But with hard work, smart policy and good luck, the region at least has a fighting chance for a future, and "Caught in the Middle" provides a brilliant battle plan. ----------

'A lot of the Midwest is in denial'

By Kristin Kloberdanz | a former Time magazine writer
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"Growing up in a small town in central Iowa, my boyhood ambition was to get out of there," author Richard Longworth said in an interview. "It took me about 15,000 miles before I slowed down." Longworth spent 16 years as a journalist in London, Moscow, Vienna and Brussels. In 1976 he headed back to the Midwest and become a foreign correspondent for the Tribune, focusing on international economics. He left the paper in 2003 and became a senior fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. "I became very curious about how globalization was affecting my home turf,

from Ohio to Iowa," he said. In 2006 he hit the road, hoping to see how the Midwest had weathered recent changes, such as outsourcing. He logged 11,000 miles winding his way from small towns to cities across the Midwest researching his book, "Caught in the Middle." He talked to anyone -- from factory workers to clergy members to people hanging out in convenience stores -- willing to share their concerns.

"A lot of the Midwest is in denial and hope the good old days are going to come back," he said. Longworth said he, too, is nostalgic for the Midwest of his youth, but he hopes the region can embrace globalization the way Chicago has been forced to in recent years. "This is the area that framed us, that made us what we are -- and a lot of that is going away. I regret a lot of these changes. On the other hand, we have to face up to the forces, understand they are global and be willing to do something about them."

---------- Kristin Kloberdanz is a former Time magazine writer.

Unsettling landscape

Photographer Gregory Crewdson's America is filled with people and places that reflect life at its most hopeless

By Jessica Reaves | TRIBUNE REPORTER

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Norman Rockwell brought us a singular vision of small-town America, as did Edward Hopper. Now photographer Gregory Crewdson has created a new, uniquely unsettling American landscape: a highly atmospheric, cinematic world that pays homage to the past while standing on its own. While Rockwell took the occasional, sly swipe at the status quo, raising a critical eyebrow at injustice, his depictions of a quasi-mythical Main Street, U.S.A., were by and large peaceable, safe. His paintings are a well-mannered (but hardly toothless) survey of the social, political and professional mores that governed the coffee shops and dinner tables of the American middle class. At about the same time, Hopper's paintings were infusing the same subject matter with something slightly more sinister. Hopper, one of

America's greatest realists, was more interested in the interplay of sunlight and shadow than he was in making social commentary. Even so, his art seemed to recognize the danger lurking on quiet streets, or behind closed doors. Hopper took Rockwell's cheerful coffee shop and turned it, ever so subtly, into a lonely, lustful place, the customers slumped together against the threat of darkness. Today, half a century after Rockwell and Hopper, Crewdson presents us with another American realism. And while Crewdson works in a different medium, he tackles the same streets, houses, cars as his predecessors -- the same distinctly American iconography, revisited after decades of neglect and despair. This is Americana stripped of sentimentality: the working poor, the forgotten middle class, surrounded by failure and realizing they've been robbed of the life they were promised. Main Street, once bustling, is hushed now, its deserted storefronts papered over and forgotten. Commerce, as we all know, doesn't live downtown anymore. And even if it did, Crewdson would evict it for the sake of an image: His photo shoots, elaborately documented in the second half of his book, "Beneath the Roses," resemble movie sets, with lights, makeup artists and meticulously arranged props. This is Crewdson's realism: fictional characters, events, disappearances, slights, all taking place on a set, carefully staged to reflect life at its most hopeless. While the tone of his photographs is overwhelmingly bleak, Crewdson, who claims Diane Arbus and Walker Evans among his influences, occasionally betrays a wicked sense of humor: One photo shows a sedan halfway through an intersection, abandoned by its driver. The remaining passenger stares, alone but apparently unbothered, as light streams from the Independent Living Center on the corner. Crewdson is especially gifted at conveying a cold physical intimacy -- sex without love, nakedness without desire. His subjects wear consistently blank expressions; the young and old, coupled and alone, are equally removed from their surroundings, equally dulled to personal tragedies and disappointments. The book's stark design and oversize pages create a dramatic canvas for the 175 photographs, taken during extended shoots from

2003 to 2007. Locations, scouted with the precision normally reserved for feature films, include Adams, North Adams and Pittsfield, Mass., as well as Rutland, Vt. Like any bona fide realist, Crewdson isn't interested in showing us a fantastical, dystopian version of ourselves. Instead he focuses on the life he imagines is already happening: undocumented, behind closed doors and shaded windows. And his photographs dare us to take a good, long look.