

Book Reviews

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Editorial note: Book reviews are lightly edited for clarity and typographical errors.

Reviews

THE COLOR LINE AND THE ASSEMBLY LINE: Managing Race in the Ford Empire.
By Elizabeth D. Esch. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2018.

Decades before the advent of the “sticky note,” the storied industrialist Henry Ford had a habit of scribbling thoughts on small pieces of paper on his desk. On one such unsticky note, Ford wrote, “What is the best way to handle the Negro?” On the other side, he penned, “Colonize the Negro.” What can explain this? Since the early twentieth century, activists (and later historians) celebrated Ford for breaking the unwritten rule that African Americans not be hired for skilled industrial labor. His decision to put thousands of African Americans to work in all positions at his River Rouge plant sent shockwaves through the nation. White industrialists looked askance while southern African American workers packed suitcases and bought train tickets to Detroit. Elizabeth D. Esch’s new global history of the Ford empire finally explains the racialized and racist logics behind the full range of Ford’s labor management policies as applied in diverse sites in the U.S. and abroad. This sophisticated and ambitious volume will change the way American studies scholars think and write about global race, capitalism, and American empire.

The Color Line and the Assembly Line examines Ford management strategies across multiple sites in the United States, Brazil and South Africa from the founding of the company in 1903 through its heyday in the interwar era. Within the U.S., Esch focuses on the commonly analyzed Detroit-area factories Highland Park, which did not hire African Americans, and River Rouge, which did. Esch adds to the picture Inkster, Michigan, where African Americans settled because all-white Dearborn excluded them. Ford bought the town in 1932 and subjected residents to a form of debt peonage, ostensibly to “save” them from the Great Depression. Esch also analyzes Ford’s 1936 purchase of Richmond Hills, Georgia, a former rice plantation that Ford used for a series of experiments in Jim Crow social and economic development. To this complex U.S. picture, Esch adds Fordlandia and Belterra rubber plantations in Brazil, each with its own worker “improvement” project, and the Port Elizabeth factory in South Africa that only hired white workers. Finally, Esch also examines the Port Elizabeth African community of Kwaford that built its housing

from the Ford company's discarded shipping crates. With these eight sites, Esch performs a comprehensive study of Ford's imperial vision of industrial development and its effects.

Esch's is the first study to create a coherent picture of Ford's management logics, solving a persistent mystery. Previous scholarship on Ford, considered in aggregate, is full of contradictory portraits. Ford is celebrated as the brilliantly successful architect of the five-dollar day and is credited with inaugurating "Fordism": the high-wage, high-consumption economy that reputedly came to characterize the U.S. and Europe. However, Greg Grandin's recent work on Ford's rubber plantations in Brazil paints Ford not as the brilliant capitalist strategist but as a ridiculously deluded failure. Another set of scholars celebrate Ford as the first automobile manufacturer to hire African Americans, while Ford is also widely known for authoring anti-Semitic publications that gained the approval of Adolf Hitler.

Esch demonstrates that a racial modernization project unifies these disparate portraits. The Ford Company, argues Esch, paired making cars with making men—that is, it hired and managed labor forces through racial logics and social engineering. The Company's vision of capitalist development assumed that the peoples of the world were ordered along a hierarchy of civilization and produced strategies for recruiting, shaping and disciplining labor forces for different tasks accordingly. Ford tapped black workers in Detroit not because he saw them as interchangeable with white workers, but because he wished to cultivate a cheap workforce when the supply of European immigrants was on decline because of immigration restrictions. "Race improvement" meant treating white and black workers very differently. Esch demonstrates that Ford mandated residential segregation and, during the Great Depression, subjected the black area of Inkster to a system of debt peonage. Esch also shows that Ford's plantation in Richmond Hills, Georgia built directly on the legacy of slavery and segregation to envision a modern plantation racial hierarchy. When Ford took management tactics developed in the U.S. to Brazil, they failed, but so committed was the Company to this strategy that it could not change course. Esch argues that such white managerialism fostered and capitalized on uneven economic development within the U.S. and across the globe.

If Ford was an expert exploiter of uneven development, then what about the concept of Fordism, that is, the idea that a high-wage, high-consumption economy was enjoyed by the U.S. and Europe? Esch does not contrast a U.S. high-wage economy with Brazil and South Africa, but she notes that Ford created areas of debt, dependency and low consumption in the U.S., just as he did in Brazil. Fordism, Esch insists, is better understood as the implementation of white managerialism with the expected and desired outcome of uneven development in the U.S. and globally.

This thesis is transformative both spatially and temporally for future scholarship in American studies and history. Scholars continue to see the global economy as shaped by spatially divergent processes that created first, second and third worlds, or the global North and South, despite widespread acknowledgement that these concepts are highly problematic. Esch's argument that Ford unevenly developed the U.S. challenges scholars to spatially re-frame the U.S. in studies of global economy. In addition, scholars tend to mark neoliberalism as beginning with the end of Fordism, conventionally defined, despite widespread complaint that defining elements of neoliberalism are found earlier. Esch's revision of Fordism challenges scholars to rethink temporal continuities and contrasts across the twentieth century. *The Color Line and the Assembly Line* thus offers invaluable tools for rethinking global capitalism's spatial and temporal variance.

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MEASURING MANHOOD: Race and the Science of Masculinity, 1830-1934. By Melissa Stein. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2015.

In this impressively researched book, Melissa Stein documents how scientists in the late 1800s and early 1900s naturalized racial hierarchy. As she explains: “this book is a story about how categories of human difference are created, maintained, and contested and the role of science in that process... not just categories of difference... they were, and often continue to be, categories of sociopolitical exclusion” (24). Ethnologists and sexologists in particular adapted ideas about race at the intersection of gender and sexuality to fit new social cultural and political circumstances, solidifying a mutually constitutive relationship racial science, politics, and culture. While the politics of these professionals differed, one constant theme among their work was the notion of “a natural racial hierarchy” grounded in white supremacy (269). Unlike other historical works concerning manhood in the late 19th century that focus on popular discourse and cultural texts, Stein’s unique work begins with a consideration of how ethnology emerged as a field of study and the central role of men—and patrilineal descent—in questions regarding the origins of humankind. The confluence of ethnology and white masculinity served as a foundation for ethnological conclusions about race in justifications for slavery. Pro-slavery defenders grounded their logic in paternalistic rhetoric and utilized gendered arguments when it benefited their aim, often de-gendering Black folks or likening black men and women to children (77). What was so dangerous about these assertions is that many ethnologists raised their “innate prejudices to the level of scientific truth[s],” truths that shaped law, policy, and social opinion (124).

These trends were exacerbated in the post-abolition era when concerns over two things: 1) citizenship—particularly for Black men, and 2) what racial scientists saw as the “threat” of miscegenation (93, 107). As Stein argues, “white supremacy depended on white men maintaining their dominion over white women” and whites believed that if Black men were to access political equality, they would also want social equality; that is, “equal access to white women” (159). General concerns about race, sexuality, gender, and the boundaries of whiteness converged in these moments, but Stein demonstrates the specificity and interconnectedness of these discourses. She focuses on the role of manhood, finding that in order to denigrate “a particular race or immigrant group” one only needed to “impugn[] manhood within the group” (165). Manhood, of course, was synonymous with reproductive heterosexuality, since the “fate of the nation depended on the superior race ‘outbreeding’ the inferior” (168). Thus, any white person who was not heterosexual was a “threat to the whole race and, in turn, American civilization” (168).

Racial science and ethnology directly impacted other fields of medical research as well as attempts at legal and social control of those deemed “less evolved.” The emergence of sexology is one key example, where concepts of “sexuality and sexual difference [were] shaped by the country’s racial context” (178). This occurred, in part, because many ethnologists also conducted research as sexologists, using their “expertise” gleaned from their work on race. Sexologists’ defined inverted and homosexuals as not just reflective of deviance from the norm, but also reflective of a devolution or evolutionary regression. The results of these scientific inquiries alongside the emergence of eugenics as a specific iteration of scientific racism directly shaped not only the future of assessments on race and sexuality within the fields of medicine, but directly impacted the law and extra-legal violence. In her analysis of lynching, for example, Stein notes that “racial science and popular discourse on lynching shared language, imagery, and a highly charged set of assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, and power in America” (219). The influence of eugenics facilitated the use of castration as an “increasingly central component in

the practice of lynching” but both “served the same ideological and practical functions; intimidation, containment, and social control” (239).

Stein’s research is particularly salient given our current political moment and the contemporary “resurgence of scientific interest in biology and race” (3). However, some readers might disagree with her optimism that “science has the potential to unmake race” (283). For example, while some believe that DNA tests have the potential to combat bigotry, they are anything but anti-racist. These tests continue to treat races as a biological fact, and to deny that science is affected by racism denies the reality of racism as it exists today. However, regardless of a reader’s agreement with this assertion, it is difficult to argue that this book is anything but impactful, timely, and necessary. How have histories of race science—at the intersection of gender and sexuality—shaped our current political climate and what are the legacies of this history? Stein’s work not only demonstrates the relevance, and import of these questions, she also provides the groundwork to combat the legacies of the answers she provides.

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