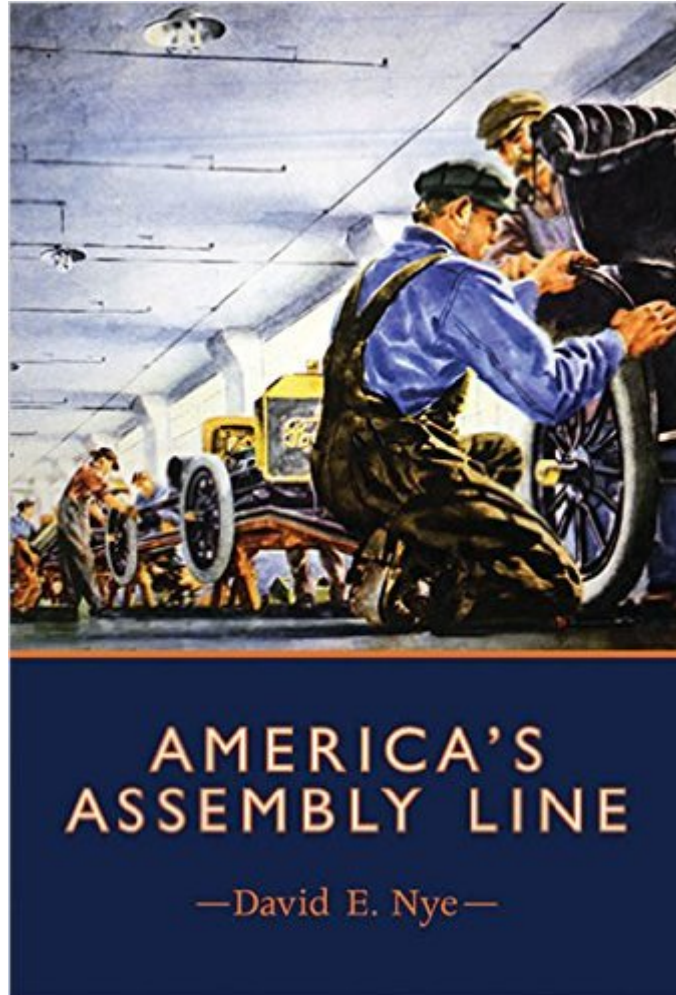


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# America's Assembly Line (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

The mechanized assembly line was invented in 1913 and has been in continuous operation ever since. It is the most familiar form of mass production. Both praised as a boon to workers and condemned for exploiting them, it has been celebrated and satirized. (We can still picture Chaplin's little tramp trying to keep up with a factory conveyor belt.) In America's Assembly Line, David Nye examines the industrial innovation that made the United States productive and wealthy in the twentieth century. The assembly line -- developed at the Ford Motor Company in 1913 for the mass production of Model Ts -- first created and then served an expanding mass market. It also transformed industrial labor. By 1980, Japan had reinvented the assembly line as a system of "lean manufacturing"; American industry reluctantly adopted the new approach. Nye describes this evolution and the new global landscape of increasingly automated factories, with fewer industrial jobs in America and questionable working conditions in developing countries. A century after Ford's pioneering innovation, the assembly line continues to evolve toward more sustainable manufacturing.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this well-drafted study, David Nye provides the reader with the best historical analysis of American manufacturing since the publication of David Hounshell's FROM THE AMERICAN SYSTEM TO MASS PRODUCTION, 1800-1932 (1984). His use of the enormous documentary base that now exists on the rise of assembly-line production over the last century and his thorough

examination of the origins and successive stages of that development are impressive and convincing. Nye has a unique gift to both inform and entertain as he covers the technical evolution of a process that came into existence in 1913 and has continued to adjust to new techniques. In addition to helping readers understand the technologies that shaped the assembly line, the author also provides insights into its cultural impact as seen in literature and the arts, particularly painting and photography. In ten chapters, Nye addresses the historical roots and context, Henry Ford's inaugural effort, spread of the process overseas, impact on workers, social and political criticism, Japanese reconfiguring of the assembly-line dynamic, and current efforts to confront the question of sustainability. This last concern presents the greatest challenge to assembly-line technology. During the 100 years since the first Fords rolled off that original assembly line, the global impact of accelerated manufacturing, with its ever expanding need for natural resources and resulting pollution of the environment, remains a disturbing consequence that has not yet been really addressed. Nye acknowledges the problem when he writes: "The assembly line will have to be reconceived as far more than a physical arrangement of machines."

Many writers of biographies "fall in love" with their subject. With David Nye, it is the opposite; he "hates" assembly lines as the result of comprehensive study about its evolution since the introduction of the Ford Motor Company in 1913. The first 240 pages present in great detail the negative characteristics of assembly line work. He is right, work at an assembly line is boring, repetitive and the worker is forced to complete a simple task in exactly, typically, one minute. I recommend the reader, in order to keep all these bad aspects in their historical perspective, to read first the last chapter, 'Centenary', a brilliant description about what modern assembly lines are like today and the need for further innovation. There is a world of difference with the Ford assembly line. In my view the author does not explain clearly enough why the assembly line has not disappeared after 100 years. The main reason is logistics, getting all of the components to the assembler. The amount of materials that goes into building a car is enormous. To supply all of these parts to stationary workstations is almost impossible. I must admit that, as a consultant, trained in the Taylor's principles of "Scientific Management", I have improved the performance of assembly lines in Sweden, Norway, Germany and the United Kingdom that led to substantial reductions in the man-hours used. This was not achieved by speeding up the assembly line but by organizing the work better. The methods used are quite well described in the last chapter. The work from a worker's point of view became much less heavy by the use of power tools and making most parts available within reaching distance. This was done already in 1963. In my view the author assigns too much

importance to assembly lines.

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