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Elektrizität in der Geistesgeschichte, and: Elektrifizierung
als Vision: Zur Symbolgeschichte einer Technik im Alltag
(review)

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Elektrizität in der Geistesgeschichte.

Edited by Klaus Plitzner. Bassum: Verlag für Geschichte der Naturwissenschaften und der Technik, 1998. Pp 239; illustrations, notes/references. DM 50.

Elektrifizierung als Vision: Zur Symbolgeschichte einer Technik im Alltag.

By Beate Binder. Tübingen: Tübinger Vereinigung für Volkskunde e.V., 1999. Pp. 399; illustrations, notes /references, bibliography, index. DM 48.

The spread of technical innovations has always been accompanied by new practices that give meaning to the new devices. Electrical devices are especially susceptible to cultural analysis, and this approach dominates Beate Binder's *Elektrifizierung als Vision* and most of the essays in Klaus Plitzner's *Elektrizität in der Geistesgeschichte*. While both publications deal with the period around the turn of the century, Binder's mainly explores the discourse on electrification in Berlin and Stuttgart while Plitzner considers German-speaking countries as a whole and also developments in the United States. In his foreword, Plitzner writes that technical innovation must adapt to the prevailing zeitgeist. Binder's thesis is that new technologies must be integrated into the symbolic order of a given community.

Both volumes conclude that electrification should be seen as exemplifying a cultural promise and the exploration of an avant-garde lifestyle. But the expectation of a profoundly modified electrical world stood in sharp contrast to common experience. Both Binder and several of Plitzner's contributors show how the promise of the future was forecast through allegorical and mythological figures representing progress, freedom, victory, and glamour. That even artists were affected by the cultural appropriation of the new technology is shown by Christoph Asendorf, who explores the connections between energy and the avant-garde. Gugerli argues that allegory was put to use not only in the service of popularizing abstractions associated with electricity but also in the "invention of tradition" and reduction of the confusion engendered by technological change at the turn of the century.

One place to get accustomed to new technologies was the international fair, where mythological themes and the imagery of the exhibits reflected the cultural and social importance ascribed to electrical technology, a point made both by Binder and by Gugerli and Felber in the Plitzner volume. Another site for developing electrical imagery was in the discourse concerning cities. The illumination of important streets was described in terms of enhanced glamour and social distinction. Theaters, restaurants, railroad stations, and business centers were the first to get electric lights, and these completely changed the image of cities and the self-image of their inhabitants. The electrical city represented progress and modernity; only a few arguments were heard in favor of a moderate introduction of technological innovations.

Electrification was involved in the processes of social distinction and expectations of prosperity, as evidenced by the competition between gas lighting and electricity; the latter was acclaimed for its cleanliness, especially if water power was used for generating current instead of dangerous and dirty steam engines. Discourses about electricity opened up visions of a better future, and held out the hope that electricity might make good the costs of modernity and industrialization. The disadvantages of the capitalistic past and its large-scale industry, for example, could be turned down in favor of small-scale manufacturing and trade supported by electrical machinery. In the end, however, as both Binder and Helmut Lackner in the Plitzner volume observe, large-scale industry benefited most from the introduction of electric power, because it could profit from the advantages of transmission and of mass production, and so the expectations for the social role of the electric motor remained unfulfilled.

Though electrification has been interpreted as a possible way of softening the effects of concentrated, large-scale production, the process itself was deeply involved in the tendency toward centralization, which has been supported by the hope of producing electrical power more effectively and more cheaply. This logic underpinned the Klingenberg-Plan, which in the 1920s became a model for organizing electric utility systems in Germany. Norbert Gilson, in *Elektrizität in der Geistesgeschichte*, argues that Klingenberg's concept of large power plants and high-voltage transmission lines prevailed despite the discussion of equally profitable but more decentralized systems.

On the whole, the essays in the Plitzner volume demonstrate that negotiations concerning the process of electrification included political, economical, and cultural values. Binder, by contrast, identifies all the debates about the meaning of electricity as culturally coined. She points to the symbolic dimension of electricity developed in the context of discourses about the electrical city, the electrical home, and electrical machines for production. Consequently, her monograph represents an instructive summary of the central topics of the cultural history of electrification.

Both volumes leave unresolved a question that merits further research: the connection between cultural discourses about the advantages of electrification and the social positions of the actors who introduced them. While Binder starts from the assumption that the process of electrification was grounded in collectively developed ideals, some of the Plitzner essays give a clearer picture of who speaks, though without a profound methodological reflection on the range of cultural history and its restrictions.

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