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Der produktive Blick: Wahrnehmung amerikanischer und japanischer Management- und Produktionsmethoden durch deutsche Unternehmer, 1950-1985 (review)

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Christian Kleinschmidt. *Der produktive Blick: Wahrnehmung amerikanischer und japanischer Management- und Produktionsmethoden durch deutsche Unternehmer, 1950–1985*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002. 453 pp. ISBN 3-05-003657-5, €64.80.

In this important and innovative book, a revised version of his University of Bochum postdoctoral thesis, Christian Kleinschmidt analyzes the impact of American and Japanese management and production models on German businesspeople and firms, surveying the whole range from the early perception of these models, fact-finding tours, and intra- and intercompany “learning,” up to their full or at least partial implementation. He focuses on ten large companies, primarily in the chemical industry but also including Bahlse (food processing), Continental (rubber), Freudenberg (leather), REWE (food retail trade), and Volkswagen. The respective company archives and others like those at the Hagley Museum and Library (DuPont and National Association of Manufacturers record groups) and at the National Archives provided him with extensive source material.

Kleinschmidt divides the book into three parts. In his very useful introduction of almost fifty pages, he outlines his intentions (“*Erkenntnisinteresse*”), the argument of his book, his methodical and theoretical tools, and the “state of the art” concerning this special field of business history and management studies. The second—and by far the largest—part of the book deals with the American “challenge.” Clearly and with great detail, Kleinschmidt describes the means by which German managers, entrepreneurs, and business associations gathered information on practices in the United States. He then turns to the perception of the “technological gap” between the United States and West Germany, focusing on the attempts to come to terms with American human relations, public relations, marketing, and control models, and ending with a section on the German “*Sonderweg*” to educate managers. In an interim assessment he notes a shift from the “Americanization” of German management and production regimes during the late 1940s and the early 1950s, initiated and supported by U.S. business circles and government, to a more voluntary orientation toward American patterns beginning in the mid-1950s.

In the third chapter, Kleinschmidt examines the perception and impact of Japanese models during the postwar period, especially since the 1970s. Compared to the relationship with the United States, with Japan communication barriers were of course much higher, and it took quite a long time for German businesspeople to

become alarmed by, or even aware of, the “challenge” from this Far Eastern country. In 1954 Heinrich Nordhoff of Volkswagen assessed the Japanese automobile industry as uninteresting and economically weak. Even ten years later a mixture of ignorance and arrogance characterized comments on Japan. Kleinschmidt shows how the image of Japanese managers and business leaders changed gradually from “champions of imitation” to “champions of innovation.” It was the German automobile industry that, in the early 1980s, took the lead in “learning to learn from the Japanese,” as a board member of Audi put it. “Quality circles,” “team work,” “just-in-time,” and, later on, “lean production” became the new “magic words,” demonstrating the adaptation of German management and production practices to the successful models of Far Eastern competitors.

Kleinschmidt’s book continues the research done by scholars like Robert R. Locke, Jacqueline McGlade, and Matthias Kipping on management training and the transfer of American models to Western Europe, as well as contributes to the debate on “Americanization” started by Volker R. Berghahn. Most compelling about his book is the precision of its analysis. Kleinschmidt shows, for example, that in the case of American paradigms the adaptation process was rather selective. Although German willingness to learn from Americans and to adopt their techniques and expertise was high in the fields of marketing, advertising, public relations, and company structure, in human relations or management education German businesses decided to go their own way. Although these findings are not completely new, the process of adoption and rejection and the important role of individual entrepreneurs in pushing or blocking this process have never been analyzed in such detail or for such a variety of topics. The broad archival basis and the intelligent use of theoretical approaches, especially organization theory and management theory, also distinguish this book. For all these reasons, Kleinschmidt’s work makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the strengths and shortcomings of West Germany’s big business and of the relationships among three of the most successful economies after World War II.

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