The People’s Car: A Global History of the Volkswagen Beetle by Bernhard Rieger (review)

Brian Ladd

Technology and Culture, Volume 55, Number 1, January 2014, pp. 275-276
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/tech.2014.0005

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/538935


As an innovative machine that became a cultural icon, the Volkswagen Beetle demands a blend of technological and cultural history. The People’s Car delivers both. Fundamentally, however, this book is a business history, tracing the emergence of the firm that grew up around its main product, while adding substantial material on the car’s reception among consumers. The topic requires a scholar who is well-versed in the history of the automobile as well as that of Nazi and postwar Germany. Fortunately, Bernhard Rieger proves to be both.

After an introductory survey of early automotive history, the book’s second chapter explains the Beetle’s Third Reich origins. The ambitious engineer Ferdinand Porsche exploited Hitler’s desire to promote mass motorization in order to produce a sophisticated design (more robust than the rival Citroën 2CV and Fiat 500) and an entirely new factory, and a new city, to manufacture it. Once it was done supporting the Nazi war effort, the enormous factory in the newly named Wolfsburg offered both headaches and opportunities to shattered postwar Germany and the region’s British occupiers. The occupation years are the subject of the third chapter, as the Nazi people’s car somehow escaped the taint of the Third Reich and went into production under difficult conditions. Chapter 4, the longest, offers a general history of postwar German car culture, as automobiles—especially the now-reliable and ubiquitous Beetles—became the symbols of a new freedom as well as an acceptable if sometimes controversial outlet for male aggression and bloodshed. Chapter 5 follows the successful export product abroad, looking briefly at the Beetle’s less-than-spectacular arrival in Britain before turning to its remarkable growth in the U.S. market and its emergence as an icon of American culture. Rieger dwells no more than necessary on the astonishing irony of this banner product of Hitler’s militant racism coming to embody the pacifist individualism of the hippie, along with its (perhaps less astonishing) apotheosis as Herbie the Love Bug in a Disney movie.

Next he charts the decline of the now-obsolete Beetle as it was withdrawn from the U.S. and German markets in the 1970s and ‘80s. It makes sense, therefore, that chapter 7 takes the story to Mexico, where production of the car in Puebla continued until 2003 and where its users bestowed on it a uniquely Mexican identity with scarcely a hint of its German origins. A final chapter functions as a kind of postscript, divided between the development and sales of the superficially similar New Beetle, developed in Germany in the 1990s specifically for the U.S. market, and accounts of hobbyists and collectors in many countries who obsess over old Beetles.
Rieger is clearly impressed by the Volkswagen company’s leadership and resilience, and in places the book takes on a boosterish tone. However, any apologetics are thoroughly tempered by accounts of the company’s sometimes bitter labor disputes in Germany and Mexico. Nor does Rieger whitewash the firm’s intimate ties to some of the Third Reich’s horrors, notably its eager exploitation of slave labor during World War II. The subtitle’s claim to a “global history” is perhaps a little overstated, but the substantial accounts of Germany, the United States, and Mexico fill out a portrait of a car that was an international success story without any precedent—certainly not its only rival in total production numbers, the very American Ford Model T. There are no startling revelations in Rieger’s story, and his analysis remains cautious and subtle. In view of his topic’s scope, it is no surprise that his research is more broad than deep. He uses some archival material and interviews to supplement his principal reliance on published sources. The writing is reliably clear if neither elegant nor especially concise. Each chapter concludes with a fairly lengthy summary, and a brief epilogue summarizes the story of how a machine developed as a symbol of fierce national identity became a “global icon.”

BRIAN LADD

Brian Ladd is a research associate at the University at Albany (SUNY) and the author of Auto-phobia: Love and Hate in the Automotive Age (2008).

Greening Berlin: The Co-Production of Science, Politics, and Urban Nature.


Jens Lachmund’s Greening Berlin tracks the emergence of urban ecology as a new scientific field in postwar West Berlin, blending urban and environmental studies with STS. He draws on history, sociology, and geography to define cities as “hybrid socio-natural fabrications” (p. 5). His work thus joins other recent studies of urban nature, including Dorothee Brantz and Sonja Dümpelmann’s Greening the City (2011) and Peter Atkins’s Animal Cities (2012). Although we still labor under the nineteenth century’s overdrawn distinction between nature and the artificial city, Lachmund joins a growing chorus calling for loosening this distinction since William Cronon’s 1991 landmark Nature’s Metropolis. Atop this interdisciplinary base, Lachmund’s book stays close to science studies, further developing the spatial turn he took with the 2003 Osiris volume Science and the City. Both that volume and the work under review argue cogently that it matters where science happens. Greening Berlin offers deep reflection on science outside the laboratory for scholars interested in fieldwork and applied science.