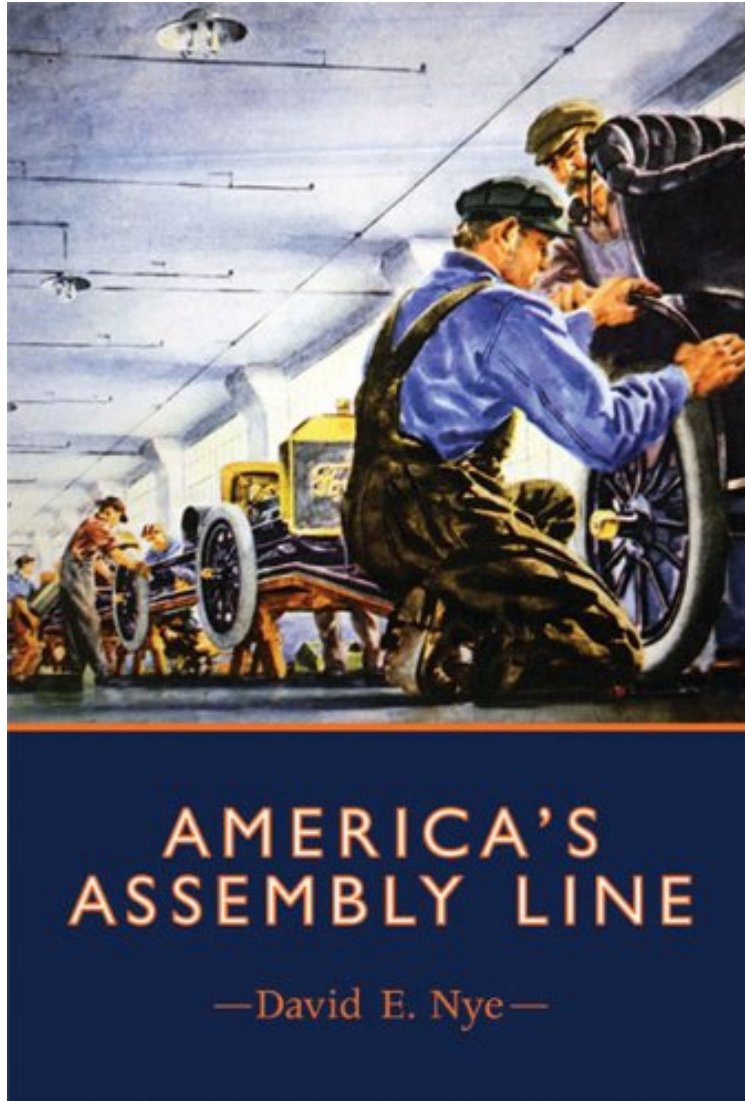


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## America's Assembly Line (MIT Press)

*David E. Nye*

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**David E. Nye : America's Assembly Line (MIT Press)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised America's Assembly Line (MIT Press):

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A Story That Entralls and DisturbsBy Ronald M. JohnsonIn 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. It is the center of an entire cultural system that stretches far beyond the factory gates, including farms, iron and copper mines, rubber plantations, transportation networks, energy systems, steel mills, parts suppliers, the factory itself, banks, repair shops, recycling programs, and landfills." (p. 263) Here Nye functions as both historian and moralist as he concludes a book that recounts a development that has given the global human community so much material progress. Yet, at the same time, it has added to the creating of a possible environmental disaster which could undermine the very economic gains it has provided. This is a book with powerful facts and a clear message. It should be on everyone's must-read list.

0 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars  
By Ronald Thomas  
On time and as described.

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Unhappy but very useful work  
By laurens van den muyzenberg  
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 evolvement since the introduction 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 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 reading the last chapter, 'Centenary', a brilliant description about what modern assembly lines are like to day and the need of 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 point of view became much less heavy by the use 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. It is only a very small part of all the work in the automotive industry. Increasing inequality is a problem but there are many other more important causes than the assembly line. The same is true about the effect of assembly line on unemployment. Maintaining useless tasks cannot solve the unemployment problems. It is also highly desirable that unhealthy work like painting cars is done by robots. One should not forget that many other jobs are very boring and unpleasant too like digging potatoes on your knees in cold and rainy weather of which I have some personal experience. There are also many people that accept doing this undesirable work because it provides them and their family with an income. The author correctly point out that important political leaders like Roosevelt and Obama are glorifying assembly line work. It does have an important impact but the work itself deals with human beings as if they are robots. Overall I liked this book, even though I am still a kind of expert in assembly line development. It does present assembly line work in a broader useful perspective. The author also describes a way in which it can and should be developed to further reduce the negative aspects

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.

To make sense of their twenty-first-century world, people need to understand the profound influence of the twentieth-

century technology known as the assembly line. David Nye's sweeping analysis of the origins and development of 'the line' is the place to start. (Robert Casey, former Senior Curator of Transportation, Henry Ford Museum) It is hard to think of a manufacturing technology that has had a greater economic and social impact than the moving assembly line. In *America's Assembly Line*, David Nye shows us how this new technology emerged, expanded, stalled, and was reinvented, setting in train the age of mass production and consumerism as well as many of the subsequent environmental problems we experience today. Nye's beautifully nuanced and perceptive treatment of the subject indicates why he is one of the most distinguished historians of technology and culture working today. (Merritt Roe Smith, Cullen Professor of the History of Technology, MIT) Crafted with immense erudition, *America's Assembly Line* is a fascinating cultural history, combining extensive archival research and theoretical sophistication. Nye shows how America's growing economy in the twentieth century was powered by the assembly line and how deeply this 'general purpose technology' was intertwined with American culture, from the exuberance of the Rockettes to the dysphoria of the American worker. He offers a lucid, historically informed reading of the problems that beset America today, in a changed global economy that has adapted assembly-line technology to its advantage even as the American worker has been marginalized. (Miles Orvell, Temple University, author of *The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community*) Nye's fascinating book deserves a wide readership. (Howard Segal *Times Higher Education*) Nye's beautifully written interpretation covers so much ground that historians of technology, labor, business, international economics, and American culture will all find it an invaluable resource, offering new reasons to appreciate the hundred-year history of the assembly line. (Amy Sue Bix *American Historical*)

**About the Author** David E. Nye is Professor of American Studies at the Danish Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Southern Denmark. He is the author of *Technology Matters: Questions to Live With* and *When the Lights Went Out: A History of Blackouts in America*, both published by the MIT Press, and other books.