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PROJECT

A Global History of Production

My project, a global history of production since 1900, must seem to be both impossible and unnecessary. Surely, we have more than enough knowledge on the topic, so much indeed that it is impossible to synthesize it in a single volume. To the contrary, I argue that we do indeed believe this, but what we in fact have are trite exemplars of poorly specified theories. These are the vital but unexamined foundations of nearly every social scientific or humanistic account of the twentieth-century world. Examples might include the idea of the second (and to a lesser extent) subsequent industrial revolutions, or the invocation of the concept of Fordism or mass production. These ideas are so common and used with such authority that they seem to explain much, yet they (and others) are empirically and theoretically very deficient ideas. Of particular surprise is that Marxism, the production-based account par excellence, has produced no significant work on production since *Capital*, with the partial but important exception of 1970s and 1980s work on the labour process.

My aim is to make us more modest about our knowledge of production while at the same time increasing it. I want to paint a reasonable empirical picture, which requires archival research, of the main lines of development of production, of the "how" of production in particular. My aim is to sketch the development of agricultural, industrial, and domestic production, aiming to identify the most important trends while capturing the diversity that undoubtedly exists. The picture that emerges is radically different from the received one. For example, the assembly line stands out not because it is at the forefront of a generalised mechanisation (as it is supposed), but rather because it represents a particular element in production that has not been possible to mechanise. The Ford River Rouge assembly line is today much like it was in the 1930s, while the rest of the production system is very different. Assembling a car still needs many human workers; machining an engine, or making steel or plastic, does not. My project is also genuinely global in scope, which in itself transforms our understanding of production. This is not only a means of getting away from very partial Eurocentric stories. Rather, a proper global history will radically change our understanding of the Eurocentre. This is important not least because so many accounts of modernity (with associated accounts of production) assume we know the story of the Eurocentre, but debate whether it is applicable to the rest of the world, with many invoking alternative modernities to modernities that exist only in theory, not in reality.

Recommended Reading

- Edgerton, David. *Warfare State: Britain, 1920–1970*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- . *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900*. London: Profile, 2006. Paperback with a new introduction 2019.
 - . *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History*. London: Penguin, 2019.