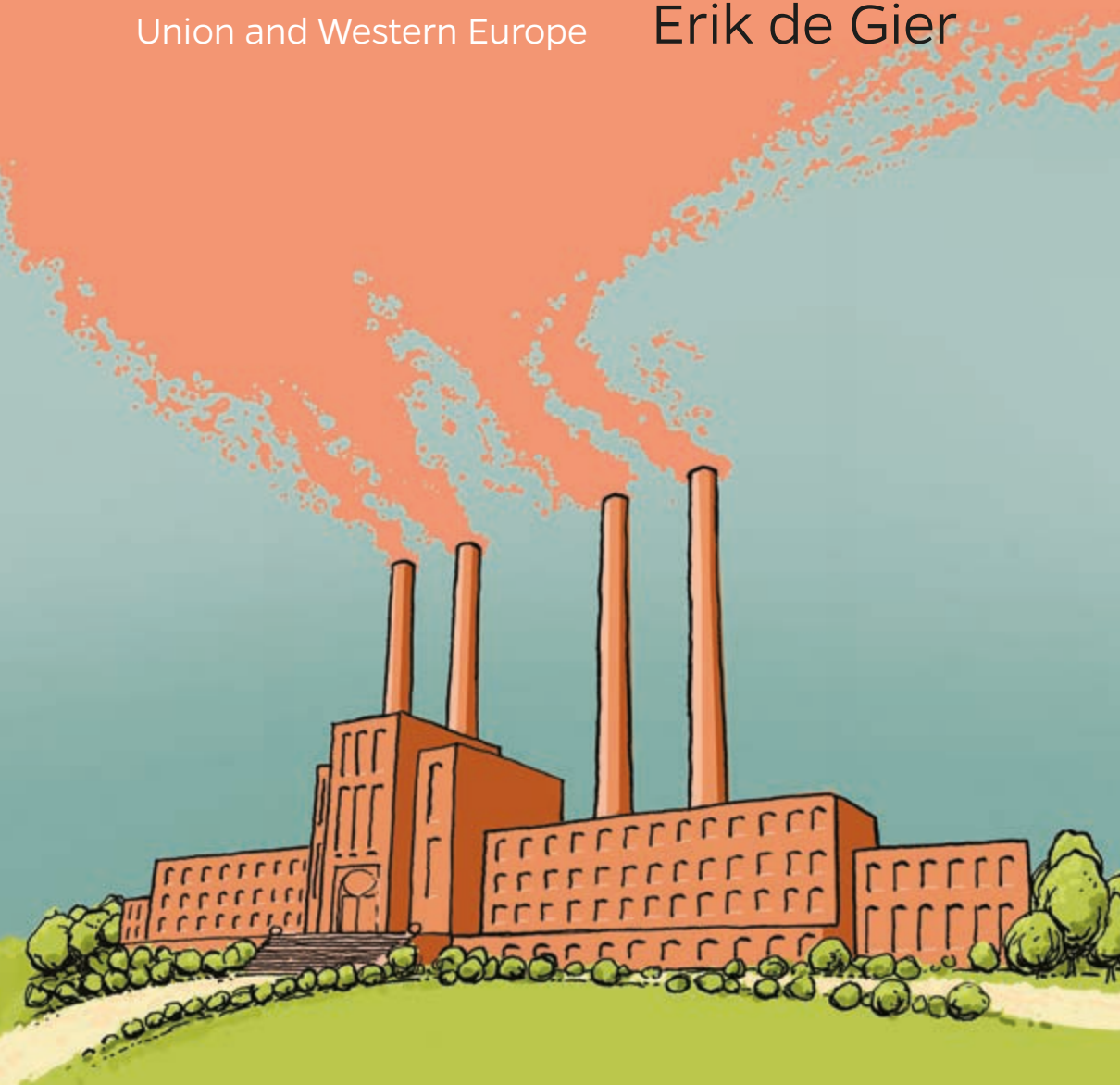


Documentary Industrial Novels and the Sociology of Work in the Twentieth Century

The United States, the Soviet
Union and Western Europe

Erik de Gier



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The industrial novels that will be analysed from each country and time-period all belong to the most characteristic works of their period and country. All were written by established major writers and contain an empirical foundation (whether documentary, statistics, reportage, of personal manual work experience and observation). All in all, the choice of novels may be considered as representative, though not fully exhaustive. From the onset, given the economic dominance of the United States in the 20th century, the concept of the 'American Empire' should not be missed in this study.⁹ To some extent it forms its centrepiece. What is more, the chosen perspective of the Americanization of production processes also co-determined the choice of the other countries in this study, to show the extent of its influence. It is important to realise that Americanization of production by introducing scientific management and Fordist work methods on the shopfloor have been main themes both in the sociology of work and in 20th-century industrial novels.

As Dutch-American-studies expert Rob Kroes has made clear, the Americanization of production processes outside the US (in this case in the Soviet Union and Western Europe) has always involved both rejection and acceptance (Kroes, 1996: ix). Based on the American idea of 'interchangeable parts', industrial products henceforth were 'conceived as a set of components separately produced and separately replaceable'. This phenomenon was going to contribute enormously to the economic wealth of the United States and other countries, but at the same time collided with traditional, non-economic cultural values in both the Soviet Union and Western Europe (Kroes, 1996: 33). For that reason, the outcome of the Americanization of production processes in these areas always involved some 'mediation' of the original concept (Kroes, 1996: 176).

Americanization more specifically had a very strong impact on countries such as the German Weimar Republic in the 1920s, the pre-World War II Soviet Union, and France in the 1930s.¹⁰ Also, a choice for post-World War II Italy is justified because, after initial pre-war initiatives by for example car maker Fiat and type writer company Olivetti, Americanization of production

9 The term *American Empire* is derived from Joshua Freeman's book of the same title (Freeman, 2012).

10 In his book *To Hell and Back* on the history of Europe between 1914 and 1949, British historian Ian Kershaw confirms this with respect to Weimar Germany and France: 'France, like Germany, was among the countries most advanced in adopting in large-scale industry the modern management methods pioneered in the USA by Frederick Winslow Taylor soon after the turn of the century and mass-production techniques introduced into car manufacturing by Henry Ford in 1913' (Kershaw, 2016: 157).

processes in Italy got a further firm footing in the rapidly expanding industry during the economic boom of the 1950s. What makes Italy moreover a very interesting case is the fact that this country may be considered a relative latecomer with respect to extensive corporate welfare work programmes. It is remarkable that the Italian economic boom of the 1950s caused an overwhelming and impressive wave of industrial novels by a large group of authors. Finally, France is also included in this study because this country across time has a long-flourishing tradition of industrial novels that continues to this day.¹¹

In sum, a selection of 20th-century modernist industrial novels written in five industrial countries will be analysed in successive time periods. Both 'content', focused on Americanization of production processes and its consequences for workers, and certain aspects of 'form and style' of the novels will be analysed. By 'form and style' is meant in what way ('how') the respective authors carried out their research as well as how they presented their results (see Table 4 in Chapter 8). It is not my intention to carry out a formal in-depth content analysis of these novels, which encompasses an analysis of the nature and function of their aesthetic dimensions. Rather, the analysis will focus mainly on its content, in particular the consequences of Americanization of production processes for the workers, within the context of the age of the 'American Empire' in the so-called American Century.

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¹¹ The UK is not included separately in this study since its main phase of industrial growth, coinciding with a flourishing of (traditional) industrial novels, had taken place significantly earlier – in the 19th century in the wake of the first industrial revolution. See with respect to this period Williams, 1963: 99–119. As regards the introduction of American production techniques, historically seen, the UK was not in the in the forefront (see footnote 10).

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