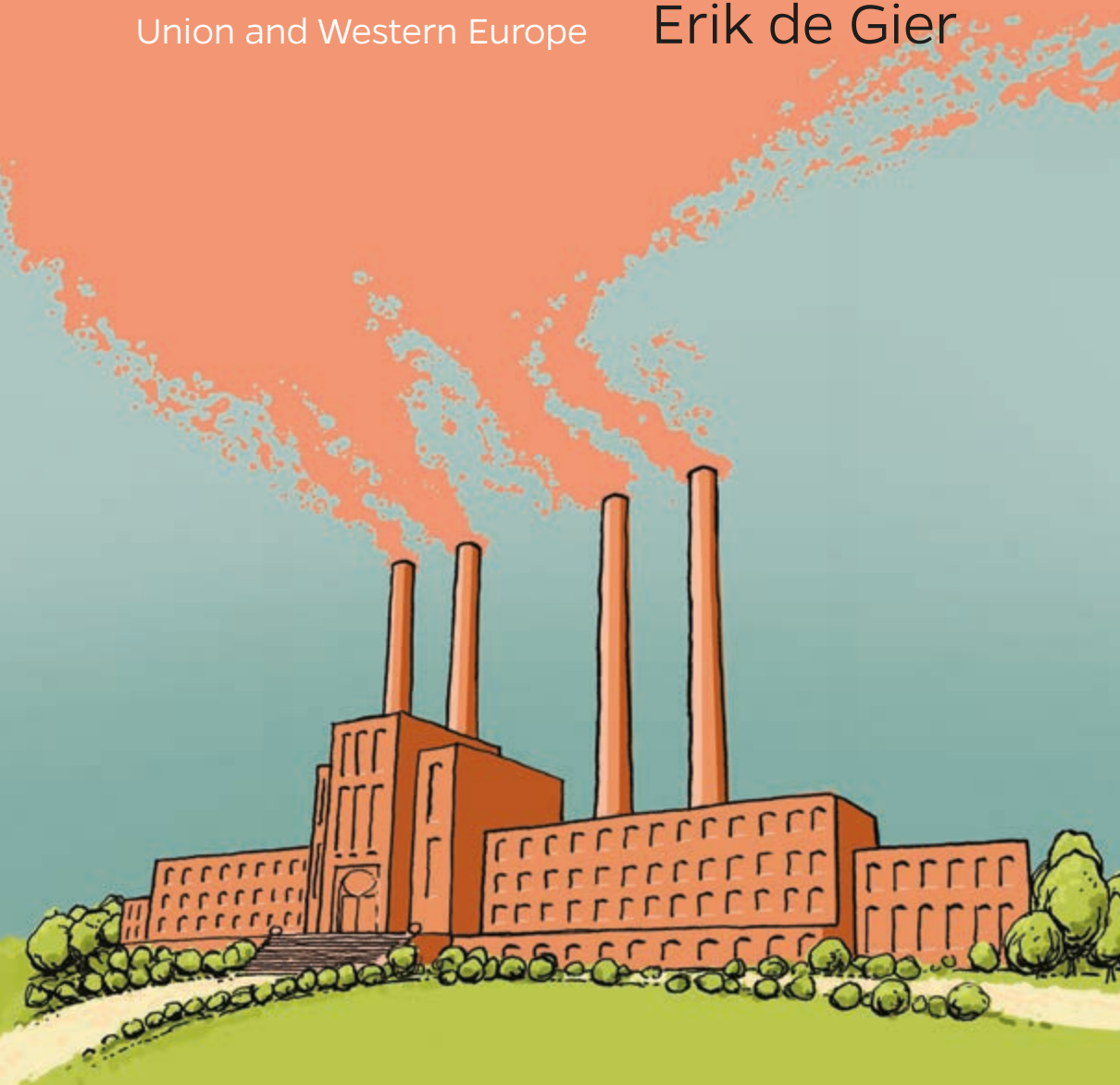


Documentary Industrial Novels and the Sociology of Work in the Twentieth Century

The United States, the Soviet
Union and Western Europe

Erik de Gier



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Preface

The idea for this study was born while writing a book on capitalist workingmen's paradises in different countries in the golden age of capitalism. That book was published in 2016 by Amsterdam University Press (AUP) (De Gier, 2016). In the golden age of capitalism, generally spanning the decades between 1880–1930, major fiction writers also dealt with welfare capitalism in industrial novels in these countries. Well-known examples include Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (first published in 1854) in Great Britain and Émile Zola's *Germinal* (first published in 1885) in France (Dickens, 1854/1993; Zola, 1885/1991). In the same context, it was obvious that the writing of industrial novels continued in modern times, after the turn of the 19th century. In literary writing naturalism was succeeded by realism. In general, this implied more systematic attention by authors to reinforcing the empirical underpinnings of these novels. For this reason, the distinction between realist or modernist industrial novels and academic sociology blurred to some extent. Nevertheless, until today industrial sociology has neglected entirely the twentieth-century industrial novel as a meaningful research source. This book tries to bridge that gap. It is based largely on synthesizing and analysing a significant number of 20th-century modernist industrial novels in five countries. All these novels are based on empirical fundamentals, and will be compared in successive time periods, from about 1900 until today. Any remaining omissions and inaccuracies in the book remain the author's responsibility.

Erik de Gier

The Hague, Spring 2023



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Note on sources

The chapters on the US, Weimar Germany and Italy are partly based on earlier published articles by the author:

De Gier, E. (2018). Modernist industrial novels and industrial sociology: A comparison between Weimar Germany and post-WWII Italy. *Przegląd Socjologiczny/Sociological Review*, 67(3), 179–196. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=718121>

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De Gier, E. (2022). From the good factory toward a new sustainable post-war social order in Italy: The remarkable 'utopian' welfare work policies of Adriano Olivetti and his typewriter company in the 1950s. *Management Revue Socio-Economic Studies*, 33(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0935-9915-2022-1>



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1 Bringing together the fields of sociology and literature: Towards an integration of Modernist industrial novels into industrial sociology¹

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the main research question dealt with in this study: do modernist 20th-century industrial novels have a surplus value for industrial sociology? There are several reasons for affirming this question. During recent decades industrial sociology has lost momentum in academic study, due for example to the increased significance of organizational sociology and the popularity of human resource management. A reevaluation of the historical dimension in industrial sociology could restore this, as well as the application of relevant complementary sources such as realist industrial novels. This book focuses on the possible contribution of 20th-century modernist industrial novels written in the USA, the Soviet Union, and Western Europe in successive time periods in this so-called 'machine age'.

Keywords: 20th-century industrial novels, industrial sociology, alternative social research sources, history of sociology, interdisciplinary international comparative approach.

Introduction

Modernist 20th-century (documentary) industrial novels, partially or completely based on empirical facts and statistical data, constitute a typical 20th-century phenomenon. Before that time, starting with the

¹ In this book the terms 'sociology of work' and 'industrial sociology' have the same meaning and are used interchangeably.

first industrial revolution, a substantial number of industrial novels had already been written in various countries. But with some exceptions, such as Friedrich Engels's non-fictional reportage *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Engels, 1845/1993) and Emile Zola's mineworker novel *Germinal* (Zola, 1885/1991), these were not intentionally based on empirical facts, but were fiction.² One of the most renowned examples of a narrative industrial novel is Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (Dickens, 1854/1993). In this novel Dickens questioned working conditions and labour relations in his fictional 'Coketown' (Manchester). Dickens was not unique. In the middle of the 19th century there were several other renowned British and American authors who published remarkable industrial novels. British literary critic and art historian Raymond Williams summarized a number of these novels in his seminal book *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (Williams, 1958/1963). Williams considered mid-19th-century British authors of industrial novels as expressions of 'industrialism' – a new collective system composed of manufacturing and productive institutions and their general activities. In his view industrial novels such as *Looking Backward* (Bellamy, 1888), *Mary Barton* (Gaskell, 1854/2008), *North and South* (Gaskell, 1854–1855/1996), *Hard Times* (Dickens, 1854/1993), *Sybil* (Disraeli, 1845), *Anton Locke* (Kingsley, 1892/2016), and *Felix Holt* (George Eliot, 1866) 'provide vivid descriptions of life in an unsettled industrial society, but also illustrate certain common assumptions within which direct response was undertaken' (Williams, 1958/1963, pp. 13, 99).

Table 1: 'Traditional' 19th century versus 20th century 'modernist' industrial novels (see footnote 2)

Traditional industrial novels:	Modernist industrial novels:
– 18 th -19 th century	– (20 th century)
– Naturalism	– (Neo-) realism; 'Neue Sachlichkeit'
– Fiction, narrative	– Reportage, documentary, montage, cinematic, memoir
Examples: Dickens (1854), Gaskell (1848), Elliot (1866), Zola (1885)	Examples: see Table 2

2 As a matter of fact, industrial novels are as old as the first English industrial revolution. Only the nature of these novels varied over time. A meaningful formal distinction can be made between 'traditional' industrial novels written in the 18th and 19th centuries and 'modernist' industrial novels written in the 20th century. The earlier ones usually have a more fictional character, whereas the later ones are more often based on documentary facts, statistical data and author's research on site. See also Table 1.



Though still of interest for sociology as a possibly secondary source, the primary significance of the traditional industrial novel lies in its lasting contribution to the literary world. By contrast, modernist documentary industrial novels, just because of their empirical underpinnings, could actually contribute still in a positive way to the *acquis* (main core knowledge) of the sociology of work. Regrettably this has often been ignored by today's industrial sociologists. In particular, the sociology of work is traditionally focused on the collection and practical application of empirical data in behalf of the formulation of practical employment and human-resource policies important for either the workers, the management or both, for example regarding the improvement of working conditions and labour relations on the shop floor or at company level. Enriching the sociology of work with insights from modernist industrial novels could turn industrial sociology into a more multifaceted sociological subdiscipline. From the onset of sociology as an autonomous academic discipline in the 19th century, at several moments in time sociologists have recognized the possible relevance of literature and narrative to their discipline. For example, narrative fiction already played an important role in 19th century Chicago's urban sociology.³ Today in the 21st century a new but (compared to the past) definitely smaller corpus of industrial novels is being written in countries like the United States, Germany and France.⁴ Compared to the 20th century, the socio-economic context in the 21st century has changed dramatically. Instead of the long-lasting increase and growth of modern industry in the 19th and 20th centuries, the 21st century is characterized by the downturn of traditional industry in the developed, post-industrial economies and the rise of a non-industrial service economy.

This book attempts to enrich industrial sociology as an academic discipline, making it into a more widely conceived sociological subdiscipline by linking it more explicitly with relevant observations in 20th century modernist industrial novels. Therefore, a selective but deliberate sample of both illustrative as well as illustrious industrial novels will be analysed from a sociological viewpoint. This exercise may also be considered an attempt to complement the more usual methodology employed in the sociology of work.

Industrial sociology as a separate subdiscipline of sociology developed first in the United States in the context of the process of industrialization

3 Think in this respect of Park, Thomas, Burgess, Wirth, Zianecki and Veblen (Abbott, 1999; Fine, 1995).

4 In Chapter 7, on France, I will pay attention to one of these novels published after 2000 (Ponthus, 2019).



in the 20th century. Among its milestones were the Hawthorne studies by Elton Mayo in the 1930s focused on analysing human relations on the shop floor (Mayo, 1933; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). Thereafter, industrial sociology got a footing also in European countries such as the UK, Germany and France, often adapted to national economic and social circumstances. However, from the 1970s onwards industrial sociology got into a critical situation caused by structural societal changes with respect to work and labour (Dahrendorf, 1967; Schmidt, 1974; Düll, 1975). First, the subdiscipline was overhauled by another, the sociology of organizations (Burawoy, 1979). Then subsequently, another competitive discipline (not strictly sociological), human resource management, emerged in the academic field. At the same time the historical dimension of industrial sociology became less pronounced and moved to a secondary position. Only recently have pleas emerged for an 'updating' ('contemporarization') of industrial sociology from a historical perspective (Lallement, 2007). It is in this context that a sturdier coupling of industrial sociology and industrial novels in a longitudinal time perspective becomes particularly interesting.

As it is already being debated vigorously among academic historians, good historical research need not be strictly limited to the usual research sources of a discipline. It can gain a substantial new significance by more extensively utilizing other relevant sources, such as novels, photography, film, paintings, and even material artefacts (machines, factory buildings, products, and so on) (Schlögel, 2017).⁵ Industrial sociology could benefit equally from this approach. By combining it with knowledge from, in this case, documentary industrial novels, the 'sociological imagination' of the discipline could improve substantially. Both industrial sociologists and authors of modernist industrial novels aimed to come as close as possible to the subjective perceptions of workers (the world of life and work), but in general it is assumed here that authors of modernist industrial novels have been more successful in this. I will return to this point in the concluding Chapter 8 by briefly comparing the industrial novels considered in this book and some important examples of industrial sociological research in which the researcher(s) not only applied formal social research methods but, like the majority of the novelists discussed, also worked for a time as workers or managers in the factories described (Roy in 1946, cit. in: Burawoy, 1979; Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979; Snyder, 2016).

5 See also Smith, 1993. Smith chronicled the making of the modern in the United States between the world wars by coupling developments in industry, work processes, art, and design.

The florescence of the modernist documentary industrial novel as a distinct literary sub-genre of social novels in the United States, Europe and the Soviet Union coincided with the rise of welfare work capitalism and the so-called ‘Americanization’ of production processes in many industrializing countries in the first half of the 20th century (De Gier, 2016). This is the period of the second industrial revolution, also called the ‘machine age’, which started in the United States by the end of the 19th century. After the turn of the century, it spread rapidly across European countries, first and foremost to Germany, the UK, France, and then also to the communist Soviet Union, and after World War II again to France as well as to Italy. Its main characteristic was the rise of mass-production and, related to this, mass-consumption. The resulting Americanization of production processes is also often indicated as ‘Taylorism’ and ‘Fordism’. Fordism was above all: ‘a productive system of incessantly self-refining functionality in which nothing was original except the system itself, in particular its capacity to redefine, simplify, and proliferate – that is to make new – its own parts’ (Smith, 1993: p. 15).

In several European countries, the United States, and the Soviet Union, industrial or factory novels based on empirical observations, and sometimes also statistical data, were written between 1900 and the 1970s. Because these books are not exclusively fictional but also based on empirical facts, I will call them from a sociological viewpoint ‘modernist’. Altogether these novels belong to the literary genre of realist or neo-realist novels, which became an important literary genre for a while in various industrial countries before World War II and in the period 1945–1970s respectively. One of the more specific forms it took in the 1920s and 1930s in Weimar Germany, the United States, and the Soviet Union is ‘reportage’. This was a literary form that is perhaps closer to research journalism or cinema than to literature. On the other hand, reportage has a lot of similarities with academic social research.

The period 1900–1970s was a very turbulent time in the history of industrial capitalism. Not only did humanity endure two world wars, but it saw the rise of communism and fascism, sustainable strong economic growth after 1945 as well as the very serious economic slump of the 1930s (the Great Depression). In industry Americanization was aimed at increasing mass production as well as mass consumption (Freeman, 2019; Maier, 1970; Maier, 1975/2016; Kershaw, 2016; Kershaw, 2018; Judd, 2005). It is in particular this more specific background that influenced the writing of modernist industrial novels in various countries. It also determined to a large extent the nature and content of these novels. Important themes that emerge in them include:

class conflict, bad working and living conditions, worker alienation, job satisfaction, worker participation, changing employee cultures, urbanization, and the migration of workers. The primary goal of these novels was to document and make public the developments of working conditions in factories and offices, often with a deliberate intention to influence in a positive way companies' welfare provisions for their workers as well as state social and labour policies. Also, they often intentionally tried to contribute to the emancipation of the working class and were therefore written with that aim in mind.

Although in principle this commitment conflicts with the ideal of viewpoint neutrality meant to characterize academic work, the difference from academic sociology is not always that great. After all, industrial sociology is not particularly neutral. It has turned out to a large extent as a mixture of management-oriented or worker-oriented sociology.

This study focuses on modernist 20th-century industrial novels written in five major industrial nations in several time periods. These are pre-World War II United States and Soviet Union, Weimar Germany, and post-World War II Italy and France. The choice for the United States and the USSR is determined by the fact that these countries represented two fundamentally opposing ideological blocks (capitalism and communism). This caused different, but in both cases interesting types of industrial novels.⁶ It is important to keep in mind that despite particular striking methodological similarities, Soviet industrial novels differ principally from capitalist ones in that they were to a large extent a top-down expression of 'socialist realism' aimed at glorifying the Soviet worker and Soviet labour.

By contrast, industrial novels written in the pre-World War II United States, Weimar Germany, and post-World War II Italy and France, despite some significant differences, had a lot in common. In these countries the *Neue Sachlichkeit* or 'New Objectivity' style originating from Weimar Germany determined to a large extent the documentary approach of the modernist industrial novel.

Table 2 briefly summarizes the works that will be analysed in this book.

6 Called 'production novels' in the Soviet Union.



Table 2: Modernist industrial novels in the United States, The Soviet Union, Weimar Germany, Italy and France in the 20th century

USA	Soviet Union	Weimar Germany	Post-WWII Italy	Pre-WWII resp. Post-WWII France
1900-1935	1920-1935	1918-1933	1950-1989	1935-1940 1945-2019
Upton Sinclair: – <i>The Jungle</i> (1906) – <i>King Coal</i> (1917)– <i>The Coal War</i> (1976) – <i>The Flivver King</i> (1937)	Alexei Gastev: – <i>Poetry of the Factory Floor</i> Maxim Gorky – writer brigades Yevgeny Zamyatin: – <i>We</i> (1924) Fyodor V. Gladkov: – <i>Cement</i> (1925) Ilja Ehrenburg: – <i>The life of the automobile</i> (1929) Valentin Kataev: – <i>Time Forward!</i> (1933) John Scott: – <i>Behind the Urals</i> (1942)	Egon E. Kisch: – <i>Der rasende Reporter</i> (1925) Franz Jung: – <i>Gequältes Volk</i> (1927) Siegfried Kracauer: – <i>Die Angestellten</i> (1930) Willi Bredel: – <i>Maschinenfabrik N&K</i> (1931) Erik Reger: – <i>Union der Festen Hand</i> (1931)	Ottiero Ottieri: – <i>Tempi Stretti</i> (1957) – <i>Donnaruma all'asalto</i> (1959) – <i>La linea Gotica</i> (1963) Paolo Volponi: – <i>Memoriale</i> (1962) – <i>Corporale</i> (1974) – <i>Le mosche del capitale</i> (1989)	Georges Navel: – <i>Travaux</i> (1945) Simone Weil: – <i>La condition ouvrière</i> (1951) Claire Etcherelli: – <i>Élise ou la vraie vie</i> (1967) Robert Linhart' – <i>L'Établi</i> (1978) Leslie Kaplan: – <i>L'excès-l'usine</i> (1968) François Bon: – <i>Sortie d'usine</i> (1982) Joseph Pontus: – <i>À la ligne</i> (2019)

Methodological considerations

The principal question this book tries to answer is to what extent do, or could, 20th-century modernist industrial novels based on empirical observations and documentary sources contribute to industrial sociology and its practical applications? Should the formal boundaries between these novels and mainstream sociology of work be blurred in order to further enable this?

If we take Schlögel's argument seriously, alternative research sources for historical study have become increasingly important. His argument may also apply to the sociology of work. If so, 20th-century Modernist industrial

novels are certainly a relevant research source for the sociology of work, as either a primary or a secondary source (Schlögel, 2017).

Apart from this, John Jackson discerned four areas in which sociology and literature could be complementary (Jackson, 1969). First, literature could fulfil the function of general documentation for the sociologist. Second, the sociologist, by drawing illustrations from literature, could underline a particular period included in sociological analysis. Third, by analysing intrinsically a literary work a sociologist could consider such a literary work as the given subject of his research. And fourth, according to the famous Thomas-theorem ('If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'), the interpretation of social action requires from the sociologist some understanding of the *Weltanschauung* of the writer (Thomas & Thomas 1928: pp. 571-572).

More recently, Alberto Penadés contended that literature generally may contribute to the social sciences in three different ways: first, by observations of otherwise unknown data; second, by interpretation (through specific examples) of how certain social mechanisms function; and finally, by exploring alternatives to the current reality. In his view, literature potentially making this contribution not only encompasses literary fiction in a narrow sense but also science fiction and detective fiction. For example, by combining imagination, logic and empirical contrasts, Conan Doyle's stories of Sherlock Holmes contain at least 12 significant lessons for social scientists, such as the capacity to reason backwards (or 'backward induction') in addition to induction and deduction (Penadés, 2019; see also Bradbury 1969). As such, literature could even serve as a primary source for social research.

Reasoning the other way around – that is, starting from a sociological-historical viewpoint – added sociological value in the case of Modernist industrial novels will be realized more properly if these novels are considered and analysed in the specific time periods and proper socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts in which these are set. In the case of American industrial novels written in the first part of the 20th century, such as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* (both discussed in this book), the relevant historical context is the so-called 'Progressive Era' between around 1900 and 1923 as well as the subsequent 'New Deal' period between 1933 and 1941. Apart from being a time of impressive social and cultural change and reform in the United States, the broad period from 1900 to 1940 encompassed a period of increasing wealth and consumption never experienced before in American history until the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. As a result, the traditional small-town culture based on traditional family values – still dominant in the preceding Gilded Age

– was almost entirely replaced by a more cosmopolitan individualistic materialist culture.⁷ In the United States, as well as in other industrializing and industrialized countries, industrial novels contributed, sometimes significantly, to the introduction of social labour and welfare work policies by industrial companies and states. They also contributed to the legal regulation of businesses (such as anti-monopoly legislation, known in the United States as anti-trust laws) and the emancipation of workers by giving them a voice. This was for example explicitly the case in post-World War II Italy. In that country major authors like Italo Calvino, Elio Vittorini and Paolo Volponi gave workers their own voice for the first time in Italian literature – until the post-war economic boom the real workman’s voice was almost entirely absent in Italian literature (De Gier, 2018). The Italian Communist Party (PCI) played a significant background role in pushing forward this development. Both Calvino and Volponi had been active members of the Partito Comunista Italiano, and Volponi even became a senator for this party in the Italian parliament.⁸

Contextualizing modernist industrial novels in the specific times and places in which they were written is crucial for being able to assess their surplus-value for the sociology of work. In this book this will be done in several explanatory layers. First, the context and development of welfare work will be described briefly. According to Brandes ‘welfare work’, was defined in 1916 by the American government as: ‘anything for the comfort and improvement, intellectual and social, of the employees, over and above wages paid, which is not a necessity of the industry nor required by law’ (Brandes, 1957: 5). The discussion of welfare work will be followed by a description of the dominant economic process at the corporate level in the 20th century until the 1970s in the five countries being studied. This process can be summarized in two significant terms that are common to all of them: the Americanization of production processes, and mass consumption. *Americanization* refers to the introduction of scientific management and Fordist production methods in industry and services, first in the United States and soon thereafter adopted widely in European industrial countries and the Soviet Union. The contextualizing will become more specific and in-depth subsequently, when analysing the case studies of each country.

7 By 1925 the majority of Americans had at their disposal hot and cold running water, flush toilets, furnaces, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, washing machines, telephones, cars, and so on (Pastorello, 2014: 193). See also Lynd & Lynd, 1929; Lynd & Lynd, 1937.

8 Calvino left the party after a few years.



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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