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Volkswagen and Volkswagen: The Concept, the Car and the Company in Four Germanies and the United States

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Volkswagen and Volkswagen: The Concept, the Car and the Company in Four Germanies and the United States

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

by

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Bachelor of Arts in History, 2013

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Abstract

This thesis explores the changing cultural meanings that the Volkswagen took in Germany in an attempt to understand the cultural exchange between the United States and Germany. In sum, it establishes that the car takes a distinct cultural form in the two countries governed by unique and particular historical developments. Over the last decade researchers working with car cultures have realized the long standing error of taking American values associated with the car as a normative marker of global car cultures, yet no one has suggested a working methodology to ensure that non-normative meanings are captured in analysis. I suggest that this problem arises from studying single aspects of the car in isolation. The methodology that I propose looks at design, production, marketing, and consumption as a system where meaning can be produced, interpreted, and reassigned at the various stages. This wider approach allows for a non-normative analysis of car culture. This helps to demonstrate how the development of the car culture becomes more distinct through transatlantic interaction. I propose that the incursion of culturally significant foreign products causes shifts and redefinitions in the domestic market making the product a way to evaluate one's own identity.

The present work plots these various identities to capture the large trajectories of German car culture. I challenge the notion that there were necessarily different cultures of production and consumption in the United States and Germany which could explain the divergence in the two nation's car's cultures. When discussing the Weimar Republic I highlight Germany's interest in motorization *visa-vie* developments in the United States. The section on the Third Reich places the creation of a Volkswagen as a lynchpin for the Nazi's entire ultranationalistic modernization policy which carried meanings of their particular vision of racial community. The post-war section identifies the ways that the Federal Republic reinterpreted the Volkswagen

making it a symbol of the economic miracle of the 1950s, and ultimately, a way to contrast the republic with the Nazis era and win international validation.

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I. Introduction and Methods and Guiding Questions: The Volkswagen Beetle and Cultural Duality

When considering the history of the automobile in America, very few cars have endured and imprinted themselves so firmly into the cultural tapestry that subsequent generations can identify them on the road at a glance. If the category is refined to imports, the Volkswagen Beetle stands alone. The reception of the small German car in America was surprisingly warm despite the contrasts that it represented with the large monuments in metal that poured out from Detroit. The VW was largely praised, often tongue-in-cheek, for its build quality and the driving sensation that it produced.¹ Much in the way that modernist artists attempt to reduce a landscape to its base elements, the VW was, in its combination of form and function, high art brought down to the man on the street: Bauhaus for the blue collar, a Neoclassical antidote to the Rococo chaos of big tailfins and afterburner taillights.² With its distinctive shape the Beetle stood out in America's automotive landscape, but in 1960 one in three cars on the road in Germany were a Volkswagen, making it the defining element in Germany's automotive landscape. Thus, in Germany, the Volkswagen Mk 1 Sedan, only later and begrudgingly dubbed 'the Beetle,' was just "the car," an aspect that Volkswagen later chose to highlight when the company adopted the corporate motto, "Das Auto."³ With such diversity in context, when the first Beetle rolled into

¹ Floyd Clymer, "Report on Foreign Cars," *Popular Mechanics* Vol. 97 No.3 March 1952, 106-110, 288.

² "Machine gun Rococo" was taken from a description of Tom Wolfe's story concerning California youth in the early 60s as described in Daniel Horowitz, *Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Postwar World*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 283. Tom Wolfe, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, (New York: New York Herald Tribune 1963).

³ "VW's New Tag Line: 'Das Auto'" *Motor Authority Magazine* Oct. 2007. http://www.motorauthority.com/news/1026205_vws-new-tagline-das-auto

the Hoffman Motor Car showroom in New York City in 1950, Americans and Germans encountered principally different things.⁴

Recent works on the Beetle highlight how the Beetle was imprinted with a multiplicity of meanings because German national reference points were drowned out by the foreign contexts, that is, the Beetle was viewed as a cultural *tabula rasa*.⁵ In outlining his predominately American account, Phil Patton says it most succinctly: “the Bug suggests that designs, images, and ideas do not remain identified with the cultures that create them.”⁶ Through statements like these historians have denied that there is anything inherently German about the small car, or that if there is, that the presence of the Germaness goes unfelt. These conclusions fit with other studies which look at how cultural *adaptation* of consumer goods better describes how multinational consumer goods appear and function in foreign cultures.⁷ To the degree that the Beetle was permitted to thrive in other cultural contexts, most notably in the United States and Mexico, this judgment carries some weight; Americans bought German cars for American reasons. This realization, combined with the success of the Beetle, has help historians

⁴ Paul Ingrassia, *Engines of Change: The History of the American Dream in Fifteen Cars*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012) 94; Bernhard Rieger, *The People's Car: A Global History of the Volkswagen Beetle*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) 232.

⁵ Phil Patton, *Bug; The Strange Mutations of the World's Most Famous Automobile* (New York: Da Capo Press 2002). Andrea Hiott, *Thinking Small: The Long Strange Trip of the Volkswagen Beetle* (New York, Ballantine Books, 2012); Rieger, *The People's Car*.

⁶ Patton, *Bug*, 6; Patton's emphasis on the Mexican experiences with the Beetle govern this conclusion, since, even more than in Germany, it is fair to say that the Beetle was foundational to the development of Mexican car culture.

⁷ This is the position that helps undermine the concept of Americanization developed by Rob Kroes. Rob Kroes, "American Mass Culture and European Youth Culture," in Axel Schildt and Detlef Siegfried eds. *Between Marx and Coca-Cola: Youth Cultures in Changing European Societies, 1960-1980* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006) 82-108.

problematized earlier explanations concerning the processes of cultural transformations, such as Americanization.⁸

Indeed the concept of Americanization has not fared well in recent years. While partial to its descriptive functions Konrad Jarausch criticizes the term for being imprecise and overtly political.⁹ To help with the imprecision of the term Kasper Masse divided the concept into five forms of Americanization; however, these categories hardly address all of the economic, political, and cultural dimensions for which the concept is routinely employed.¹⁰ Rob Kroes believes that analysis based on Americanization inevitably “reduces the complex processes of cultural influence, of borrowing, imitation, and reception, to a stark binary form of a zero-sum game.” Moving from a theoretical construct to a constructivist account, Christoph Hendrik Müller notes that in the post-war Americanization was simply the way to complain about modernization in general.¹¹

Yet, as the concept of Americanization fails to capture the cultural transformation of Germany in the 1950s historians have struggled to present an alternative concept that can fill the explanatory void. The concept of Westernization, proposed by Anselm Döring-Manteuffel, suffers from the same normative functions as Americanization but is writ large through the analytic paradigm of the “Ideas of 1789,” effectively importing all of the normative issues associated with the *Sonderweg Thesis*.¹² Moreover, as Konrad Jarausch notes, Westernization’s

⁸ Uta G. Poiger. *Jazz, Rock and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany*, (Berkeley, University of California, 2000) 3-6.

⁹ Konrad Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 104.

¹⁰ Christoph Hendrik Müller, *West Germans Against the West: Anti-Americanism in Media and Public Opinion in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1949-68*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillian 2010), 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

“content continues to refer primarily to American influences.”¹³ The same problems occur in the literature that reverses the paradigm to find narratives of Europeanization.¹⁴ Alternatively, as much as one can distill a process of Globalization it only seems to point to the increasing interconnectivity of the world without offering much explanation on the causality of cultural transformation at such nexuses. The issues with the analytic properties of Americanization and the subsequent variants go beyond the term’s imprecision, its reductive nature, or its overly simplistic assertions. However historians configure the terms, Americanization, Westernization, Europeanization all share the same conceptual features based on concepts of hegemonic pressure, normative trajectories, and attempts to foreground external cultural patterns in necessarily foreign cultural contexts.

Thus, the rejection of Americanization seems well warranted and would also seem to suggest a dismissal of the competing sibling theories of Westernization and Europeanization. But analytics that problematized these concepts sow the seeds for wider destruction. The inherent danger in all of these attacks is a way to talk about cultural change more generally. Kroes’ concern about the reductive nature of Americanization simply acknowledges the gulf that always exists between generalized phenomenon that theories attempt to explain and the specific examples that historical inquiry aims to reveal. Losing the distinction between Americanization and Westernization is meant to centralize political culture, yet it also undermines geographic boundaries, not only by moving from the specific to the general, i.e. America to “the West,” but also by using the ideology of the French Revolution that would be experienced differently within national cultural contexts. Although Europeanization lack a clear conceptual framework, it too homogenizes all of Europe into a single mass which only seems appropriate when discussing the

¹³ Jarausch, *After Hitler*, 104.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

political integration of the continent into the European Union. The goal of such strategies seems to be to further distance the theory from the category of study in order to blur the distinctive elements in an effort to make the theory fit the evidence. Thus, Americanization is much like a mirage, depending on the distance of the analysis Americanization may appear real but on closer inspection of specifics and details, the evidence sublimates.

The present work attempts to place the Volkswagen into the conversation concerning cultural transformation caused by the transatlantic exchange of products. The small car is instructive to this conversation because of the diverse meanings that the car took in the two national settings which provide enough contrast to show transformations centered on the single product. Yet without the sufficient contextualization the Volkswagen story may be misinterpreted as an Americanization narrative. Yet when taken in the *longue durée* the two distinct car cultures demonstrate a two way traffic that informs rather than blurs distinctions. This cultural engagement began with Germany's fascination with American life, methods of production and the Model T, soon afterwards American automotive firms put subsidiaries in Germany. The automobile's cultural meaning became ever more important in the Third Reich as the promise of a people's car forged a crucial linchpin for the Nazis' entire modernization policy. In the post-war period German car culture had to negotiate the meanings that Hitler had ascribed to the automobile while also avoiding losing the particular German-ness of their heritage. In the process of these trajectories two powerful scripts were written and reinforced, where the United States became predominately a car culture centered on consumption and Germany became a nation of car producers. Production and consumption were integrated in ways that reinforce this dichotomy. The United States automotive production favored Sloanism which implemented strategies of planned obsolescence and the creation of cultural need from the product itself,

making consumption a central part of production.¹⁵ Conversely marketing and consumption in Germany was often based on what took place in the factory.¹⁶

A. An Academic Road Trip: Exploring the Nation through the Car

The study of car cultures has made few assertions concerning cultural transformation in the face of international exchange largely because of the limited way that cars enter academic conversations. Many authors never take the car out of the factory, instead looking only to what Patton calls the “metal life” of the car.¹⁷ Yet, the metal life of the car gives rise to the “mental life” of the car, where its specific materiality transcends its function and its aesthetics. Mimi Sheller notes, “the car materializes personality and takes part in the ego-formation of the owner or driver as competent, powerful, able and sexually desirable (Sheller’s particular interest).”¹⁸ Importantly, she suggests that “the individual psychological investment in the car can be said to arise out of the sensibility of an entire car culture.”¹⁹ The Beetle, therefore, fits within the suggestion of Bauhaus and Neoclassical not simply because of how it deals with the principles of design; rather because it is able to communicate complex messages that its users were able to intuit within the user’s own cultural context.

Along these lines, historians have begun to access the “mental life” of the automobile, albeit from serialized narrow vantage points which, in synthesis, become a presentation of chalk dust and not what was written with the chalk. What is needed is a more extensive approach to the automobile; one that understands car culture as a system that moves and is moved by the

¹⁵ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1992) 244.

¹⁶ Volkswagen Advertisement, “Wenn Sie den VW nicht sehen.” *Der Spiegel* no 1. January 8, 1964, 71.

¹⁷ I am borrowing from Patton the distinction of the “metal life” and “mental life,” “The Bug’s mental life far exceeds its metal one.” Patton, *Bug*, 2.

¹⁸ Mimi Sheller, “Automotive Emotions: Feeling the Car,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 21 no. 4-5 (2004) pp. 221-242, 225.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

outside world. Products that become cultural artifacts are created and recreated through several distinguishable phases: design, production, marketing, and consumption, and at each phase designers, marketers, and consumers create, interpret and adjust meaning in an attempt to connect with the public.

Through the differences in aesthetics, everyday experiences and materiality, Tim O'Dell, Rudy Koshar, Tim Edensor, and Mimi Sheller suggest that car cultures are national phenomenon where meaning helps to constitute geographical boundaries.²⁰ Yet no one has considered how these nationally contained car cultures may be the product of production since the operating policy of most car manufacturers in the first half of the twentieth century was one that created cars for specific national markets. The Volkswagen was one of the first cars to successfully question this practice making a single model for the entire world. Nevertheless, the transatlantic Volkswagen story pivots on changing definitions of national meaning; specifically, of what it means to be German and what it means to be American. The Volkswagen Beetle was conceived in a moment of German existential crisis during the Weimar Republic, where American ways of life aroused fear and fascination.²¹ Commissioned by Hitler in a tragicomic misreading of American culture, the car was designed to be uniquely German, where uniquely German simply meant not American.²² The Nazis envisioned building the small car with the American manufacturing system in a factory set on a clearing near Fallersleben that was modeled on Ford's

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

²¹ K. B. Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, (Cambridge MA: Robert Bentley Inc. 1971) 36-8. Karl Ludvigsen, *Battle for the Beetle: The Untold Story of the Post-War Battle for Adolf Hitler's giant Volkswagen Factory and the Porsche—designed Car that became an Icon for Generations around the Globe*, (Cambridge MA: Bentley 2000.) 2-6. Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity, American Business and the Modernization of Germany*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 3-6, 36-49. James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age*, (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press 1992) 113.

²² Ludvigsen, *Battle for the Beetle*, 15. Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 74. Hoitt, *Thinking Small*, 59. Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 262.

River Rouge plant; yet, it was intended to become the heart of a new utopian city of work that would dwarf Detroit.²³

After the war, the plant fell under the management of Dr. Heinrich Nordhoff, a German businessman who not only spent time in the United States learning American business practices but also worked as a manager for Opel in the late 1920s, which was General Motors' German subsidiary.²⁴ In the first years of production Germans were encouraged to buy the Volkswagen based on its strong sales in America which they took as a crucial endorsement. In 1959 the American advertising agency Doyle, Dane, and Bernbach (DDB) accepted the task of marketing the car in the United States and Germany.²⁵ DDB sold the little car to Americans as an example of German quality and craftsmanship which later morphed into the marketing notion of German engineering.²⁶ When the Beetle was sent to the United States, it arrived with modest hopes. Despite this, North America soon became the company's most important market.²⁷ Even though the United States received this honor many commentators then and now identify the Beetle as a "symbol of the new Germany."²⁸ Despite this intricate international exchange, the Volkswagen never lost its German identity either in the United States or in Germany. The Beetle is able to reveal so much about both the United States and Germany largely due to the historical happenstance of its development.

In addition to the natural experiment of having the same car on both sides to the Atlantic, the Beetle also straddles other important boundaries. Manufacturing and selling a car in the 1950s that was designed in the 1930s and leaving that design largely unaltered until end of

²³ Hoitt, *Thinking Small*, 127-41; Ludvigsen, *Battle for the Beetle*, 31, 35-38.

²⁴ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 108.

²⁵ Hoitt, *Thinking Small*, 359.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 366.

²⁷ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 198-201.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

production in 1978 makes the Beetle a temporal experiment in continuity. This unique stability in design marks the Beetle with the vestiges of an industrial model of production and consumption which, in the post-war trans-Atlantic world community, the Beetle was thrust into a largely post-industrial world. The success of an industrial model of production that sharply contrasts the business practices of Detroit (Sloanism) complicates many explanations for the Beetle's success since it sold well in demographics that could afford bigger cars, more powerful cars, more luxurious cars and/or cars with higher technological elements.²⁹

All commuter vehicles span the space between the public and private spheres by containing elements of both: the public exterior and the private interior, the public road and the private garage or driveway. Some authors have commented on how the car crosses the worlds of work and leisure as well.³⁰ The Beetle also spans categories of class and gender. In the United States and Germany, the car attracted working class and lower income middle class families, but, particularly in the United States, its affordability made it desirable for upper middle class families seeking to become multiple car households, and in the United States, the simple and underpowered Beetle was marketed to be the perfect 'wife's car.'³¹ In Germany, the Beetle remained more of a masculine component in a consumer culture that veered towards the feminine.³² Many have noted that product design, automotive or otherwise, mediates between culture and technology. This is a problematic definition as cultures and technologies do not divide so easily.³³ The Beetle's popularity in the United States seems to draw out this point,

²⁹ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 204-6

³⁰ Jürgen Habermas, "Auto Fahren: Der Mensch am Linksrad." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 27, 1954.

³¹ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 201.

³² *Ibid.*, 168.

³³ Jeffery L. Meikle, "Ghosts in the Machine: Why it is Hard to Write about Design," *Technology and Culture*, 46 no. 2 2005 385-92.

since its technological features (which are not as insignificant as is often presumed) are nearly universally overshadowed by its “cute” emotional appeal.³⁴

B. Design and Production

While the automobile is one of the more durable cultural and technological forms, the Beetle’s cultural duality (or, more aptly, multiplicity) reveals how the automobile represents a culturally contested space, and how the automobile sits within a wider cultural context. Car culture is a composite image of the role of automobility in a society which draws on the political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual functions of the automobile within a designated community. It is the ways in which automobiles are designed, manufactured, discussed, bought, sold, and experienced. This impression is furthered by Bernhard Rieger when he expounds that, “automobiles can be seen as physical manifestations of abstract notions ranging from, among others, ‘speed’ and ‘freedom’ to ‘unconventionality’ and ‘wealth.’”³⁵

During almost half a century of relative and often self-imposed isolation, car culture in Germany and the United States developed on separate trajectories. Until the Beetle disproved the theory, car manufacturers operated on the assumption that American and European cars were not directly exportable for mass consumption, and in course, the only market utilized for exportation were those machines suitable for the high-end luxury consumer. Of course the politics of two World Wars tended to limit the number of commuter vehicles exchanged across the Atlantic. Beyond the wars, it is possible to sketch some of the material causes and effects of this divergence in culture. After the war, direct exchange was hampered by protective tariffs in Europe that targeted specific features of American automobiles. The favorite example of this principle for automotive historians was the “horsepower tax” which Germany introduced in

³⁴ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 6.

³⁵ Rieger, *The People’s Car*, 6.

1906, with many major car producing nations following Germany's example.³⁶ The "horsepower tax" was not actually a tax on the power that the engine made, rather on the displacement size of the engine. This pushed engine development in Europe towards the goal of making more horsepower with a smaller displacement, giving European motors the general characteristics of lower torque and higher revving engines when compared to their American counterparts. The smaller engines encouraged lighter construction so the deficit in torque would be less noticeable. In turn, the lighter cars were made nimble through chassis and suspension developments. Some authors have pointed to geographic reasons that aid this development, commenting on how early European roads were rougher and windier and how the automobile was shoehorned into the already cramped infrastructure of European cities.³⁷ The basic economic gulf between depression in continental Europe and boom in the United States during the formative years of the 1920s also cannot be ignored as an important factor in the asymmetry between the two systems. These developments, coupled with conscious efforts to cultivate national dimensions of automobility helped to create a unique automotive experience in Germany which informed distinct restructuring of values systems and associations centered on the automobile.

The Beetle's success in these two markets creates a unique, almost ideal, opportunity for the cultural historian because it pulls into relief the different values and principles that created and consumed the single product. The Beetle's life after it was first unloaded in New York is also an example of how trajectories can shift in the face of cultural exchange. The Beetle was the first import car that caused considerable consternation in Detroit. By the early 1960s, both of the major automobile companies (Ford and General Motors) released domestic cars that

³⁶ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 76-82.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 293.

attempted to incorporate the German idea.³⁸ In a time when Americans bought American cars, the Beetle made the import an acceptable alternative to domestic offerings; in a way, lowering the defenses for the Japanese invasion of the 70s and 80s.³⁹ Likewise, international success shaped the future of Volkswagen as the company began to imagine a post-Beetle world. They wrestled with the balance between the German identity they cultivated and the needs of outside cultures.⁴⁰ Much of this contest of identity was resolved by acquiring other car manufacturers but retaining the iconic names, like German Audi, British Bentley, French Bugatti, Spanish SEAT, Czech Škoda, and Italian Lamborghini. While cultivating this international presence, Volkswagen ultimately decided to rediscover and reinvent the car that brought them into contact with the wider world by releasing a modern Beetle in 1998. Yet, the new Beetle is more of a reference rather than a revolution, as its updated non-utilitarian sensibility fits with the global trends of automotive design in the United States, Germany, and Japan.⁴¹ The new Beetle accepts rather than rejects the late twentieth century's compromises of parsimony for the pursuit of luxuries in an automotive landscape that they helped to create after the Beetle. Yet, by 2000 the question of which car culture is displacing the others is by no means clear. In recent decades, Volkswagen has become the world's largest automotive manufacturer, while Detroit has atrophied in the global market.

When Heinrich Nordhoff took his seat as General Manager of the Volkswagen plant in 1948, his estimation was that “exporting cars to America is like carrying beer to Bavaria.”⁴² While much has changed since Nordhoff made these remarks 67 years ago, his statement marks

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 309.

³⁹ Early Japanese imports attempted the same marketing strategies as the Volkswagen Beetle by advertising on difference; Datsun 240z Advertisement, “Join a Minority Group.”

⁴⁰ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 191.

⁴¹ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 422.

⁴² Heinz Nordhoff, quoted in Rieger, *The People's Car*, 199.

an important continuity as to the meanings of production. Americans still accept the positive stereotype that German and Japanese cultures strive for perfectibility in their creations. Conversely, American production culture is co-opted by the image of the soulless corporation which, in the name of profits, attempts to meet the minimum standard of quality and innovation.⁴³ Whereas Volkswagen continues to sell cars based on their Germaness, Chrysler, after being purchased by Italian auto manufacture Fiat, has taken a fresh tack with its new tagline: “This is Chrysler: America’s Import.”⁴⁴ Certainly Chrysler’s advertisement is trying to have the best of both worlds by revitalizing the “made in America” sentiment, making an appeal to national pride while still promising the quality of an import. Implicit in this advertisement’s statement is that where the car is built imparts a mystical sense of the nation that built it. In the age of the global corporation these stereotypes somehow ignore the fact that many German and Japanese factories reside in North America and that designers for automobiles are drawn from an international pool. Yet, the myth helps to create the reality, and mythologies surrounding national forms of production hold as much sway today as they did in 1950.⁴⁵

Moving the creation of these national myths to the center of the story rests on the assumption that the things that cultures create are emblematic, or otherwise carry some information about the culture that created and consumed these goods. The historical debates which featured production methods and values of consumption attempt to transcend the meaningless tautology that German cars are German because they are made in Germany by showing the subjective nation as a site of contention. The pertinent question for Volkswagen in

⁴³ Flink, *Automobile Age*, 291.

⁴⁴ Chrysler Television and Web Advertisement “This is Chrysler”
<http://www.chrysler.com/en/this-is-chrysler/>

⁴⁵ China, unfortunately, holds the most prominent association between a country of origin and quality of products, just knowing that something comes from China one can make inferences on its quality. “China Agrees to Raise Its Product Standards” New York Times August 27 2007.

the twentieth century is: can national forms of production and consumption exist or is “German Engineering” just American marketing?⁴⁶

This study is not evaluating these two nations as political and geographical units; rather it seeks to recreate and evaluate the subjective content of these two nations. The external image of America, not as an actual place but a label for certain ideals, persuaded and directed Germany’s car culture, sometimes as a model and at other times a negative example. Thus, it is possible to see how myth created reality as these national constructs created performative identities as a self-justifying act. Part of the Volkswagen’s mission was tied to negotiating a mental and cultural space that could reconcile American forms of production and consumption to German needs. Sometimes the creation of a German form of production and consumption was the ultimate end. In other instances the impulse to negotiate these American ideas was a project of avoiding the pitfalls that American consumer society faced. Acting on such ideals often resulted in unresolved contradictions especially in the Third Reich as pastoral and traditional ideals of Germany came into conflict with the modern and industrializing notions of America.

C. Marketing and Consumption

Turning from design and production, the next stop in the extended process of examining car culture moves toward the consumer through marketing and consumption. If car buying was simply a task of finding the best mode of transportation, everyone would drive the same affordable, reliable, safe car. Yet, the individual’s aspirations and self-assessments become a feature in the decision-making process. As such, it is possible for advertising to make affective appeals to consumers by placing the automobile at the center of a happy family, or promising an alternate world of freedom and power to contrast the world of the corporate cog. The extent that

⁴⁶ “That’s the Power of German Engineering, That’s the Power of Das Auto.” Volkswagen USA Television Advertisement

this form of advertising is manipulative, and therefore, unethical has given philosophers and social scientists a basis for creating an entire corpus of literature. This questioning of the efficacy and morality of advertising hit its apogee in the 1980s and 1990s, yet the interested parties' inability to forge a meaningful consensus indicates that theories concerning advertising's role still inform powerful and important debates today. Indeed, the gulf between the two positions is based on two incompatible and insurmountable assumptions based on the value of human activity, with the pessimist view seeing advertising as replacing the good life with a life of goods. In response, these writers make calls for higher forms of consciousness through high culture while the optimist view casts doubts on the assumption that any form of human activity is inherently better than another.⁴⁷ Through such broad approaches, advertising becomes another arena to contest and evaluate the trajectory of modern life.

Two general statements help situate the role of advertising in consumer cultures. First, effective advertisements can produce powerful scripts concerning social norms. Secondly, it is not clear where the actual authorship for the cultural content of these scripts takes place. For present purposes, it is possible to strike middle ground through an approach that deals with this manipulation in a value neutral way. By first asking the question, 'what does advertising do?' one can turn to the question of whether the effects are malevolent or benevolent. Creating a critical approach that achieves these objectives centers on the authorship of advertisements. Acknowledging that the themes for such scripts come from the larger culture helps to ground the advertisement's moral direction in a wider system of cultural production.

By placing advertising and marketing as a step in a circular process of consumer culture it becomes clear that, like the car designer, much of the authorship takes place outside of the

⁴⁷ Michael J. Phillips, *Ethics and Manipulation in Advertising: Answering a Faulty Indictment*, (Westport CT: Quorum Books, 1997) 2, 91-96.

drafting table or the Madison Avenue board room. This is one of the core sentiments of Michael Schudson's *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: its Dubious Impact on American Society*, indicating that the initial impulses that advertising and the media seize upon first arise in the public.⁴⁸ What this means is that there are limits to manipulation because advertisements must draw on cultural values rather than create them whole cloth. In this vein of thought, advertising becomes more about amplification than authorship.

Going beyond consumer psychology--- where the sale is the end and all other aspects are the means--- this study suggests that consumer cultures evolve in an imperfect cycle of production and consumption. Through this process some products become cultural artifacts. The extent that the product is created by the culture and the culture is created by the product becomes murky at best, and by some accounts indistinguishable.⁴⁹ The individual's agency, not only to select products but also to interpret their meaning and use them to form relationships with others, recasts certain products as politically, socially, economically, and/or ideologically significant.

The automobile is a composite of the ambitions and anxieties of modern life and, to this end, the automobile is highly instructive to understanding these cultural value systems. Partly function, partly fashion, the automobile is a text that can be read in regards to design when placed with other sources like popular magazines and publications. For such grounding I look to over 200 issues of *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* from 1924-1926 and again in 1934-1935. The other sizable body of work for this study comes from the weekly magazine, *Der Spiegel*, and my analysis includes the years between 1948 and 1956 including the DDB advertising campaigns

⁴⁸ Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: its Dubious Impact on American Society*, (London: Routledge, 1993) 183.

⁴⁹ Daniel Miller, *Stuff*, (New York: Polity Press, 2009) 10-16.

from 1959-1966. This systematic research is supplemented with comparative incidental articles from *Time Magazine*, *Popular Mechanics* and *Sports Illustrated* from the same years. The format of the magazine lends itself well to cultural studies as part of the white noise of everyday life and more often than not is intended to entertain and inform the mainstream rather than editorialize polemically.

This thesis attempts to evaluate and utilize three important components in order to establish my major argument concerning the cultural duality of the Volkswagen in Germany and the United States. The first element reviews the current literature and specific historiographies on which this study is based in an attempt to lay bare the current gaps in the histories concerning the Volkswagen. The second element outlines the development of German car culture's trajectories to establish my central analysis that in 1950 the Beetle was two different cars in the two different contexts of the United States and Germany. This will provide a much needed point of reference for later discussions and give an opportunity to make minor but important amendments to the Volkswagen story and suggest future questions that will help connect the study of Volkswagen with the larger currents in histories of Germany. The third element will utilize primary research on cultural representations of the Beetle and consider the nature of cultural transformation through the automobile. By combining these three elements it is possible to demonstrate parts of the "mental world" of the automobile in the changing contexts of the United States and Germany. This thesis concludes by tying these themes to an exploration of some of the current issues that German and American car cultures face.

Finally, there is a danger that cultural studies of Volkswagen will be reduced to a neighboring question: "Why was the Volkswagen successful?" The combination of this reductionist view with a topic this recent will lead some to suggest that cultural methods are a

long way around to a quick conclusion, insisting the real answers lay in interviewing Beetle owners or seeking out period customer satisfaction records. Yet rather than attempt to aggregate reception of the Volkswagen to create a cohesive image it is much more beneficial to understand the larger conversations and the mental world that was created around the car. I insist that customers are present in this process and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction is captured in the transformation of the production and consumption processes.

D. Analytical Historiography

Car culture is rarely defined in any formal way. As noted above, the car is an academically contested object that lacks unifying technological or philosophical aspects that would lend itself to a definition. Yet, for the present work, the squabbling over the demarcation of the boundaries among cars, motorcycles, buses, commuter vehicles, commercial vehicles etc, can be put to one side in order to accept a commonsensical definition that the car is a vehicle for personal conveyance. Historians evaluating car cultures seek to gain understanding concerning the values of groups of people who engage with the idea of the car. It is therefore an area of study devoted to chronicling and analyzing the interactions between people, their cars and other people through the car. Studying car culture in this way has recently emerged from a longer tradition of automotive histories, with the major contrast being that automotive histories' general focus was on the more concrete aspects of the automobile, its "life in metal," as Patton puts it, corporate biographies, and chronicles of specific designers and models.⁵⁰ Since the Beetle is one of the world's most popular cars experience on the global stage, it is unsurprising that it has attracted the attention of many automotive historians. Many of these historians were able to raise questions that went beyond the "metal life" of the automobile and point to the "mental life" of

⁵⁰ Patton, *Bug*, 3.

the car, yet their methodologies could not produce sufficient answers to these questions. The first major work of car culture was possibly Wolfgang Sachs' *Die Liebe zum Automobil: ein Rückblick in die Geschichte unserer Wünsche*, which was first published in 1984, and is still considered one of the best works on car culture. As an environmentalist, Sachs was interested in why we continue to invest such energy into the automobile despite the plethora of externalities like traffic and pollution. His answer was simply that the story of twentieth century Germany's relationship to the car was that of a romance; it offered independence, speed, comfort in equal measure with "our desires." Thus, the automobile became an organizing feature in German society. Sach's book contained a unique guiding question that went beyond the interests of earlier histories.

Sach's work was a rare breakaway from the traditional patterns of automotive history; as a whole studies since Sachs fell back into the methodological ruts of the "metal life" of the car. Daniel Miller remarked that, "the current literature has almost no grasp of the global reach of the car today except in matters of production and destruction. There is no sense that the car might be a different cultural form or experience among different groups."⁵¹ At about the same time, Rudy Koshar noted that scholarship on European car culture has, "paid even less attention to the everyday uses and cultural representations of the automobile than American historiography has."⁵²

The root of the problem that Koshar and Miller identify stems from a tendency to adopt American car culture as normative and, in effect, search for American car culture abroad. One of the many problems with this flawed methodology is that Germany, for instance, lacks many

⁵¹ Daniel Miller, "Driven Societies," in Daniel Miller ed. *Car Cultures* (New York: Berg, 2001)

12.

⁵² *Ibid.*

direct counterparts to American car culture; there is no *German Graffiti*, or comparable equivalent to Tom Wolfe's *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, or Beach Boy's "Little Deuce Coupe."⁵³ With few points of direct comparison and a normative model of car culture, recent literature has been best positioned to grapple with the first aspect of Miller's complaint by exploring, "the global dimensions of the car."⁵⁴

Coming to terms with the second part of Miller's criticism by discovering how the car becomes "a different cultural form or experience among different groups," has proved difficult in Germany because of these limited points of direct comparison. Part of the problem is that Miller focuses on consumption and materiality to the exclusion of other important aspects of production, design and marketing. These points in the production and consumption process form important contexts that help capture meaning in different cultural milieu. This suggests the need to look at car culture through a more systematic and extensive approach that includes the entire process of production and consumption. Production is particularly important in understanding the automobile in Germany. Yet, that is not to say that some direct comparison cannot be made. The Beetle provides such an ability for direct comparison. The car itself provides a window into the two car cultures by demonstrating the common and contrasting responses to the single car. The car's broad success in the two markets for over two decades ensures that these points of commonality and difference reflect equally broad trends experience in these two consumer cultures. At the base of these trends is a challenging and rethinking of what it means to be American and German through production and consumption.

Volkswagen and the Beetle seem to catch the attention of the academic world in moments of punctuated growth. These tend to cluster around the years 1970, 2000, and 2010, where 1970s

⁵³ Wolfe, *Kandy-Kolored*, 78.

⁵⁴ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 7-10.

saw Volkswagen expand production beyond the Beetle, 2000 saw the return of the Beetle in North America and Germany, and in 2010 Volkswagen become the largest manufacturer in the world. Therefore, the literature on Volkswagen tends to reflect a sense of optimism and surprise that parallel the national mood of Germany's *Wirtschaftswunder* or economic miracle of the 1950s. The one notable exception to the euphoria of the Volkswagen story is Hans Mommsen's *Das Volkswagenwerk und seine Arbeiter im Dritten Reich*, (The Volkswagen Factory and its Workers in the Third Reich.) This work was commissioned by Volkswagen to control the release of the information of the company's most nefarious chapter and its use of forced labor between 1939 and 1945. Besides the tendency to remember Volkswagen in moments of growth, it is also notable that the number of academic works conducted in English outnumbers works conducted in German. This is possibly due to academic differences between the two countries or to the very fundamental differences in values concerning the automobile.

It is fair to say that the literature concerning the Beetle has most consistently been presented as a story of heroes and villains; the technological heroism of Ferdinand Porsche, the capitalistic hero of Heinz Nordhoff, the socialist hero of the undifferentiated factory worker, and yet the villain is consistently and understandably Hitler and the Nazis. Each of these stories holds up different personalities as responsible for the creation, destruction, and rebirth of the enduring car brand, and, perhaps counterintuitively, they are all correct. With such a regular villain, the first twenty years of historical inquiry into the Beetle was largely a process of distancing the Beetle from the Nazis. K.B. Hopfinger's 1971 monograph, *The Volkswagen Story* began to exculpate the car from the ideology by focusing on the design and development of the Beetle. He casts Dr. Porsche as his main character and by highlighting Porsche's reluctance the Volkswagen story becomes larger than just the ravings of Hitler. Yet as a foundational work *The*

Volkswagen Story is incredibly self contained; looking at the development of the car and factory Hopfinger succeeds in creating a complete corporate biography of Volkswagen until 1970. Hopfinger's main contention is placing Porsche in a central role in the car's creation to disrupt the popular association between the Beetle and the Nazis. This pattern is then perpetuated in much of the literature concerning Volkswagen. In *Birth of the Beetle: The Development of the Volkswagen by Porsche*, Chris Barber openly states that his book's *raison d'être* is to remind the world that Porsche was responsible for the world's most popular car.⁵⁵ Yet as Porsche exits the Volkswagen story Heinrich Nordhoff, the General Manager of the Volkswagen factory from 1946-68 becomes the new figure of admiration but he is not given the same importance as Hitler or Porsche. Indeed, without Nordhoff's direction, which often defied conventional wisdom, the Beetle, and even the company, may never have been.

Focusing on Porsche and Hitler has the added result of limiting the narrative to Volkswagen's development in the Third Reich. At best, this limited scope directs the study of the Beetle as an *effect of* Third Reich culture much to the impairment of the Beetle's *effects on* subsequent German culture. Additionally, there are important continuities concerning motorization as central to constructing notions of modernity in Weimar Germany influences primarily by Ford. Rarely addressed are these cultural elements which inform the development of the Beetle, which occasionally make small appearances in the creation of the master narrative of the technological development of the Beetle. Nevertheless, Volkswagen and the Third Reich are inescapably linked. When one wishes to discuss Volkswagen, one must engage Volkswagen as a tool for understanding the Nazi past. However, this should by no means limit its discussion to before 1945.

⁵⁵ Chris Barber, *Birth of the Beetle* (London: Haynes Publishing, 2003) 7.

One work on Volkswagen which looks beyond the Third Reich in a significant way is Karl Ludvigsen's *Battle for the Beetle: The Untold Story of the Post-War Battle for Adolf Hitler's Giant Volkswagen Factory and the Porsche-Designed Car that Became an Icon for Generations around the Globe*. Ludvigsen analyzes the Allies' post-war scramble for control of Volkswagen and reveals the process by which Volkswagen, the car, the factory, and its patents, stayed in Germany. Ludvigsen is the first to do this and draws on an impressive list of secondary literature, as well as intelligence reports, newspaper and magazine articles, and personal interviews. Ludvigsen's main contribution to the Volkswagen narrative is overturning the misconception presented by James J. Flink that there was little Allied interest in acquiring control over the car firm.⁵⁶ Instead, Ludvigsen's technically adroit case studies of American, British, French, Russian, and Belgian attempts to poach the small vehicle divulges the significance the Allies placed on either obtaining or sabotaging the Volkswagen project. As *Battle for the Beetle* is primarily a text about the creation of post-war Germany, it has the potential to speak to a wide audience of German historians; however, Ludvigsen fails to connect to larger historical debates because his books are marketed toward automobile enthusiasts and not academics. The trade-off is that his technical analysis is unmatched, and borders, at times, on becoming a shop manual. Ludvigsen expertly uses technical history to point to cultural attitudes. For each of the countries who vied for the Volkswagen plant he explores how foreign manufacturers paralleled experiments with techniques and technologies along the same lines of the development of the Volkswagen and considers how the car would be accepted in that country.

⁵⁶ Flink, *Automobile Age*, 321.

Given the limitation of technology as a means of understanding cultural phenomenon like the Beetle, and since the narrative of the technical development of the Beetle has been completed by Hopfinger, Ludvigsen, and others, it is time to move on. What is now needed is for historians to access new types of sources in an effort to place the Beetle into the larger context of car culture. German car culture studies should aspire to Cotton Seiler's excellent book from 2008; *Republic of Drivers, A Cultural History of Automobility in America*. Seiler warns his readers at the outset that his book's "essential questions are cultural, philosophical, and political, not automotive nor technological nor even psychological, narrowly defined."⁵⁷ Fulfilling this promise, he then analyzes how the automobile encompasses individuality in the context of the self, gender, and race.

More recently two books have been published which move towards understanding the car as more than the technological sum of its parts: Andrea Hiott's *Thinking Small: The Long, Strange Trip of the Volkswagen Beetle* and Bernhard Rieger's *The People's Car: A Global History of the Volkswagen Beetle*. While Hiott's work attempts to understand the Beetle as a product of thinking differently, the books real strengths are in creating the biographies of the main figures of the already familiar Volkswagen story, with the addition of an in depth account of the advertising firm Doyle, Dane, and Bernbach (DDB) to whom she attributes much of Volkswagen's ultimate success. She does not approach the cultural meaning of the automobile in national contexts, which would show how the automobile differs in meaning for Germans and Americans. Instead, she sees the Beetle as a challenge to conventional thinking in both countries. By doing so, she fails to acknowledge the distinct car cultures. Rieger's work focuses on the modernizing aspects of the Beetle's life. His work is exceptional and thorough. The book

⁵⁷ Cotton Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

does not make the common mistake of failing to set the Beetle into the larger car culture developing within Germany. In many ways, *The People's Car* is the long awaited book that finally enters into the cultural discourse with Wolfgang Sachs' 1984 book, *Die Liebe zum Automobil: Ein Rückblick in die Geschichte unserer Wünsche*.⁵⁸ This is all the more impressive considering that Sachs' book has long been considered the foundational work on German car culture.⁵⁹

Going beyond Hitler, Volkswagen's story offers insights into how West Germans reconstructed their identity after the war. While looking to America and its European neighbors, Germany repurposed German traditions for the ends of constructing a new identity. At times, German car culture developed in parallel patterns with American car culture, it took from American technologies of manufacturing, it appropriated systems of management, yet ultimately, the car had a different cultural meaning in the two nations.

II . Capitalism with a Human Face

As a company (Volkswagen AG) Volkswagen's achievement in Germany is divided between two major realizations: that it brought mass motorization to Germany and that it became an economic powerhouse by exporting on the global stage. Volkswagen AG's corporate policies helped to reinforce the significance of the Beetle to the German public through production. In the 1980s and 1990s German firms, and especially Volkswagen, were applauded for pioneering a German model of economic organization and production that defied the normal Taylorist

⁵⁸ Wolfgang Sachs, *Die Liebe zum Automobil: Ein Rückblick in die Geschichte unserer Wünsche* (Rowohlt Verlag: Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1984).

⁵⁹ Rudy Koshar, "On the History of the Automobile in Everyday Life," *Contemporary European History* 10 No. 1 (2001): 144.

mentality by instead promoting “Diversified Quality Production.”⁶⁰ German automobile manufacturers use of multi-purpose machinery rather than single purpose equipment is but one indicator of how Diversified Quality Production contrasts Taylorist or Fordist methods.⁶¹ In opposition to many American firms’ practices, the German model proposed that profits can be maintained while simultaneously promoting wages and working conditions by working with labor unions. The German model also promoted investment in human capital through more intensive training programs which improved the quality of the final product and helped worker retention by turning jobs into careers. Under this model the large corporation utilized smaller regional companies to provide semi-finished goods such as seats or car body panels in what is called “flexible specialization.”⁶² While this favored the worker, it also helped the firm as Sigurt Vitols noted it, “creates constraints which are beneficial for employers, in the sense that they are forced to focus on their long-term interests rather than short-term market shocks.”⁶³ It is also notable that rather than outsourcing, the German companies favored exporting their system root and branch to both developing and developed nations. This model is justified because Volkswagen, and other German producers, believed that the discerning customer would pay a premium for high quality products.⁶⁴

Coming to terms with this German model of production and corporate behavior reached a high point of interest in the 1980s and 1990s, at a moment when self-interested capitalism and

⁶⁰ Sigurt Vitols, “Continuity and Change: Making Sense of the German Model,” *Competition and Change* 8 no. 4 (2004): 331-337. Taylorism, often also called Scientific Management is a model that attempts to apply scientific rationalism to the production process in order to achieve the ultimate goal of efficiency. Taylorism is distinguished from later forms of rationalization, like Fordism, in its limited use of technology and emphasis on work flow and shop organization.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 333.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 335-6.

mass production were increasingly viewed as destructive. In an attempt to posit ‘flexible specialization’ as an alternative to mass production, many economists and commentators traced back its development to the Wilhelminian economic world.⁶⁵ There is much to suggest that Diversified Quality Production of the 1980s owes much of its development to the crisis of modernizing Germany that began in the late nineteenth century. Yet, in the attempt to propose an alternative, these “optimist” commentators were blinded to certain historical realities, including the marginal power that the *Mittelstand* (small shopkeepers and craftsmen) had in curtailing the progress of industrialization, since as David Blackbourn notes, “If there is a red thread that runs through state policy [it is] the recognition that a modern, efficient industry was indispensable for a successful great power.”⁶⁶ Far from rejecting the importance of developments like flexible specialization, Blackbourn notes that optimist accounts, “remind us that small producers played a genuinely important role even in the age of Krupp and Siemens. The optimist case is nevertheless an oversimplification. In many ways it represents the mirror image of the pessimist accounts. One approach sees industrialization as a juggernaut destroying the old craft world; the other presents it as a vehicle for advancement.”⁶⁷ Yet, even if the *Mittelstand* had limited political support in Wilhelmine Germany, their claims concerning the nature of technology and industrialization and its effects on the quality of finished goods provided a cultural and intellectual platform to understand and criticize the modernization of Germany.

⁶⁵ C.F. Sabel and J. Zeitlin, “Historical Alternatives to Mass Production”, *Past and Present*, no. 108 (1985): 133-76.

⁶⁶ David Blackbourn, *History of Germany 1780-1919: The Long Nineteenth Century*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) 246.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

Even mass production in the large factory functioned differently in the German model. Since quality in the final product justifies the capital investments required for the German model, production is integral to understanding the value of a product like the Volkswagen Beetle which was partly sold on the claim of high quality. One of the important continuities in how the Beetle was sold in Germany and the United States was by claiming superiority in the production process itself by highlighting the human in the factory. The difference between automated and mechanized production processes and old world craftsmanship is that machines, by nature, treat every process as generalized phenomenon, whereas the craftsman can respond to the specifics of a situation. Volkswagen was able to have the best of both worlds through their extensive inspection system where the discerning human would ensure that metal did not become too thin when pressed into body panels or that paint achieved good coverage and did not leave runs. The inspector, who was sometimes portrayed as a scientist in a lab coat, personified the production process and by focusing on the human aspect of the car, Volkswagen put a human face on the production of the car.⁶⁸

In two print advertisements created by the American advertising firm DDB emphasized the role of the inspector in the production process. An American Ad appeared in 1963 demonstrated the number of the checks performed on every Volkswagen by showing a car signed by each inspector at the Volkswagen factory. The ad continued this theme of quality assurance through a written account of the consequences for failure: rather than repairing the defect the part is “smashed... down to a metal lump and thrown out into the scrape pile.”⁶⁹ In Germany an advertisement appeared in *Der Spiegel* in 1964. This ad featured a test for determining color

⁶⁸Volkswagen TV Commercial, “We Have Over One Mile of Volkswagen Inspectors,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3qpNSPRnd0>

⁶⁹ Volkswagen Print Ad, “That is How Many Times we Inspect a Volkswagen.” 1963.

blindness with the outline of a Beetle in red hues. The text pronounced, “If you cannot see the VW you cannot become a VW inspector.” The fine print of this ad focuses on the intense scrutiny of inspection that the VW must pass. The ad claims that, “our inspectors must see what others over look.”⁷⁰

The human in the factory became a reoccurring focal point. In another American ad from 1968 showed two images below which there were two statements. The first showed a group of men assembling a Volkswagen which carried the text, “It is what we do here,” and the second image showed a finished Beetle in a parking lot under which is written, “that makes a difference here.”⁷¹ Importantly, the first picture was very personal, there are no discernible tools or machinery and everyone pictured is engrossed in their work. All of this is to say that Volkswagen believed that production mattered; it mattered for the final product, it mattered for marketing, and it mattered to the customer.

To understand the significance of the Volkswagen, it is necessary to evaluate it not just as a company or a car, but rather as a particular solution to particular problems that modernizing Germany faced. Thus, even though the Volkswagen would not be sold to the public until 1948, the story of the Volkswagen begins much earlier. A genealogy that looks to the roots of the Volkswagen could trace back cultural trends and certain core concepts, like German craftsmanship, work and mass production, materialism and consumerism, to periods that would predate the invention of the automobile. Fortunately, this is not necessary to do because the pertinent discussions come to the surface at the turn of the century and reach a boiling point in the crises of the 1920s. Since the 1920s was the foundational time for the concept of a

⁷⁰ Volkswagen Print Advertisement, “Wenn Sie den VW nicht sehen.” The play on words is better in the original German: “Unsere Inspektoren müssen sehen, was andere übersehen.”

⁷¹ Volkswagen Print Advertisement, “It is What We do Here that Makes a Difference Here.” 1968.

Volkswagen, or a people's car, most histories of the Volkswagen begin in the 1920s. Designers, manufacturers, and social commentators attempted to imagine a mass culture of cars as they worried about the social, economic, and ethical implications. Yet, these conversations accepted an American way of production and consumption as a foregone conclusion, which these commentators then used as a point of departure for defining a German way of production and consumption which remained theoretical due to the devastation of WWI. Since the 1920s are particularly fertile ground for the concept of the Volkswagen, it is beneficial to sketch the developments that led to Germany's car culture at that time. Wilhelmine Germany is doubly important for understanding German and American trajectories since, as Volker R. Berghahn notes, "much is to be said for the view that the turn of the century represents a better starting point for examining German-American industrial relations ... for it was around 1900 at the Paris World Exhibition, that the United States moved into the telescopes of the Europeans as an industrial power to be reckoned with in the future."⁷²

A. Production and Car Design in Wilhelmine Germany

The early days of car development proved to be far from definitive. James Flink looks at the production outputs of motorizing countries and shows how the global automotive hub shifted

⁷² Volker R. Berghahn, "Fordism and West German Industrial Culture," in *The German-American Encounter: Conflict and Cooperation between Two Cultures, 1800-2000*, ed. Frank Trommler et al. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 147. "By all accounts, the new technologies shown in the American pavilion at Paris attracted a great deal of attention and soon thereafter business men and engineers from Western Europe could be seen traveling across the Atlantic to study not only new steel making techniques in Pennsylvania or rationalized factory production in Michigan, but also the fresh ideas about work organization promoted by Fredrick Taylor and the scientific management movement. By 1914 several major European companies – the Stuttgart electrical engineering firm of Robert Bosch and the French car manufacturer Renault among them – had begun to experiment with Taylorist methods of rationalized production."

several times before World War I from Germany to Paris to Detroit.⁷³ While production output is a good indicator of car culture, as it indirectly shows the supply and demand of cars, this approach only outlines the shape of car culture. Wolfgang Sachs' observations in *For Love of the Automobile: Looking Back into the History of Our Desires* helps to add some color and features to the general shape that production outputs provide.⁷⁴ While these two authors are writing very different types of histories with different methods and purposes, there are some comparable points which can be evaluated and challenged.

Whether one is discussing the 1920s, 1930s, or 1950s, it is counterproductive to look for German adoption of the automobile as a single event, or as an import into a vacuum. Along with Great Britain, France, and the United States, Germany was one of the founding nations of the automobile, and the major developments that followed are tied to this position. Many tout the German Carl Benz's three-wheeled creation showcased at the 1889 Paris Exposition as the first car.⁷⁵ Even today, German companies have retained their original monikers, in brands like Daimler, Benz, and Maybach, which were all founded by their namesake engineers and designers from *fin de siècle* Germany. Some technologies, such as diesel combustion developed by Rudolf Diesel, also betray the central role Germany played in the initial development of the automobile.⁷⁶ The first version of an electric hybrid car was designed and built by the young Ferdinand Porsche in the summer of 1901; it was also the world's first four-wheel drive vehicle.⁷⁷ These developments were not created in isolation. Car developers around the world

⁷³ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 15-27.

⁷⁴ Wolfgang Sachs, *For Love of the Automobile: Looking Back into the History of our Desires*, Trans. Don Reneau, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); James Flink, *America Adopts the Automobile, 1895-1910* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1970).

⁷⁵ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 12.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 22.

were in a technological discourse through print such as “engineering journals, bicycle periodicals, automobile trade journals, newspapers and popular magazines of the day,” as well as through exhibition.⁷⁸ Despite the global exchange of technological information at the dawn of the new century, most of the key developments in creating the automobile were fashioned by Germans.⁷⁹

These technological achievements reflect Germany’s experience with cultural modernity, as they grew in the shadow of a society transformed. In Blackbourn’s periodization of German history, he uses the label the “Age of Progress” to describe the period from 1849-1880.⁸⁰ Following this progress, by the 1880s Germany had become an exporting powerhouse in the realm of finished goods, noticeably, the automobile and automobile parts. The most notable export was Gottlieb Daimler’s internal combustion gasoline engine which car manufacturers built their cars around in the United States, Great Britain, France, and also in Germany.⁸¹ German garage-based automotive operations enjoyed the growth of purchasing power afforded by the general expansion and availability of credit.⁸² Increase in leisure time aided the development of mass culture; the rise of the department store marked the beginning of mass consumption.⁸³ In short, as Sachs verifies:

The Wilhelminian era – contrary to its reputation – was eager to modernize... it was the classic age of progress. Whoever had the money could acquire electrical light in the 1890s, enjoy new mobility with the bicycle, write letters on a typewriter and admire the first moving picture show.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 14.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸⁰ Blackbourn, *History of Germany*, 204-6.

⁸¹ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 15-24.

⁸² Blackbourn, *History of Germany*, 237-9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 237-47.

⁸⁴ Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 26

Prosperity, the rise of mass culture, and new forms of consumption put Germany in a position to become the heir apparent in the automobile age. Automotive historian James Flink claims this is best seen by the 1901 Mercedes, which he considers the first modern car. According to Flink, “Nothing better illustrates the early superiority of European automotive design than the sharp contrast between this first Mercedes model and the 1901 American 3-horsepower, curved dash Olds[mobile], which was in significant respects merely a motorized horse buggy.”⁸⁵ The differences between these two cars are more than just design. It is not just that the Mercedes was more refined, but that the car was traveling in different cultural directions in Germany and the United States. The refinement in design marks the divide in the prevailing concepts of what the car was to become, and subsequently who should own one. The 1901 Olds demonstrates that America’s central concern with the automobile was developing not just the car, but also systems of organization that could create increased output. The Mercedes, on the other hand, utilized the same types of innovative design which accompanied the technological development responsible for creating the seachange of technology brought on by early automobiles. The difference was that while American car companies focused on broadening the access of the current automobile, Germany was developing the car to new levels. Thus, the cars, like the 1901 Mercedes, were hand-crafted works of art, and by comparison the Olds seemed primitive.

This characterization, that American industry was managed by output and German industry was obsessed with quality, has its limitations. It has all too commonly been constructed in automotive histories with the presentism of Henry Ford’s dual contribution to the world: the Model T and Fordism. Flink points out that before 1914, “automobiles were made and sold

⁸⁵ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 33.

much the same way on both sides of the Atlantic, that is, they were assembled from jobbed-out components by a crew of skilled mechanics and unskilled helpers at low rates of labor productivity, and they were sold at high prices and high unit profits.”⁸⁶ Flink sharply turns from this observation to set Fordism in a longer historical context based on rationalized management. Flink’s main task is to show why the United States adopted the automobile a generation ahead of Europe, yet he is content to say that Europe adopted the automobile for the same reasons and in the same ways as the United States, only years later.⁸⁷

Many scholars, observing the commonalities between the Ford Model T and the Beetle make a special point to evaluate Ford’s methods as a means of understanding Volkswagen.⁸⁸ Ford and his humble car had momentous effects, observed globally, which captured the imagination of the world not only in regards to the automobile, but also as a vision of the future. This vision was constructed as a dream or nightmare depending on the source, yet irrespective of the critic or proponent’s position, Ford’s brave new world alluded to the relationship between man and machine, and between worker and manager. Ford’s organization, based on interchangeable parts, mechanized semiskilled labor, and conformity of product, constituted what became known internationally as the “American model of production,” or, later, as Fordism.⁸⁹ Even though ‘true’ Fordism was short lived in the American automotive world, as it was an industrial model of production unable to cope with post-industrial demands, it is understood as the starting point of the mass cultural experience of the automobile. Therefore,

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

⁸⁸ Ludvigsen, *Battle for the Beetle*, 77-86; Rieger, *The People’s Car*, 14-32.

⁸⁹ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 61; Rieger, *The People’s Car*, 21. Douglas Brinkley, *Wheels for the World: Henry Ford, His Company, and a Century of Progress*, (New York: Penguin Books , 2004).

Ford, his car, and his industrial philosophy contribute greatly to the international association of automobiles as an America symbol.

Before the First World War, there was no way to predict that American production methods would, at least momentarily, establish superiority. Andrea Hiott elucidates this point by drawing on Douglas Brinkley's work *Wheels for the World* when she says, "In retrospect we can talk about 1908 as the birth of Ford's Model T, the time when 'the people' got a car, in fact, all Ford had that year was 'a wonderful car – one, single, wonderful car.' ... 'At the time Ford himself wondered aloud whether his company would ever build even a tenth Model T.'"⁹⁰ Neither in the United States nor in Europe were auto manufactures near to dreaming of mass motorization, which could cut across class lines and see workers as a consumer. Moreover, it is doubtful that in these early stages of car manufacturing one could distinguish an American method from a German method. Flink maintains that despite the lack of difference between production methods, "as early as the turn of the century, it was accepted as axiomatic that, unlike European producers 'American manufacturers have set about to produce machines in quantity, so that the price can be reduced.'"⁹¹ This allows Flink to show how Fordism was a "perfected" model of the existing American manufacturing process.⁹² Oldsmobile and Mercedes serve as examples only because they survived the initial technological gold rush of automobile manufacturing. Many more companies in both countries folded and failed than survived, which gives the comparison some Darwinian credibility, but only in the way that these methods created national images of production, and only in hindsight.

⁹⁰ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 36.

⁹¹ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 40.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 43.

Even if this narrative of production does not capture the total story of motorization, it is useful in showing how notions of the automobile differed in different national contexts. Describing the motivating factors for why Europe, and Germany in particular, worked to refine their automobiles to appeal to the higher classes has only been approached objectively through economic explanations, which largely ignore Germany's rising prestige, economic power, and geographic need.⁹³ Leslie Butterfield takes a simpler approach by relying on the romantic, positive stereotype of German craftsmanship that compels Germans to perfectionism in whatever they undertake.⁹⁴ For Butterfield this is more of a description of an ancient national character tied to German inwardness than a development of German consumerism in the twentieth century. In sum, the German penchant for quality is an explanation in itself for Butterfield--- an end rather than a beginning.

As such, the most troubling aspect of Flink's account on the differences between European and American car production is that it does not seem to correlate with the larger image of a transforming Germany that Blackbourn and Sachs describe. After all, Germany's rise in prestige and power was palpable enough to concern the other world powers on the eve of the First World War. Bernard P. Bellon reconciles these divergent images of Germany's second industrialization, which he summarizes as "later, faster, bigger, newer," when he simply states

⁹³ *Ibid.* "For several reasons, the United States afforded an unparalleled market for motor vehicles, the most costly durable consumer product of the second industrial revolution. With its vast land area, hinterland of scattered and isolated settlements, and relatively low population densities, the United States had a far greater need for individualized automotive transportation than the nations of Western Europe. Even more important, great effective demand was ensured by a higher per capita income and more equitable income distribution than in European countries - an estimated average annual per capita income in 1914 of \$334...[compared to] \$146 for Germany."

⁹⁴ Leslie Butterfield, *Enduring Passion: The Story of the Mercedes-Benz Brand*, (Indianapolis, IN: Wiley, 2005).

that “the German motor vehicle industry fell outside of this [industrializing] pattern.”⁹⁵ Bellon dismisses any meaningful analysis of why this would occur and simply remarks that “there was no German counterpart to Henry Ford.”⁹⁶ These endeavors fail to recognize what Sachs most elegantly notes, that “technology is the material reproduction of culture.”⁹⁷ That is to say, there were cultural reasons that America would produce a figure like Ford, while Germany continued to hammer out cars by hand. Many ready-made cultural explanations already exist from other studies on German modernization, and it would be easy to expand these problematic theories to show how Germany had an automotive *Innerlichkeit* (inwardness). As inwardness would be tied to Butterfield’s reliance on the stereotype of German craftsmanship, such an interpretation would be unsatisfactory in that it does not probe deeply into why quality and craftsmanship were more valued in German culture. Blackbourn debunks the notion of overt inwardness and anti-materialism as the majority experience in late nineteenth century Germany by showing how “attitudes towards material progress were more often jubilant.”⁹⁸ Yet, even Blackbourn acknowledges that there was an ambiguity in reactions to these notions of progress, which, “in so far as it was seriously challenged, this would come only in the decades before the First World War.”⁹⁹

Turning to the attitudes and opinions of the public regarding the automobile before 1914, Flink describes the American experience: “No industry in history developed in a more favorable climate of public opinion.”¹⁰⁰ Flink seems to forget Woodrow Wilson’s 1906 diatribe against

⁹⁵ Bernard P. Bellon, *Mercedes in Peace and War: German Automobile Workers, 1903-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 13.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁷ Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 100.

⁹⁸ Blackbourn, *History of Germany*, 232.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁰⁰ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 27.

automobiles: “Automobilists are a picture of arrogance and wealth... Nothing has spread socialist feeling in this country more than the automobile.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, the outrage that Wilson felt toward the automobile was also experienced in Germany. Following a passage from Rudolf Diesels’ journal entry after driving through Italy in 1906, he describes the large dust plumbs which blanketed angry pedestrians. Sachs notes that, “little wonder, too, that the rage blended with class hatred, for those who raced along the country and village streets, who drove speedily off leaving peasants with the mess, were indeed those nouveaux riches from the cities.”¹⁰² Patton recalls similar accounts involving Willie Vanderbilt on the streets of Newport, Rhode Island.¹⁰³

While these problems, which accompanied the early adoption of the automobile, are scarcely covered in American narratives of the automobile, Sachs begins his book with the conflicts the automobile caused in everyday life. It is difficult to tell if the roots of the two automotive trajectories stem from this initial experience as presented in the literature, that America was more open to the automobile than Germany, or if it is a problem of presentism within the historiography of American car culture. Including Patton’s account, it seems that the prewar cultural experience and expectation of the automobile was matched note for note in America and in Germany. Even if there was more opposition to the automobile in Germany, Sachs shows how the “automobile question” became reframed into a nationalistic question concerned with maintaining German industrial development.¹⁰⁴ Flink notes that by “1903, the belief that the automobile would soon supersede the horse was commonplace,” which is intonated by Sachs’ citation of the *Allgemeine Automobil-Zeitung* in 1906, which proclaimed,

¹⁰¹ Woodrow Wilson quoted in Phil Patton, *Bug*, 10.

¹⁰² Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 14.

¹⁰³ Patton, *Bug*, 10.

¹⁰⁴ Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 22-31.

“The automobile: it will grant to human beings their conquest over time and space by virtue of its speed and forward motion.”¹⁰⁵

By the standards which would make mass motorization possible, both the United States and Germany were far from reaching levels of output which could cater to the masses. Yet, before 1908, when Ford first put his Model T into production, it was still an idea yet to be conceived in the world, and would be far from proven until almost the 1920's, when the Model T would become the first “people's car,” or as Ford envisioned it “universal car,” in the world. Therefore, the car in both cases served as a sharp divider of class. Sachs' work on German car culture and Flink's more comprehensive work shows that there are still more commonalities between the two societies in relation to the emerging automobile. The simple answer to why America became the “classic land of the automobile,” and not Germany, was that even before 1903 and the founding of the Ford Motor Car company, America was increasingly and rapidly becoming the image of modernity in European eyes, and with such interest, the American ethos became divisive.¹⁰⁶

As if to demonstrate this principle, there were some early failed attempts to appropriate American methods in the pre-war era. Berghahn notes that the electrical company, Bosch, traveled to the United States by 1914 to observe the Taylorist methods which they attempted to employ on their factory floor. Located just down the street from the Daimler-Benz (DB) factory,

¹⁰⁵ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 27; Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 9; Interestingly, the automobile in these two accounts are being cited as liberating man from two different outmoded forms of transportation, in America the horse and in Germany the train. To some degree this demonstrates that Germany's superiority in railway construction vanquished the horse as the primary means of transportation before the Americans. Public transportation was far more advanced, even in urban centers, and throughout the pre-war years Germany continued to develop electric trams.

¹⁰⁶ Jürgen Schlegelmilch, *VW, Er läuft und läuft und läuft... Vier Jahrzehnte VW-Werbung* (Königswinter: HEEL Verlag GmbH, 2006) 19.

DB executives would have had a good view of the massive Metal Workers Union strike against the new “Bosch Tempo.”¹⁰⁷ Berghahn continues by saying, “other employers also opposed this kind of ‘Americanization,’ Daimler-Benz among them. They believed that what was coming from across the Atlantic was not suited to German industrial conditions and principles.”¹⁰⁸

Blackbourn reveals the workers’ concerns with “increased pace of work... also raised the spectre of deskilling, the fear that those who sold their labor were becoming more interchangeable, and thus dispensable. The skilled craftsman could see himself threatened...[by] the fate of the mass worker.”¹⁰⁹ This feeling also coincided with the growth of the trade unions in Germany, which underwent unprecedented growth in the pre-war years, from 300,000 members in 1890 to 2.5 million in 1913.¹¹⁰ Thus, “the labour movement was a fixed point in a turning world, fostering a common identity,” which led to “political ferment at the base of German society,” which grew from the lifting of the anti-socialist laws of the 1870-90s.¹¹¹

Thus, while it is possible to see a particular strain of production taking root in America, German attempts were much less concerted. Instead of having a definite German system, one can see how German production was configured by constraints that were not present in the United States. Strong labor unions’ resistance to mechanization inhibited producers’ abilities to streamline production by replacing skilled labor with semi-skilled workers. Political support for the *Mittelstand*, even at a token level, further complicated a comprehensive embrace of standardization and mechanization. While this support did little to remedy the industrializing

¹⁰⁷ Berghahn, “Fordism and West German Industrial Culture,” 147.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰⁹ Blackbourn, *The History of Germany*, 271.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 275 , 312-3.

process, it acknowledged the superiority of hand-build products and imbued the concept of quality with a sense of spirituality which can contrast the soullessness of the machined good.

The lending system for business prevalent in Germany before the war also complicated how companies enacted policies, as large banks had a major role in how the lent capital could be used. Large banks would often lend with the caveat that the bank would have representation on the corporate board of directors. To fill these positions, Bank's often hired corporate executives which created a revolving door effect as executives left corporations to work for the bank and then returned to work for the company.¹¹² Later, many executives would serve on the board on behalf of the company, the bank, while serving on the board of competitor companies which would create conflicts of interest and a general state of confusion.¹¹³ For example, in 1926, after serving on the board of trustees for both Daimler and Benz on behalf of Deutsche Bank, Emil George von Stauss forced a merger to create an "economically irreplaceable corporation," in essence, an automotive cartel that was too big to fail.¹¹⁴

Yet, none of these developments completely prevented the German automotive industry from making greater moves toward a Fordist future. Ultimately, the large producers were eager to move to mass production despite these impediments. The business decision to stay the course was based on a much more basic problem. Benz and others would have been happy to convert their factories for mass production if only they had something to sell and someone to sell it to. While Germans would be fascinated by aspects of Ford and Fordism, the man, his production techniques, his welfare capitalism, Ford's car itself would escape this fascination as German automobiles were far more technologically and stylistically advanced. They realized that the

¹¹² Neil Gregor, *Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich*, (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1998)

12.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Bellon, *Mercedes in Peace and War*, 214.

luxurious cars for the elites which composed their current market were not suitable for mass consumption and that if Germany was to reach mass motorization it would require a different design. Designing such a car was not a high priority because Germany lacked the “income revolution” that was taking place in the United States.¹¹⁵

The upper class and *nouveau riche* were instrumental in the development of the car on both sides of the Atlantic. Even in America, the car for the common person was still considered unlikely. But the American model was able to expand for the swelling customer base, making it possible to produce in a volume that would allow more and more people to drive. Mass motorization of Germany was always dealt with as something for which to prepare in the future and not a reality that could be dealt with in the present moment.

Yet, this economic problem was understood and couched in cultural terms as it became a fulcrum which German critics and proponents of the “American system” could pry by citing fundamental differences between Germany and America. For many Germans, this system was holistic, as so, production methods, political economy, cultural development in the arts, and social developments fit hand in glove together. Against this backdrop powerful illiberal narratives developed that purported alternatives to American hedonism and consumerism.¹¹⁶ These voices would help constitute much of the rhetoric of the National Socialists backlash against the progress of self interested capitalism.

¹¹⁵ Nolan, *Visions of Modernity*, 160.

¹¹⁶ Ernst Rudorff, *Heimatschutz*, (1901; reprint, Berlin: Reichl Verlag 1994), 69. “It is not a pleasing portrayal...but it corresponds to actuality. The world is not only uglier, more artificial, more Americanized with every day, but rather with our insisting and hunting after the illusions of supposed happiness we simultaneously [and] unremittingly undermine further and further the ground that sustains us.” Original German “Es ist keine erfreulich Darstellung, die wir gegeben haben, aber sie entspricht der Wirklichkeit. Die Welt wird nicht nur hässlicher, künstlicher, amerikanisierter mit jedem Tag, sondern mit unserem Drängen und Jagen nach den Trugbildern vermeintlichen Glücks unterwühlen wir zugleich unablässig, immer weiter und weiter den Boden, der uns trägt.” Self Translation.

Even though mass production did not take root before the First World War in Germany, German car culture did continue to grow. The remarkable aspect of car culture is that it can develop, as it did in Germany, with relatively few automobiles on the road. Car culture is as much about aspirations as it is ownership. As such, the German image of the automobile continued to develop in the Weimar period. One way car culture continued to grow in the absence of cars, which is rarely explored, is through motor sport and, more specifically, the spectacle of Grand Prix racing. Another avenue of growth is through writings in trade and popular journals where visionaries such as Josef Ganz imagine the future of automobiles and continue to see Germany as central to its development. In the years from 1904-1933 the German forms of production play a central role in keeping the car ‘German,’ at least in their own understanding of the differences between the definition of American and German cars. As mechanization was deferred for the more labor intensive process, many more German workers experienced this aspect of car culture. Mass motorization remains out of reach in the Weimar Republic; however, as a national issue, motorization of Germany gains a sense of urgency. The government would draft plans for a new system of highways and manufacturers moved forward with plans that would put a larger number of people behind the wheel despite the unstable financial situation. There was no cohesive opposition to modernization, even within the trade unions, but rather fractured complaints about some of the tradeoffs and byproducts, which was enough to shape German car culture’s future.

B. Small Cars for the Little People, Practical Cars for the German People

In 1925 the Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung published a comic that showed two wealthy men assembled around a grotesquely large automobile. Attached to the running boards of the titanic vehicle was a small automobile. The 1st gentleman begins: “A Fabulous Car! But why is there a

small car mounted to the sideboard?” The second man replies: “Oh, the Chauffeur uses that when he needs to go around the car to inspect car troubles.”¹¹⁷

German car culture in the 1920s moved in two different directions. One school of thought for automotive design continually pushed the innovation and refinement that was typical in Wilhelmine Germany. These machines, fused with new aesthetics and modern notions, would remain limited to the higher levels of society. The 1920s also saw an impulse to broaden access to the automobile which gained enthusiasm under a common assumption that a nation on wheels would fundamentally change daily life and remake social structure. Yet, at both levels German car cultures attempted to define itself against other national car cultures. The cartoon above appeared in a September issue of the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* ridiculing British luxury cars for their size. Even though the caricature remains generalized, a few points about the car make it stand out as British, and specifically, a Rolls Royce 40/50 Silver Ghost. First, the top of the steering wheel juts out over the right hand side of the car, which, in a time before Australian and Japanese car manufacturing, could only make it a British car. The hood ornament retains the general shape of the “Spirit of Ecstasy,” the art deco miniature sculpture that peered over the radiators of most Rolls Royce cars, and the general lines of the car, despite its exaggerated size, fits with the later models of Rolls Royce Silver Ghost 40/50. Yet, as a Mercedes advertisement in the same magazine in the same year, indicates, exaggerated stature seems, if British, to have some currency in Germany, as it shows the Mercedes drawn at the same dimensions as a train.¹¹⁸

German criticism of British luxuries went beyond size. An *ad absurdum* take on British luxury cars appeared later in the year titled, “Car with every convinence,” which pictured a car

¹¹⁷ *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, 11 October, 1925, 1318. “Ein fabelhafter Wagen! Aber wozu ist den das kleine Auto auf das Trittbrett montiert?” “Ach, das benutzt der Schofför, wenn er bei ‘ner Panne den Wagen ringsherum nachprüfen muß.” Self Translation.

¹¹⁸ Mercedes Ad, *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, No. 45, 8 November 1925, pp 1478.

with built in garden, makeup mirror for the modern woman in the back, dog house, and various other unnecessary additions.¹¹⁹ The British flag flying over the weather vain and the bull dog in the dog house give the car away as another English example. The *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* published an illustrated article that covered the Berlin Auto Show that expressed the same sentiments saying that “The German Auto industry, to a larger degree than other European countries, is not so much concerned with bringing out new designs, rather to make its production methods so efficient to enable a substantial reduction of the price of the products.”¹²⁰ The author believed that the thrust of innovation would be aimed at “making the car a device which can be operated without any in-depth technical knowledge,” since “the modern automobile is, and has been for a fairly long while, already such a perfected design that there is nothing more essential to improve on it.”¹²¹ In a much more even handed manner the author addresses the function of the car and dispels the notion that the automobile industry should push innovation further from the general public. The fact that the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* is by no means proletariat, in the 1920s the magazine embraces the cosmopolitan and modern achievements of German society, indicates the broader reach of the enthusiasm of expanding access to the automobile.

What remained unclear in 1925 was the degree that redesign was necessary to these goals. Germany’s failure to accomplish this task of mass motorization gives shape to much of

¹¹⁹ *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, no. 50 13 December 1925, 1676.

¹²⁰ “Das Automobil von Heute,” *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, no. 48, 29 November 1925. “Die deutsche Automobilindustrie ist in noch größerem Maße als die der anderen europäischen Länder nicht so sehr darauf bedacht, neukonstruktionen herauszubringen, als vielmehr ihre Fabrikationsmethoden so rationell zu gestalten, dass ein wesentliche Verbilligung der Erzeugnisse eintreten kann.” Self Translation.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* “Das Bestreben der Konstrukteure geht jetzt dahin, aus dem Wagen ein Geraet zu machen, dessen sich jeder ohne eingehende technishce Kenntnisse bedienen kann.” Self Translation. “Das Moderne Automobil stellt seit geraumen Zeit schon eine so vervollkommnete Konstruktion dar, dass es an ihm nichts Wesentliches mehr zu verbessern gibt.” Self Translation.

the historiographical understanding of Weimar's car culture. When describing the interwar period, Bernhard Rieger insists that:

In the twenties, even the most benevolent commentators would have struggled to portray Germany as a car nation. While the public was well aware that Germany lagged far behind other countries in terms of the automobile's proliferation, the topic never rose to the top of the public agenda. Debates about car matters were pushed into the background by the repeated social, political, and economic crises and conflicts that afflicted Weimar Germany. The country's low car ownership levels attracted limited public note because the issue itself elicited little public controversy. Among analysts, a broad consensus existed regarding the numerous material obstacles that made mass motorization a prospect far beyond Germany's horizon. As a result, calls to remedy this situation, for instance by designing a car for the wider population, surfaced merely intermittently. The idea of a 'people's car' never gained sharp public contours in the Weimar Republic but remained a rather fuzzy notion.¹²²

Despite these two connected conclusions, first that the Weimar Republic was not a car nation, and second, that the concept of the *Volkswagen*¹²³ remained secondary to the issues that plagued the Weimar Republic, the interwar period witnessed radical transformations in the mental world of the German automobile. Mass production of the automobile was stifled in Wilhelmine Germany partly because car design had developed away from the common man. Yet, Weimar Germany was full of optimism that the car could become more than a plaything of the wealthy. The *Volkswagen*, as Hiott points out, "was a generic term" for an inexpensive car for the people that was widely discussed in the 1920s.¹²⁴ Indeed, in 1923 the automotive publication *Automobile-Revue* published an article by Josef Ganz, which imagined that

things will develop with the automobile as they did for the horse, the railway, and the bicycle. Not the grand automobile, which for a long time, if not forever, will belong only to a small, privileged minority, but the middle-sized and especially

¹²² Rieger, *The People's Car*, 13.

¹²³ *Volkswagen* (in italics) indicates the concept of the *Volkswagen*, a small "people's car" rather than what we have come to know as the Volkswagen i.e. the Beetle or Volkswagen the company.

¹²⁴ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 8.

the small car... The day will come – more quickly than we think- when everyone will have a place in the garage.¹²⁵

The article goes on to imagine that one day the cost of the automobile might be included in one's rent, as a modern luxury equivalent to “gas, electricity, bathrooms, and central heating.”¹²⁶ In the same year this article was written, Ganz started designing a very small car, which he called the Ganz-Klein-Wagen, pun assumedly intended.¹²⁷ The most notable small car attempting to cater to the masses during the Weimar period came from German manufacturer Opel.

This automotive promise is evident in General Motors' interest in creating a presence in Germany in 1928 when it acquired Opel. General Motors believed that Germany was a growth market, despite the shocks of runaway inflation and unemployment earlier in the decade. GM wagered that Germany's economy and democratic government was stabilizing as “many sectors of [German] industry had attained or surpassed prewar output,” and “rising incomes [was] stimulating demand for cars.”¹²⁸ Proof of this demand was evidenced as early as 1924 with Opel's own compact car, a clear forerunner to the Volkswagen, which was mass produced in a 3.5 Million square foot factory using American equipment and production techniques.¹²⁹ Yet, Opel's implementation of these processes was much more of an exception than a rule. Likewise, Ford moved from an assembly shop in Berlin to a full production facility in 1929 at Cologne.

¹²⁵ Josef Ganz quoted in Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 40; Also quoted in Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 62.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Paul Schilperoord, *The Extraordinary Life of Josef Ganz, The Jewish engineer Behind Hitler's Volkswagen* (New York: RVP Publishers, 2009), 20; The name of Josef Ganz' creation is a play on his name, Ganz-Klein-Wagen in German means ‘very small car.’

¹²⁸ Henry Ashby Turner Jr., *General Motors and the Nazis: The Struggle for Control of Opel, Europe's Biggest Carmaker*, (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2005) 2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-6.

Within five years Ford had dozens of small factories across Germany manufacturing parts and assembling cars and trucks.¹³⁰

As Sachs notes, “In 1924 Opel introduced assembly-line production and copied, almost centimeter for centimeter, the Citroën [a French manufacturer] –without license, but,” breaking with the traditional black paint that was considered standard, the car donned with the “green paint job [that inspired] the name ‘Tree Frog,’”¹³¹ Officially, the car was named the Opel 4PS, and although the car was mechanically crude it received its affectionate name for its appearance and simplicity.¹³² As Hiott notes, the car was “a big step in Germany at the time because it sold well, a sign that the common man did indeed want greater mobility.”¹³³ The manufacturer Hanomag also produced a cheap small car which it advertised in *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* in 1926.¹³⁴ Along the same lines, the BMW Dixi began production in 1928.¹³⁵ These cars all failed due to technological inadequacies and low build quality, yet they mark a serious growth in the cultural interest of a motorized Germany.

The genesis of a car design which had the potential to become a *Volkswagen* arrived as early as 1921. First, Porsche designed a small car for Austro-Daimler called the *Sascha*.¹³⁶ Unsure of the concept of a car for the common man, Austro-Daimler commissioned Porsche to build it as a race car.¹³⁷ Following its success on the track, which received international recognition, the *Viennese Motoring Paper* noted, “if there was ever to be a design for a ‘car of

¹³⁰ Fink, *Automobile Age*, 255-8; Ford Print Advertisement “1-Liter Ford *Volkswagen*,” *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, no. 18, 1934, 636.

¹³¹ Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 42.

¹³² Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 91.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Hanomag Print Advertisement, “*Ich Liebe nur Einen, Hanomag, den Kleinen*,” *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, No. 37, September 1926.

¹³⁵ Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 42.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

the little man' one day, then surely it would come from something like this."¹³⁸ Second, in this same year, the Austrian engineer Edmund Rumpler's car, the Tropfen-Auto, or drop car, named after its tear drop shape, was presented to the public at the Berlin Auto Show.¹³⁹ Rumpler's car was called "the star of the Berlin Show."¹⁴⁰ Although visually unusual, as it resembled a boat rather than a car, the design had philosophical and technological similarities to the car Ferdinand Porsche would ultimately design and Hitler would approve. First, the car's atypical shape is one of the earliest attempts at what would later be called streamlining, or using aerodynamics to govern the car's shape. Another idiosyncrasy common to both cars was that the engine was rear-mounted.¹⁴¹ Following this development a new school of thought in automotive design emerged from the concept of mounting the engine over the rear axle. The prevailing logic was that moving the engine closer to the drive wheels cut down on the number of parts in the power train by eliminating the long driveshaft or propeller shaft. Also, when positioned correctly, this put the weight of the engine over the drive wheels which improved traction and handling. Josef Ganz was in attendance at the opening of the auto show and, inspired by the Tropfen-Auto's design, he wrote to the automotive publication *Klein Motor Sport* in 1922. Ganz's letter outlined the fundamental elements that could constitute a *Volkswagen* which would offer an alternative to the motorcycle. The car would have "an air-cooled, four stroke, rear-mounted 'horizontally opposed' or 'boxer' engine made of lightweight alloy, built as a single unit with a clutch and three-speed gearbox [transmission]."¹⁴²

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Ludvigsen, *Battle for the Beetle*, 9-14.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴² Schilperoord, *Josef Ganz*, 18-9.

Beyond Ganz, the car had other admirers. First among them were the designers and executives at Benz who sought to buy licensing rights for the Tropfen-Auto. Putting the car into production, however, faced some serious challenges. The chassis and suspension proved to be inadequate. That, coupled with Rumpler's dissatisfaction with the deal Benz offered for full licensing, led to the decision to modify the car into a grand prix racer for the 1923 racing season.¹⁴³ The car proved itself on the racetrack at Monza earning Benz a gold medal.¹⁴⁴

During Porsche's time as Technical Director at Daimler-Benz, Porsche developed projects that ranged from motorcycle designs to aircraft engines to high performance racecar. Yet one of the projects that served to unify Porsche's life work was the design of a small, affordable and reliable car. His last project at Daimler-Benz, after the difficulties Benz experienced getting licensing to produce the Tropfen-Auto, was to create a report "for cars much smaller than the company normally produced," including one called 5/25 and a car based on a 1.2 liter air cooled rear engine "with independent suspension and a semi-monocoque body."¹⁴⁵ These features would constitute the basic formula for the Volkswagen Beetle.¹⁴⁶ Ludvigsen notes that Benz engineer Josef Müller went on the record as saying, "A new era of popular motorization was announcing itself. This is reason enough to think anew about the overall design of the car, especially its space utilization."¹⁴⁷ Rejecting Porsche's design of the 5/25, Daimler-Benz decided to return to the basic design of the Tropfen-Auto to create a new model: the Mercedes-Benz Type 130. The company soon discovered that they had erred by placing the engine too far back, which made the car unwieldy to drive.

¹⁴³ Ludvigsen, *Battle for the Beetle*, 11.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Designing a functional small car entailed a whole new set of challenges than those experienced with designing a full sized car. Longer and wider wheelbases provide a more stable platform which affects the cars traction and handling and its ability to absorb shocks. A larger car can house a larger and simpler engine. Hiott illuminates this struggle when she says, “making a small version of one of the more advanced cars like Hitler’s beloved Mercedes was an idea that proved both economically and technologically flawed: The type of engine, the design, the materials, and especially the expense, simply did not allow for a car that was ‘the same, but smaller.’”¹⁴⁸ The small modern car was truly a unique problem for Weimar German and a life-long passion for Porsche.

After working on a variety of projects for Austro-Daimler and Daimler-Benz, Porsche, famous in his own right as a designer, decided to leave Daimler-Benz and create his own consulting firm in 1928. He opened his doors in April of 1931 in Stuttgart, “*Dr. Ing. H.c. F. Porsche Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung, Konstruktionen und Beratungen für Motoren und Fahrzeugbau.*”¹⁴⁹ Porsche surrounded himself with family members and a few pilfered designers from established firms including his long time friend and second in command, Karl Rabe.¹⁵⁰ Stuttgart was the logical home for Porsche’s new venture with its proximity to the electrical firm Bosch, piston manufacturer Mahle, engine component manufacturer Hirth, and the coachworks (body work) of Reutters.¹⁵¹ There he would continue to work on designs under contracts from other car manufacturers with more freedom in selecting projects. Porsche numbered the projects his company undertook and Project 12, commissioned by the motorcycle manufacturer Zündapp, was slated to be a small car for the common man. Projects 1-6 are lost to

¹⁴⁸ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 93.

¹⁴⁹ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 95;. Hopfinger, *Volkswagen Story*, 45.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 45, 56.

history or, as some have speculated, Porsche started with Project 7 to make the business look more viable.¹⁵² The designers at Porsche dropped everything to complete Project 12 on the tight deadline of three months.¹⁵³ The designs for Zündapp produced three prototypes; however, Zündapp's resolve was shaken as moving from motorcycles to cars seemed financially impossible. Porsche shopped the small car around and received considerable interest from another motorcycle manufacturer NSU; however, a contract with the Italian firm, Fiat, prevented NSU from expanding into car production.¹⁵⁴ In effect, the basic design for the Volkswagen was completed before Hitler came to power in 1933. The car already has its iconic shape as well as its novel air cooled engine that was mounted behind the passenger compartment.¹⁵⁵ Once Hitler took up the cause of the Volkswagen it was mostly a process of refining and updating this design to allow for mass production on an unprecedented scale. There is a prevailing view that Weimar Germany was racked and ruined by financial crisis that prevented its growth; however, the development of the small car shows that Germany was on a path, albeit a slow one, to mass motorization.

Edmund Rumpler's Tropfen-Auto, Porsche's *Sascha*, the Opel Hanomag, the Mercedes 130, the BMW Dixi, , and even Josef Ganz's *Ganz-Klein-Wagen*, and indeed Porsche's Project 12 were all attempts to create a people's car before 1933.¹⁵⁶ The criticism and praise of these cars created conversations in a wide range of automotive journals and magazines. Koshar reminds us that there were, "dozens of such magazines... including the *Allgemeine Automobil Zeitung*... which appealed to a general audience; the contentious *Motor-Kritik*, whose editors

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 48-50.

¹⁵⁵ Ludvigsen, *Battle for Beetle*, 14.

¹⁵⁶ Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 51-7.

vociferously touted the advantages of small, fast cars... the glossy *Motor*, which appealed to the upper-class driving... and the gear heads bible, the *Automobiltechnische Zeitschrift*. (the technical automotive newspaper)¹⁵⁷ The list goes on. Explicating the presence of such diverse sources, Koshar continues,

there is little doubt that German car magazines offered information on the whole panorama of car culture. Readers could find tips on driving, racing accessories, service and maintenance, tourist routes, insurance, traffic regulations, and 'speed traps,' coverage of racing events and automobile shows, automotive clothing and cosmetics, and vacation gear.¹⁵⁸

Coupling these developments with the return of the annual auto show in Berlin, they create the very picture of an automotive nation.

Germany also showed other signs that the car was at the cultural forefront. The first is the way that motor racing gripped the nation. Reiger begins by saying that "The virtually boundless enthusiasm the car elicited in Weimar Germany manifested itself most visibly among the mass audiences at the nation's racetracks."¹⁵⁹ Specifically, he looks at the 1932 German Grand Prix raced on the AVUS track which attracted by his estimates, "over three hundred thousand spectators," some of whom were "unemployed who went hungry to afford a standing-room ticket."¹⁶⁰ The spectacle of these early Grand Prix would still inspire awe today, but especially for the German public as grand prix racing in this time was dominated by German heroes like Manfred von Brauchitsch and Rudolf Caracciola. Reiger recounts the coverage of the 1932 German Grand Prix received in the mainstream newspaper *Berliner Tageblatt* that "the spectators were richly rewarded with a 'gigantic struggle'" in that Brauchitsch and Caracciola,

¹⁵⁷ Rudy Koshar, "Germans at the Wheel: Cars and Leisure Travel in Interwar Germany," in *History of Leisure*, ed. Rudy Koshar (New York: Berg, 2002), 218.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Reiger, *The People's Car*, 39.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

“‘cased each other’ at ‘terrifying speeds’ in excess of 140 miles per hour.”¹⁶¹ These events inspired a 1932 film that was centered on Grand Prix racing, *Kampf*. The story focuses on a love triangle that embitters two racecar drivers and long time friends, the cheesy story is held together by thrilling race scenes that were captured at actual grands prix.¹⁶²

The second sign that mass motorization was already on Germany’s mind involves the spatial transformation of Germany to accommodate mass motorization by building the infrastructure including roads, gas stations, and parking garages in anticipation of wider access to the automobile. Sachs outlines this procession, “the first gasoline pump in Hamburg in 1923, the first lighted signal lamp in Berlin in 1928, and in 1929 the first parking garage.”¹⁶³ Sachs goes on to show how the most necessary transformation was of a “penetrable,” public space: “in the twenties, the first images of a spatial order defined by traffic started to appear.”¹⁶⁴ With these new roads, clear laws of right of way would come. Hiott notes that during this time “plans were drawn for a great highway system that would connect Germany and pave the way, literally, for a new way of thinking about the motor car.”¹⁶⁵ Yet, these programs of infrastructure faced challenges in implementation. The plans for the creation of “Nur-Autostraßen,” (highways for cars only) were hindered at many levels.¹⁶⁶ Given Germany’s limited social diffusion for the automobile some viewed the roads as streets for the rich. The roads were influenced by special interest groups and designed by committee. Rivalries emerged in planning over small details like whether to plant fruit trees or bushes along the roadways. Perhaps most critically, the new

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Erich Schönfelder, Haro van Peski, *Kampf*, 1932.

¹⁶³ Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 45.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 78.

¹⁶⁶ Thomas Zeller, *Driving Germany: The Landscape of the German Autobahn, 1930-1970* Trans. Thomas Dunlap, Berghahn Books: New York 2010) 47.

highways had to compete with more popular proposals to expand the existing network of roadways.¹⁶⁷ Thus, these developments were continually deferred.

C. Production in Weimar

The changes which occurred in the trade unions concerning mechanized labor ultimately display progress in Germany. As Hiott illustrates, Germans did not strive for the duplication of the Model T as “too much innovation had happened in the past ten years for Ford’s Model T, the first People’s car in the world, to serve as anything more than a metaphorical example.”¹⁶⁸ The idea of the automobile animated discussions that transcended production methods. Sach identifies this linkage in the metal workers’ union newspaper, *Metallarbeiter*, in 1930. The author in this article begins by lamenting that high tariffs are stifling Germany’s move toward mass motorization, which slows economic growth. “The motor vehicle, that fun-filled, purring, and devilishly fast factory on wheels, has changed our entire public and social life in a few short decades.”¹⁶⁹ The author predicts that, “the transformation [Fordism] will continue in Europe, notably in the area of wage policy. This will, in turn, foster and increase in the income of the masses and their social advance... the revolutionary automobile will serve the cause of the revolutionary working class.”¹⁷⁰ This optimism has to be counterbalanced and explained against the reality that Germany did not experience a revolution in production and consumption in Weimar. Instead, what Weimar experienced was growth in production and consumption. Yet, this growth remained limited by several interconnected factors. First, lending institutions and executives were not convinced that mass production would result a net gain. Rieger notes that “businessmen warned that Fordist mass production would undermine German industry’s

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 47-52.

¹⁶⁸ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 93.

¹⁶⁹ Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 41.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

reputation as a purveyor of high quality products.”¹⁷¹ Second, most sectors that made gestures towards rationalization did so half-heartedly by adopting Taylorist management styles without the mechanization of production prominent in Fordism.¹⁷² Part of this limited move is tied to the scarcity of capital and the nervousness of businessmen. A third factor is that as wages increased so too did unemployment. This phenomenon gave credence to some workers’ fears that rationalization would make many jobs obsolete. Finally, the benefits of improved industry could not be realized because the German reliance on price fixing kept prices too high and out of the hands of many workers which defeated the purpose of increased production. To some degree, it is possible to say that these developments centered around common understandings of how start industrial rationalization- whether it starts with lower costs as the industrialists believed or if it started with higher wages as workers tended to propose.¹⁷³

As for a model of production, except in the case of American controlled Opel, car manufacturing remained labor intensive. If World War I changed German society into a mass consumer culture society, as Sachs suggests, surprisingly, it changed very little in terms of how the automobile was produced.¹⁷⁴ Daimler was pushed into adopting mass production methods during the war for the creation of airplane engines, but after the defeat the company reverted back to prewar production methods.¹⁷⁵ Berghahn indicates that this was largely the result of entrepreneurs’ and industrialists’ dependence on price fixing set by the cartels which, in these businessmen’s minds, stabilized the economy and insured profits.¹⁷⁶ Notably, Mary Nolan indicates that the trade unions became receptive of Fordist production methods. She gives the

¹⁷¹ Rieger, *The People’s Car*, 28.

¹⁷² Nolan, *Visions of Modernity*, 131.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁷⁴ Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 58; Bellon, *Mercedes in Peace and War*, 14.

¹⁷⁵ Bellon, *Mercedes in Peace and War*, 14.

¹⁷⁶ Berghahn, “Fordism and West German Industrial Culture,” 148.

example of a trade unionist who visited Ford's Highland Park facility and remarked, "each individual worker and each feature of the plant is fitted into the factory whole with planned expediency...[T]he whole is something organic."¹⁷⁷ Social Democrats were captivated by Ford's five-dollar-day program which paid laborers an unheard of wage of five dollars for an eight hour day.¹⁷⁸ Mary Nolan completes this image by saying:

Social Democrats saw high wages and low prices as the prerequisite for successful Fordism. To be sure, the Fordist wage-and-price policy was in workers' self interests, as no movement leader would deny. Ford seemed able to combine the incompatible by increasing productivity without increasing exploitation, and by paying workers more for produced goods which cost less. According to a German worker who had been employed in both the Ruhr and Detroit, 'In the current situation it is more pleasant to allow oneself to be exploited by Ford than by Krupp.'¹⁷⁹

For all the discussion of the American method in this time period, the image of America was more of a mirage in which Germans saw incommensurable images and responded to different stimuli. This returns to the problem of the receivers of Americanization that Rob Kroes describes in his study of European youth culture in the post-war years that, "There is always the further question as to why, at the level of the individual reception and appropriation of the rival constructions, people opt for particular readings of their collective identity."¹⁸⁰ Moreover, in the realm of the automobile, Reiger notes that these visions of modernity which came from the encounters Nolan describes were not aimed at improving the German automobile industry. Rieger states, "Germans of the Weimar era looked upon Ford as a mass manufacturer rather than a car manufacturer," and that "for German car manufacturers, Fordism remained an elusive goal

¹⁷⁷ Nolan, *Visions of Modernity*, 37.

¹⁷⁸ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 120-3.

¹⁷⁹ Nolan, *Visions of Modernity*, 51.

¹⁸⁰ Kroes, "American Mass Culture and European Youth Culture," in Axel Schildt and Detlef Siegfried eds. *Between Marx and Coca-Cola: Youth Cultures in Changing European Societies, 1960-1980* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006) 91.

as long as the sector was dominated by comparatively small companies unable to shoulder the investments necessary for mass production.”¹⁸¹

These reasons support Rieger’s conclusions that Germany was far from becoming a nation on wheels in the Weimar era. Yet the fact that the Weimar Republic was not able to realize the overly optimistic goals concerning production, or that rationalization did not live up to the rhetoric of its proponents does not mean that Germany did not have a car culture in the Weimar era. Car culture flowered with possibility.

D. Conclusion

The concept of the Volkswagen did not come from Hitler, nor exclusively from Porsche, but from the car culture of the Weimar era. The shifting focus that the literature on Volkswagen has had in recent years elucidates this point. More attention has been given to the designer and engineer Josef Ganz, most notably Paul Schilperoord’s monograph, *The Extraordinary Life of Josef Ganz: The Jewish Engineer Behind Hitler’s Volkswagen*. Yet, instead of recognizing how the *Volkswagen* was a cultural project that circulated throughout Weimar, Schilperoord suggests that Hitler and Porsche “poached” the concept from Ganz. A similar claim can be made concerning Hans Ledwinka’s work at the Czech auto manufacturer, Tatra. The visual similarities between the Beetle and 1934 T77 cannot be denied.¹⁸² This made for some interesting theatre at the patent office as Porsche and Ledwinka attempted to stake a claim for the basic configuration of the small car. Yet, as any T77 owner will be the first to say, the Volkswagen Beetle and the Tatra are very different cars. The Tatra has a longer sweeping body, and although it has the rear mounted and air cooled engine, it is a V-8. Likewise, it has four-

¹⁸¹ Rieger, *The People’s Car*, 28-9.

¹⁸² Ludvigsen, *Battle for the Beetle*, 221-3.

wheel independent suspension, yet it does not have the torsion bar suspension that allowed Porsche to give his car secure handling on such a short wheel base.¹⁸³

The question, “Who invented the Volkswagen?” is much like the question, “Who invented Jazz?” While many personalities can vie for that honor, it is more of a development of a particular atmosphere in a particular time and place. Ultimately, neither Ganz nor Ledwinka, while important to this atmosphere, can claim to have put Germany behind the wheel. In fact, neither could Porsche and Hitler since their project never actualizes in the Third Reich. The significant aspect that escapes many authors’ attention, is that despite the financial turmoil of the 1920s, Weimar Germany stood poised to become a nation on wheels. The number of registered cars in Germany tells part of this tale: in 1924, German streets hosted only 130,000 passenger vehicles. By 1932, that number swelled to half of a million.¹⁸⁴

The Volkswagen was one of many readymade and popular issues that Hitler could seize upon in his campaign for the hearts and minds of the German public. It was a clear deficiency that Germans lagged behind their European and importantly their American counterparts which Hitler diagnosed as a symptom of a larger disease. Economic constraints as well as issues with production hampered this growth, yet, the demand for the automobile was evident. Weimar Germany could claim, as Sachs notes, “The people’s car and the freeway – the two pillars of a society on wheels- had already been conceived of at the beginning of the 1930s, and the ideas pressed for realization.”¹⁸⁵

III. *Modernisierungbewältigung des Nationalsozialismus: Coping with Nazi Modernization*

¹⁸³ Ludvigsen, *Battle for the Beetle*, 223.

¹⁸⁴ Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 33.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

In the 1990s, as the concept of bringing the Beetle back began to circulate in the boardrooms in Wolfsburg, the idea was met with considerable resistance because the classic Beetle was “too emotional,” and held too many different meanings.¹⁸⁶ In this ambiguous corporate language, it is not clear what these managers were referencing. Certainly, the nostalgia of the Beetle’s success in the post-war period, its role as a symbol for counter culture, and its subsequent image in popular culture had created a hype and mythology about the car that would be hard to live up to. But as much as it was a reminder of these positive times, Volkswagen’s managers were probably equally concerned about re-igniting the darker image that the company had to slay in the 1950s: the car and the factory’s origins in the Third Reich.¹⁸⁷

Volkswagen’s management is not the only group to be struck by the task of negotiating the multidimensional aspect of the historic car. This is what makes the study of the Volkswagen so viable- its ability to tell many different stories. Yet, with the exceptions of Hans Mommsen and Manfred Grieger’s inquiry into forced labor in the VW factory and Bernhard Reiger’s recent contribution, when it comes to the Nazis, the literature has mostly used the Nazis to understand the Beetle with little attention paid to how the Beetle can give insights into the Nazis. This disengagement reflects a tendency to shy away from controversies in the larger historiography of the Third Reich and treat the car as faultless witness to Nazi misconduct.

The issues that historians are forced to deal with when working with the Nazis’ modernization policies, including the construction of the Autobahn and the development of the

¹⁸⁶ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 390.

¹⁸⁷ The Discussion of the Beetle’s return coincides roughly to the publication of Hans Mommsen and Manfred Grieger’s *Das Volkswagenwerk und seine Arbeiter im Dritten Reich*, which was commissioned by Volkswagen AG to present the darkest chapter in the company’s history. However, it is likely coincidence since the 1200 page book took many years to prepare for publication and also since the new Beetle was originally only considered for the American market and *Das Volkswagenwerke* was never translated into English.

Volkswagen, is that these policies cut both ways. The difficulty arises because the historian is confronted with definite policies aimed at “progressive” goals but also with the insight and foreknowledge of the Third Reich’s bloody misdeeds and ruination of Europe. Neil Gregor cautions historians that work within these parameters in his study of Mercedes-Benz when he says that

An examination of National Socialism that places those secular trends common to most European industrial societies at the center of its analysis, however, necessarily marginalizes those aspects of National Socialism by which the peculiarity of the regime is defined and wherein its singularity lies (its genocide policies). The regime’s racist ideology and policy and its imperialist expansionism – i.e. its core characteristics – are necessarily relativized by an interpretative framework constructed around ‘modernization.’¹⁸⁸

The Scylla and Charybdis that historians have to navigate is in acknowledging the material conditions and daily life in the Third Reich without losing sight of the Holocaust. This issue has stabilized and has become more commonplace in the last decade with more and more works looking at the mental structures of Nazism and daily life in the Third Reich. Yet, Gregor’s fears remain palpable even among such investigatory consensus. Looking broadly at the literature that focuses on modernization in the Third Reich, a number of strategies emerge to help manage such risky propositions. First, there has been a tendency to treat Nazi modernization efforts as a part of a wider propaganda campaign.¹⁸⁹ Works in this genre attempt to divide Nazi policy into rhetoric and action, where common desires of the general public are a Trojan horse for the genocidal policies of the Nazis. There is some concern with this approach as it relegates the evil

¹⁸⁸ Gregor *Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich*, 3.

¹⁸⁹ Wolfgang König, *Volkswagen, Volksempfänger, Volksgemeinschaft: “Volkprodukte” im Dritten Reich*, (Paderborn, Germany: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2004). This division between action and rhetoric is discussed in Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, (New York: Vintage Books) 2005; David Welch, “Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People’s Community,” in “Understanding Nazi Germany,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (2004): 213-38.

of the Third Reich to the high command and the public inherits victim status by being duped into following Hitler. Intent is a key element to these studies; however, the approach itself does allow the evolution of policy behind fixed ideas. The second strategy is an ontological approach which erodes the distinction between rhetoric and program by looking for the interconnectivity of Nazi *Weltanschauung* and thereby identifying the sinister in the sanguine. This can be done to various effects, notably with this approach the contradictions and irrationalities of Nazi thought and action become more manageable but the common element of assuming cohesiveness hampers the analysis' ability to competently handle inconsistencies and evolution in thought and policy.

The last method for discussing Nazi modernization policy attempts to insulate the study from the outset by identifying specific parameters that exclude Auschwitz. Yet, the Holocaust is such a strong feature and interpretative framework for the majority of Modern German historiography that these authors routinely pay some lip service to the victims of Nazi modernization. The value of such an approach rests in its ability to relegate some aspects of the Third Reich as unrelated or unimportant to the genocide program. During the heyday of German historiography based on Cold War political discourse, the so-called *Historikerstreit*, a line of thinking developed around the rationalizing program of the Nazis which sought to understand the entire development of the Holocaust as an expression of economic rationalization.¹⁹⁰ While theoretically interesting, there is much to be desired in such explanations on empirical and theoretical grounds as I will discuss below. For the moment, it would suffice to say that studies on Nazi economics, modernization efforts, and automotive production have disproven the value

¹⁹⁰ Ulrich Herbert, "Labour and Extermination: Economic Interest and the Primacy of *Weltanschauung* in National Socialism," *Past and Present* 138 (1993).

of such works, in essence, by saying that economic policy was governed by racist ideology; not the other way around.¹⁹¹

No single strategy for dealing with Nazi modernizing policy has proved to be a magic bullet for killing the Nazi legacy in explanation. A mix of these strategies have been employed on the Volkswagen project, which helps elucidate the Volkswagen's common use as an example of more expansive principles in other studies concerning the larger issue of Nazi modernization.¹⁹² However, the canon of Volkswagen literature has mostly employed the third strategy of insulation by making the Volkswagen story a redemptive one and penning the Third Reich as a dark middle chapter, uncritically demonstrating the principle of *Stunde Null* (ignoring continuities of post-war Germany and the Third Reich), or otherwise bracketing off the Third Reich. Taking the two most recent works devoted to Volkswagen, Hiott's *Thinking Small* and Rieger's *The People's Car*, one is struck by this pattern of repression. The Third Reich is clearly present in Hiott's work, but except for a few gestures, the time period is dealt with superficially as her title for part two, "The Darkest Hours come Just before Dawn," might suggest. This blurry image of the Third Reich is compounded by the book's Tarantino-esque structure that jumps through time and space. Rieger is able to extract much more from the time period by expanding his analysis to include a new Reich Highway Code in May 1934. This law lessened regulation and restrictions including speed limits and many right of way laws in hopes that people would revive chivalry and choose to live selflessly in a *Verkehrsgemeinschaft* (traffic

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Adam Tooze, *Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) 150-7; Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning und Mussolini and Hitler*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2007) 337; Zeller, *Driving Germany*, 52.

community).¹⁹³ From that analysis Rieger is able to discover some core elements of Nazi ideology that help explain significant features of the regime and the car. Yet, Rieger's emphasis is likewise in the post-war period which renders his analysis of the Third Reich a touch impressionistic. In short, Rieger engages the pertinent discussions but does not dwell there long, meaning there are a few points that can be added to Rieger's account.

A. *Volksgemeinschaft* and the *Volkspunkte*: An Ideology beyond Expense

Bringing all of these threads together, the Volkswagen is highly instructive for understanding the ambitions and the limits of the Third Reich in the two critical areas of production and consumption. As for ambitions, the impetus governing the transformation of both production and consumption stemmed from the bone and sinew of Nazi ideology: community (*Volksgemeinschaft*).¹⁹⁴ This exclusive view of community gave the Nazi movement its emotional appeal, instructed its racial programs, and justified the Nazi mandate for war. But Nazi views of community had limits too. In terms of production, the Volkswagen evidences a limited resistance to Nazi policy by the established car manufacturers in their reluctance to act outside of their own interest for the common good.¹⁹⁵ Hitler originally charged these manufacturers with the task of realizing the Volkswagen. In essence, Hitler asked them to put themselves out of business but they were able to forestall its development for four years until Hitler moved the program completely under Nazi control.¹⁹⁶ The time that they bought here was more valuable than they could have ever realized, since the Nazi priorities began to shift around 1936 and by 1939 the Volkswagen project was completely consumed by the war. Expanding the

¹⁹³ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 53.

¹⁹⁴ See Martina Steber, Bernhard Gotto ed. *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany: Social Engineering and Private Lives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹⁹⁵ Gregor, *Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich*, 49-56.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12, 51; Hopfinger, *Volkswagen Story*, 78-80;

literature to include works on other car manufacturers, particularly Mercedes-Benz, helps to indicate the significance of the Third Reich's motorization policy to the overall program proposed by Nazism and the ways that it was frustrated and thwarted.

In the present day, it is hard to put the auto industry's resistance to the regime into absolute moral terms because it showed that industry had some power to resist the regime, yet, industry often actively engaged in Holocaust programs; specifically through utilizing forced labor camps. Yet, using only these two data points does not capture the complexity of the relationship between industry and the regime.¹⁹⁷ The regime had become impatient to industry's feet dragging tactics and by 1936 the consequences for further resistance became much more severe.¹⁹⁸ In essence, at least in the automotive world, industry had spent its resistance capital. Yet, it is important to preserve the complexity and avoid the other absolute oversimplification that the regime imposed these programs on a reluctant industry. Industry's compliance to the directives of the Nazi high command are one of many (albeit an important one) points where moral consciousness failed to intervene in the wobbly trajectory of the Third Reich.

Moving from production to consumption, the key concept that is often overlooked and underappreciated in the study of the Volkswagen is how it was part of a larger program of consumer goods known as *Volksprodukte*.¹⁹⁹ The *Volksprodukte* were intended to ape American-

¹⁹⁷ For two perspectives based on this argument see Roth, *Nazismus gleich Fordismus? Die Deutsche Autoindustrie in den dreißiger Jahren*,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialgeschichte des 20. Und 21. Jahrhunderts* 5, no. 4 (1990). Ulrich Herbert, “Labour and Extermination: Economic Interest and the Primacy of Weltanschauung in National Socialism,” *Past and Present* 138 (1993).

¹⁹⁸ Tooze, *Wages of Destruction*, 221-223.

¹⁹⁹ The major exception to this being Wolfgang König, *Volkswagen, Volksempfänger, Volksgemeinschaft: “Volksprodukte” im Dritten Reich*, (Paderborn, Germany: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2004). Yet, König takes a very narrow view of the significance of these products placing them as instruments of propaganda.

style consumer culture, or at least what Hitler thought he saw in American consumer culture.²⁰⁰

Hitler thought that the *Volksprodukte* could do specific socialist work for the Reich by eroding material distinctions between classes, which was something that Hitler admired in American culture. On Prince Louis Ferdinand's departure for America, Hitler instructed him to "tell Mr. Ford... I shall do my best to put his theories into practice in Germany... I have come to the conclusion that the motorcar, instead of being a class dividing element, can be the instrument for uniting the different classes, just as it has done in America..."²⁰¹

Parallel to the frictions between regime and industry, these programs of *Volksprodukte* are considered failures at two levels. First, the only successful *Volksprodukt* (singular) that was produced was the people's radio, *Volksempfänger*. None of the other proposed consumer goods ever made it past the drafting table. Second, these products were a part of other ideological programs that impressed *Volksgemeinschaft*; including the "Strength through Joy" movement, (*Kraft durch Freude*) and "Beauty of Work" programs (*Schönheit der Arbeit*).²⁰² A loose consensus in historical inquiry has developed that is unconvinced of the power these programs had in remaking the German public and fundamentally altering their relationships to one another.²⁰³ Even in the warmest embraces of Nazism, older understandings of German society including class, gender, and confession still governed social interaction. In the few places where

²⁰⁰ I discuss other ways of interpreting other motivations for the *Volksprodukte*, notably profit, in Stuart Bailey, "Volkswagen and the Volksprodukte: The Failed Revolution in Production and Consumption in the Third Reich," *The Ozark Historical Review* 43, 2014 1-18)

²⁰¹ Hitler in James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 113.

²⁰² Welch, "Propaganda and Volksgemeinschaft," 213-38.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*; Pamela E. Swett, *Selling under the Swastika: Advertising and Commercial Culture in Nazi Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2013) 120. Tooze, *Wages of Destruction*, 162-3; S. Jonathan Wiesen, "National Socialism and Consumption," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012) 446; John Connelly, "The Uses of Volksgemeinschaft: Letters to the NSDAP Kreisleitung Eisenach, 1939-1940," *Journal of Modern History*, 68, no.4 (December 1996): 889-930.

these products are discussed, these failures somewhat provide their own causal explanation for why the *Volksprodukte* failed.²⁰⁴ They never materialized and they had less of an impact on German social division which was their intention.

Yet, there is a unifying and more explanatory cause for the reasons the *Volksprodukte* failed, namely that the Nazis could not control the concept in the public sphere. Consumer culture marketed goods in the name of *Volksprodukte*, and this simultaneous development, or copy-cat production, in the public sector diluted the ideological message. In the two advertisements from the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* the concept of *Volksprodukte* is invoked. One advertisement for the Ford “Volkswagen” stresses many of its German and community centered aspects like charity. Counterintuitively, the ad speaks of these cars as being an example of “Ford quality and German production,” when the two major conceptual currents in German car culture had been emphasizing Ford production and German quality. Historian of Third Reich advertising practices Pamela E. Swett notes the close control that Nazi leadership put on the advertising industry, and this ad may be an example of the push for advertisers to toe the party line.²⁰⁵ Yet, it appears that Ford Deutschland is doing much more than simply pandering to the regime’s concept of community and thus has internalized the nationalist and social aspects of Nazi consumption. But on closer inspection, Ford is perpetuating class divisions by offering an entry level car “Köln” alongside a more expensive model “Rheinland.” The hope for the Volkswagen was that if everyone drove the same car then class animosities between worker and

²⁰⁴ Tooze also considers what the *Volksprodukte*’s failures meant for Nazi policy makers, and sees the justification of war as a response to the failures to imprint *Volksgemeinschaft* onto the public.

²⁰⁵ Swett, *Selling under the Swastika*, 94.

manger would disappear. In the second advertisement the ideological message of community through consumption is simply reduced to product affordability.²⁰⁶

In the early days of the new Reich, consumer culture often tried to attach itself to the popularity of the Nazi movement. Victor Klemperer documented the changing culture of the Third Reich and notes in his diary on 22 March 1933, “In a pharmacy toothpaste with the swastika.”²⁰⁷ Whether one takes this mimicry as stemming from opportunistic capitalism or an overwhelming enthusiasm for the Nazis it does not change the fact that many of these products miss the point of the Nazi consumption program. Nazi abhorrence of these facsimiles renders the significance of the *Volksprodukte* in revealing that they extend beyond the framework of instrumentality, the only approach that historians have championed with the *Volksprodukte*, a view that evaluates these goods solely as a means of propaganda and/or a means to improve living standards of the German public.²⁰⁸ If that were true, that these goods were mere means to ends, the replication of these objectives in public spaces would have been embraced as free advertising for the Nazi regime or seen as evidence of the improved standard of living that contrasted Weimar scarcity. Yet, Nazi response to the commodification of their ideology could not have been clearer. In the months following the seizure of power in 1933, Minister of Propaganda, Josef Goebbels, crafted a law which forbade the use of National Socialist images and symbols for commercial ends (*Gesetz zum Schutz der National Symbole*).²⁰⁹ The regime saw this as a reflected image of how the public understood Nazi modernity, and as such, these

²⁰⁶ “Machen Sie mit, Gewinnen Sie” Ford ‘Volkswagen’ Print Advertisement, *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* no. 18, 6 May 1934; “The People’s Radio of the Typewriter: the Typewriter that everyone can afford.” Olympia Print Advertisement, *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* no. 9 28, February 1935 pg 280.

²⁰⁷ Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years 1933-1941*, Trans. Martin Chalmers (New York: The Modern Library 1999) 9.

²⁰⁸ Swett, *Selling under the Swastika*, 145.

²⁰⁹ Jeremy Aynsley, *Designing Modern Germany*, (London: Reaktion Books 2009) 128.

products further muddied the ideological water. When Opel showed Hitler *their* Volkswagen at the Berlin Auto Show, an automobile that better fit Hitler's requirements for a people's car, he fumed, "Gentlemen! There can be only one Volkswagen, not ten."²¹⁰

This engagement with Nazi ideology bears its weight on how the story of Volkswagen and the Third Reich inform one another and serves as an important backdrop for any narrative of Volkswagen in this time. Acknowledging these connections should address Gergor's concerns about emphasizing secular trajectories of Nazi modernization policy as it sees them as operating in the same logic as the extermination camps. This interpretive framework is able to do this by demonstrating Tooze's principle, which he deftly cultivates in the pages of *Wages of Destruction: The Making and the Breaking of the Nazi Economy*, that Nazi economic policy was subordinate to cultural policy. The view goes beyond treating popular programs like the *Volksprodukte* as discrete elements of propaganda, that is to say, they were the means to more serious ends. This approach also complicates the nature of cultural power in the Third Reich by demonstrating the Nazis' inability to impress certain aspects of certain ideas monolithically onto its subjects. Furthermore, evaluating the interconnectivity of the *Volksprodukte* and the ideology that underpinned them goes a long way to resolving the false dichotomy in Third Reich historiography that pitted materialist motivations against ideological ones.²¹¹ Importantly for this thesis, this transforms the car from a mere object into a manifestation of a ultranationalist ethos, which ascribed extraordinary significance to finding and implementing a German mode of production and consumption. Most of all, it strips away the insulation that usually surrounds the Volkswagen narrative and integrates Volkswagen more fully into the historiographical discussion concerning Nazi modernization policy.

²¹⁰ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 124.

²¹¹ Wiesen, "National Socialism and Consumption," 446.

B. The Volkswagen Story

The Volkswagen is an example *par excellence* of the technological system that Thomas P. Hughes describes in his essay, “The Evolution of Large Technological Systems,” as it can be traced in ever widening circles encompassing “physical artifacts,... organizations... manufacturing firms... regulatory laws [and] natural resources.”²¹² Yet its fundamental nature is not technological in the traditional sense, rather the Volkswagen became a part of a system committed to the cultural production of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. In many ways the Volkswagen was the linchpin that would render the varied programs of modernization consistent bridging work and leisure, technology and the environment, materialism and transcendental spiritualism. The Volkswagen was integrally connected to transportation network policy (most notably the autobahn), private organizations like Reich Confederation of the German Auto Industry (RDA), party organizations like Strength through Joy, the Berlin Auto Show, and environmental resources and human capital in the form of forced labor. In this way, the technological system to which the Volkswagen belonged was “both socially constructed and society shaping,” yet it would never attain the ultimate goals the regime aspired to, which would be the small car’s saving grace in the post-war era.²¹³

In Weimar, the car for the common man was discussed in public and enthusiast circles, designed and redesigned but ultimately the plans were always made for some future date. Hitler wanted to give clear signals to the automotive industry that the time to implement these plans had come. Eleven days after becoming chancellor, Hitler gave the opening address at the 1933 International Automobile Show in Berlin, his first public address in that capacity. Riding a wave

²¹²Thomas P. Hughes, “The Evolution of Large Technological Systems,” in eds. Wiebe E. Bijer, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor Pinch, *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in Sociology and History of Technology*, (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press 2012) 45.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

of recovery and signs of incremental growth in the automotive industry, Hitler's intent was to signal to auto manufacturers in attendance that the time had come to implement these designs and put Germany behind the wheel.²¹⁴ The program that year carried the name "The Will to Motorization." This is perhaps an example of Mark Mazower's observation that fascists often "turn[ed] 'economic problems' into 'questions of will,' which was another way of saying the leadership had no idea what to do next."²¹⁵ Yet, in this instance, Hitler took the dais with more than poetic flourishing and oratory fervor, he had a concrete plan to remove the structural impediments that he believed stifled mass motorization in Weimar Germany. He claimed

I do not wish to neglect the chance of communicating my idea of what must in [the] future be done for this, perhaps, the most important industry: (1) removal of state representation of motor vehicle traffic management interests from the traditional management framework; (2) gradual implementation of tax relief; (3) commencement and execution of a large-scale plan of street construction; and (4) support for motor sport events.²¹⁶

Within the year Hitler made good on each of these four promises, lessening restrictions for obtaining a driving license, transforming traffic laws, cutting taxes on registering vehicles, breaking ground on a national highway system and funding two German Grand Prix racing teams, Mercedes-Benz and Auto Union, which were so dominant that the two teams only real form of competition was one another.²¹⁷

In 1933 Hitler never referenced the creation of a Volkswagen; instead he took a more traditional understanding of the relationship between his regime and the automotive industry. Yet, the next year Hitler spoke again at the opening of the Berlin Auto Show, as he would

²¹⁴ Julia Groosse-Boerger, "Racing and Motorization of the German People: 50 Years of the Automobile at the 1935 and 1936 Berlin Auto Shows," Charm 2013 Proceedings, 32..

²¹⁵ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000) 130.

²¹⁶ Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 47-8.

²¹⁷ Ebbard Reuss, *Hitler's Motor Racing Battles: The Silver Arrows Under the Swastika*, (Cambridge MA; Haynes Publishing, 2008) 10, 121-27.

continue to do until the outbreak of war, advocating the development of a small car for the people.²¹⁸ Despite all of this interest in everything automotive-- such as appeals to the public and the industry to move toward mass motorization, the pageantry of the automobile shows, the constant interventions that the regime imposed on the automotive industry, and the endless heaps of liquid capital injected into motorization projects (the Nazi regime spent over 100 million *Reichmarks* on the development of the Volkswagen and the Volkswagen factory alone)-- in 1939 Germany's automotive trajectory was moving further away from mass participation in an automotive society with few indications that these trends could be reversed.²¹⁹

Traditional economic analysis falls short of making pecuniary dispensations in the Third Reich intelligible except in unfolding its spectacular failures. Nazi economic policy was a witches' brew of autarkic policy, rearmament directives, industrial interventionism, and equivocal consumerist aspirations.²²⁰ This mix of goals and objectives were further complicated by a Manichean rhetoric that eschewed economic motivations and understanding for a world view based on raising cultural standards which were inherently at odds with materialist economics.²²¹ Hitler repeatedly contrasted economic concerns by characterizing them as foreign, Jewish, and dangerous. Hitler made this a common theme in *Mein Kampf* and maintained that man "will die for an ideal" but "man does not sacrifice himself for material interests."²²² To consider economics first was, therefore, not only naive but also dangerous because it created competition turning the *Volk* on one another and the true strength of the state rested in its ability

²¹⁸ Grosse-Boerger, "Racing and the Motorization of the German People," 34.

²¹⁹ Wolfgang König, "Adolf Hitler vs. Henry Ford: The Volkswagen, the Role of America as a Model, and the Failure of a Nazi Consumer Society," *German Studies Review* 27 no. 2 (2004): 258-60.

²²⁰ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 126-37; Tooze, *Wages of Destruction*, 659; König, "Hitler v.s. Ford," 260.

²²¹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, (1939: repr., Boring, Oregon: CPA Book Publisher, 2000) 94.

²²² *Ibid.*

to cultivate, “the capacity and readiness to sacrifice the individual to the common welfare.”²²³ Hitler believed that economic interests must be subordinate to the cultural interests of the state. High trade deficits, protectionist tariffs, and campaigns of moral coercion to buy domestic products all worked to undermine Germany’s reliability as an international partner.²²⁴ Wages were kept depressed in an effort to make rearmament viable while a handful of critical consumer goods were promised and dangled just out of reach of workers and the lower middle class.²²⁵

Yet it very much was an economic issue that prevented mass motorization in the transition from late Weimar to the Third Reich, as the only people who were willing to invest in Germany’s automotive future, it seemed, were Ford and General Motors. This trend away from mass motorization seems to be epitomized by Porsche’s failure to create a small car with Zündapp and NSU. After the small car project fell through with Zündapp and NSU, Porsche’s firm turned its attention to developing a Grand Prix car for the newly formed Auto Union in late 1932. While Auto Union was a new entity, it was composed of four small established car manufacturers that had banded together in order to survive; Horch, Wanderer, DKW (Zschopauer Motorenwerke) and Audi. The timing of this change in priorities must have seemed fortuitous, as months later the new Chancellor of Germany promised to support motor racing in order to raise German prestige.²²⁶ In March of 1933 Porsche and the board of Auto Union met with Hitler to attempt to secure financial provisions for Porsche’s race car. Accounts of this meeting make special note of the convincing it took for Hitler to endorse a second racing team

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 103, 131-6.

²²⁵ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 131.

²²⁶ Grosse-Boerger, “Racing and the Motorization,” 32.

after “his beloved” Mercedes-Benz team which received significant financial backing from the government.²²⁷

Initially, Hitler met the request with indignation that was only softened by Porsche’s long soliloquy of the technical details of the car.²²⁸ Hiott explains Hitler’s reluctance to the proposal through his enduring fondness of Daimler-Benz.²²⁹ Hopfinger highlights that Hitler did not see the necessity of two German teams for winning worldwide prestige.²³⁰ Yet, in light of the ubiquitous push for instilling an undivided sense of community, i.e. *Volksgemeinschaft*, the source of Hitler’s reluctance may have been more ideological than practical. Grand Prix racing was meant to foster a sense of German pride and, therefore, be a cohesive and unifying project, having two German teams could result in factionalism with fans identifying first with specific brands and only secondly with the national dimension of the teams. An article in *Der Motorist* covering the 1935 Berlin Auto Show suggests this push for corporate unity declaring, “This is no longer a matter of industrial companies fighting for supremacy, but of the German automobile and motorcycle industry firmly uniting to fight for our national prestige and the national success of a wonderful cause.”²³¹ This statement was the official line and more wishful thinking than reality. Whatever hang-ups Hitler had with Auto-Union’s proposal, Porsche was able to persuade Hitler to commit to sponsoring the construction of four racing cars giving Auto-Union one-third of the funds earmarked for the Benz team.²³²

In the following autumn, Porsche received an invitation to meet with Jakob Werlin, who Porsche knew as a director in the Daimler-Benz company. A personal friend to Hitler even

²²⁷ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 110-5.

²²⁸ Hopfinger, *Volkswagen Story*, 70.

²²⁹ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 112.

²³⁰ Hopfinger, *Volkswagen Story*, 70.

²³¹ Grosse-Boerger, “Racing and the Motorization,” 35.

²³² Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 112.

before the Nazis came to power, Werlin served in an advisory role to Hitler in matters regarding motorization.²³³ At the meeting, the two were joined by Hitler who broached the subject of creating a small car for the people. One of the most discussed elements in the history of the Volkswagen was the degree of influence Hitler ultimately had on the technical details of the Volkswagen. The Nazis engaged in a program to forge links between Hitler's name and the Volkswagen, presenting it as solely Hitler's idea. As Wolfgang König suggests, this branding campaign was not aimed at taking credit away from Porsche for the concept and design of the Volkswagen as much as it was aimed at decoupling the concept of a people's car from Henry Ford and America.²³⁴ Rieger suggests that Porsche's ideas prevailed and the cocktail napkin Hitler doodled on during Porsche and Hitler's meeting was ultimately disregarded. There is much to suggest this point of view, particularly in light of the similarities between the finalized version and the prototypes Porsche created for the two motorcycle firms before Hitler came to power. Hitler's main issue was engine placement, the rear mounted engine seemed too unorthodox but ultimately this was not the most important aspect of the car.²³⁵ Others, including Hopfinger, note that while Porsche and Hitler were able to see eye to eye on many aspects of the small car they could not see past Hitler's demand that the car be sold to the public for less than 1000 RM which seemed impossible to Porsche, as in fact, it was impossible.²³⁶

The failure of the entire project can be traced to Hitler's insistence on the price of 1000 RM. In some ways the insistence of such an outrageous price was reminiscent of Henry Ford's business ideals that he laid out in his autobiography. One pillar of Ford's corporate philosophy was "the profit motive," which Ford described as "nam[ing] a price so low as to force everybody

²³³ Ludvigsen, *Battle for the Beetle*, 14-16.

²³⁴ König, "Hitler vs. Ford," 249-50.

²³⁵ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 60-5.

²³⁶ Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 71-3.

[to] dig for profits.”²³⁷ But importantly there was the realization that there would be no profit in the traditional sense, in fact, the cars that the regime planned to sale would be subsidized with the government talking on over half of the cost of production.²³⁸ König believes that this outrageous price came from earlier discussions in committees dedicated to investigating mass motorization in the Third Reich. There were two general ideas that were floated in these meetings: the small-car, like the Volkswagen, and the mini-car which was a three wheeled vehicle powered by a motorcycle engine (like the BMW Isetta produced after the war). It was agreed in these meetings that the mini-car could be *produced* (not sold) for 1000 RM, and somehow when the proposal for the mini-car was abandoned the price of 1000 RM was applied to the small car.²³⁹

Equally likely, the price came from the realization that income levels for workers, the target demographic of such a car, were far too low to suggest a higher price point. The reality was, however, even 1000 RM was to be too expensive for the majority of workers in the Third Reich. This moment of insensitivity to the realities and possibilities of productions and the disregard of needs for consumption points to the larger contradictions in Nazi priorities, wages were kept too low to create an American style consumer culture in order to make rearmament viable. Yet as the Nazi programs to raise the standard of living failed, the Nazi high command

²³⁷ Henry Ford quoted in Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 114.

²³⁸ “Wirtschaftsbeteibe der SS’ Vortrag des Abeilungsleiters im Stab W Des SS-Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptampts, Dr. Volk, am 23.5.1944” in Walter Naasner, *SS-Wirtschaft und SS-Verwaltung: Das SS-Wirtschafts- Verwaltungshauptampts und die unter seiner Dienstaufsicht stehen wirtschaftslichen Unternehmungen und weitere Dokumnete*, Düsseldorf DE, Groste Verlag GmbH 1998) 381.

²³⁹ König, “Ford vs. Hitler,” 254.

interpreted these failures as proof of international Jewish sabotage and inadequate *Lebensraum*, requiring heavier investment in rearmament.²⁴⁰

While the degree of influence Hitler had on the design of the Volkswagen is contested, Hiott goes one step further to note that Hitler was merely parroting Porsche's ideas as his own.²⁴¹ After a long meeting, Werlin asked Porsche to create a memorandum that would outline the particular features of such a car, which Porsche did in a short memorandum known as the Porsche Exposé dated 17 January 1934. The Porsche Exposé was a sober account that works through the technical aspects of the car design. The design was a compromised version of the cars Porsche was unable to produce with the motorcycle manufacturer NSU in 1932.²⁴² Porsche begins his report by acknowledging the need and the feasibility of creating a Volkswagen. His introduction looks to the success of the *Volksempfänger*, or people's radio, as a precedent for undertaking such an endeavor.²⁴³ The central concern of this document is ensuring that the Volkswagen does not become compromised to fit a price point. Porsche states:

I do not see a small vehicle with artificially restricted dimensions, performance and weight, etc., in the manner in which we have seen some results in this area. Such a car can be cheap to purchase, but never from the point of view of a healthy national economy, since the value is extremely limited if the driving comfort of life are in any way decreased. At such times of an increase of traffic density, when the safety of the vehicle is gaining more importance, all measures which in any way lower the value of the vehicle are to be totally rejected.²⁴⁴

Porsche showcases his diplomatic prowess in this introduction by using Hitler's own vernacular to reframe the car in terms of a "healthy national economy," and by citing the people's radio and the success of the creation of the *Autobahn*. The report continues by listing the five necessities

²⁴⁰ Tooze, *Wages of Destruction*, 162; König, "Hitler vs. Ford," 258-9.

²⁴¹ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 113.

²⁴² Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 66; due to the company's contractual obligations with Italian car manufacture Fiat, which stipulated that NSU would not build cars.

²⁴³ Ferdinand Porsche, Porsche's Exposé, in Barber, *Birth of the Beetle*, Appendix I.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

of a true Volkswagen, emphasizing its “road-holding” capabilities, a top speed of 100kph (62 mph), a “mountain-climbing ability of about 30%,” the ability to carry four passengers, and “the lowest possible purchase price and lowest possible running costs.”²⁴⁵ Yet, on the issue of price, Porsche remains obstinate, claiming, “with the future of Volkswagen, there may be no compromise solution in consideration of a certain price.”²⁴⁶ Porsche goes on to say that he can design such a car and as for payment he is content with a licensing fee if the car goes into production.²⁴⁷

At the surface level there is nothing transformative about Porsche’s short memorandum. The technical specifications and design concepts all fit within the patterns forged in the Volkswagen craze of the 1920s. Yet while the technical features did not change, the contexts that Porsche used demonstrate the fundamental shift away from the aspirations of private consumption in Weimar to one firmly fixed into the program of Nazi modernity. The question of the Volkswagen is transformed into a question of the nation and class unity. Porsche points to the failures of the private industry to overcome class exclusion and references its importance, not as a product to be consumed by individuals but for the German nation. Porsche notes how government planning can expedite the production of such a good. As innocuous as using the *Volksempfänger* as a model may seem, the implication would be that the Volkswagen would be produced in the same way. Under the direction of Joseph Goebbels all of the radio manufacturers were conscripted to produce a single design of an inexpensive radio.²⁴⁸ While in the short term it helped to stimulate growth in the sector, that growth would be terminal as the

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ König, “Ford vs. Hitler,” 252.

market became saturated with the same standard product.²⁴⁹ Yet, Porsche was being more diplomatic than ideological in relating his project to Hitler's goals. It was, after all, a sales pitch with a multi-point conclusion stating why he should be entrusted with the design contract.

Nevertheless, the Nazis were transforming the very foundation of Germany's car culture. Earlier associations and value systems were systematically eroded and the car question was reframed as an industrial and national question. The entire atmosphere of the 1934 Berlin Auto Show was transformed. In 1934 Hitler exchanged his civilian suit for his military uniform. Likewise, the swastika flags replaced the international flags that usually adorned the convention hall and the seats traditionally reserved for foreign dignitaries were now reserved for officers in the SS. The texture of this transformation is most visible in the event posters for the 1934 Berlin Auto Show. In 1933, the poster featured a young couple framed by the windshield of an automobile highlighting the post-sale consumption of the automobile.²⁵⁰

The 1934 poster, on the other hand, appears almost intentionally sinister. Julia Grosse-Boerger notes that the image "shows how the National Socialist were making a grab for the car and the automotive industry."²⁵¹ The bare chassis of a car is held up by the swastika banded arm extended above a barren industrial valley wasteland. Stripped of its defining characteristics, the coachworks, the car is inelegant, incomplete, and even crude. Even the line weight of the text completes the transformation from a light script to heavy font. Compared to the previous year's poster, the Nazi image indicates struggle through unity and determination, and, in essence, that motorizing Germany would be no Sunday drive. This was the imagery that Hitler used to

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁰ Erik Eckermann, " '300 Wagen aus ganz Deutschland mit Blumen geschmückt' 100 Jahre Automobil-Ausstellungen von der Motorwagen-Vorführung zur Leitmesse," *Kulture und Technik* 22 no.1 1998, 46.

²⁵¹ Grosse-Boerger, "Racing and Motorization," 35.

introduce the Volkswagen, and this industrial image of a Volkswagen would guide Hitler's policies that would yield the motorization of Germany. To achieve this goal policies had to be implemented to cure the diseases within the German auto industry.

If industry was central to the new image of car culture in Germany, the individual automotive firms did not completely buy into this picture and continued to advertise as individual concerns with their own distinct appeal to individual consumers.²⁵² Additionally, the good will that Hitler earned with the established car manufacturers for his four point plan to motorize Germany in 1933 began to deteriorate in the following year. Hitler made appeals to the industry as a whole through the automotive lobby, the Reich Confederation of the German Auto Industry (*Reichsverband der Automobilindustrie* or RDA). At the same time Hitler was interviewing Porsche, he had also reached out to the RDA for suggestions on how to create a Volkswagen. The RDA proposed a number of half-hearted measures that were similar to the 1933 measures including more tax credits and industrial subsidies. More alarming for Hitler was the back biting of the individual firms who each proposed their own designs and plans to create a Volkswagen in the private sector. Opel believed that they were the only ones capable of such a manufacturing feat, but their early celebrations in their newsletter raised the ire of Hitler who was already resentful about Opel's GM ownership.²⁵³

Perhaps because of this disharmony, Hitler opted to ignore all of the lobby's suggestions, including their dissatisfaction with Porsche's proposal. In July of 1934 Hitler announced that Porsche's design firm would be the one responsible for "the motorization of the German people on the basis of teamwork, using the best strengths of the German automotive body

²⁵² "Mercedes Ad," *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, no. 3 21 January 1933; "Auto Union Ad," *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, no. 10, 11 March, 1934, 321.

²⁵³ Hiott, *Thinking Small*,

[*Automobilwesen*], by all means to promote the interests of the German Reich.²⁵⁴ Clear in Hitler's statements was not only Porsche's role in creating the Volkswagen, but also the role that German automotive concerns would play as well. Hitler was positioning the industry to repeat the *Volksempfänger's* successes based on mass production on a massive scale. But the manufacture of a car is far different from the manufacture of a radio. The capital required for rationalization of a radio factory pales in comparison to that of the automobile. First, the car has many more types of tasks associated with its construction: engine building, body work shaping, electrical wiring, glass work, and upholstery. All of these more or less independent workshops have to be configured as to produce at the same level, so that engines, coachworks, and upholstery are able to be assembled simultaneously.

Furthermore, there were 28 radio manufacturers in Germany all of whom participated in the creation of the *Volksempfänger* compared to the 10 surviving German car manufacturers. The real issue was the amount of diversity that existed in the German automotive industry. Of these ten, two were American subsidiaries (Ford Deutschland and Opel) and four more had banded together under the Auto Union corporate structure, ostensibly making it a single concern. The remaining four automotive concerns ran the gambit from principally motorcycle manufacturers like BMW to manufacturers that made hand-produced, high end luxury cars like Maybach. Daimler-Benz stood alone as a truly German company that had experience with mass production techniques, but the Mercedes brand could never make a serious grab at the lower end of the market, favoring the higher profits per unit of upper and mid-class cars.²⁵⁵ Benz's market

²⁵⁴ Hitler quoted in "*Porsche von Fallersleben: Geschichte eines Automobile*" *Der Spiegel* 11 May 1950 29. "um die Motorisierung des deutschen Volkes auf der Grundlage einer Gemeinschaftsarbeit, unter Einsatz der besten Kräfte des deutschen Automobilwesens, mit allen Mitteln zum Wohle des deutschen Reiches zu fördern." Self Translation

²⁵⁵ Gregor, *Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich*, 40.

share had the effected its production methods as the expensive cars relied on a discerning skilled labor force. With the largest rationalized factory on the continent, Opel would have been the clear choice to produce the Volkswagen; however, Opel had its own Volkswagen, the P4, the mandate to produce Porsche's design and sell it at Hitler's price of 990RM made the Volkswagen a losing endeavor.²⁵⁶ This is perhaps the most important difference between the *Volksempfänger* and the Volkswagen: radio manufacturers endorsed the *Volksempfänger* as profits were still manageable in most cases while there would be no profit margins at all at the price point on which Hitler was insisting.²⁵⁷

Compounding the RDA's woes was Hitler's personal involvement. The motorcar was one of Hitler's lifetime fascinations and he believed that it was the defining symbol of progress in the 20th Century. At the groundbreaking ceremony for the autobahn in 1933, Hitler noted that, "If in earlier times one attempted to measure people's relative standard of living according to kilometers of railway track, in the future one will have to plot the kilometers of streets suited to motor traffic."²⁵⁸ Perhaps this sense of prestige associated with the automobile was the reason that Hitler was willing to bankrupt his party by buying a new Mercedes in 1924 after his failed Beer Hall Putsch.²⁵⁹ Hitler created his own mythologies around his dedication to motorizing Germany spinning a tale of rescuing a stranded motorcyclist in his Mercedes before he came to power. This was an apocryphal moment when Hitler realized that the German people deserved the dignity of owning their own car which made motorization a priority.²⁶⁰ As the RDA and Porsche knew all too well, motorizing Germany was Hitler's project, and Hitler was all too

²⁵⁶ Turner, *General Motors and the Nazis*, 32-4.

²⁵⁷ Wolfgang König, *Volkswagen, Volksempfänger, Volksgemeinschaft*, 224.

²⁵⁸ Hitler in Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 105.

²⁵⁹ Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 67.

²⁶⁰ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 109.

willing to take credit for the successes of the recovering auto industry. The RDA agreed to work on the Volkswagen project in order to control its direction and avoid having the regime impose solutions. Unable to contradict Hitler, the RDA implemented stall tactics and sabotage by imposing unrealistic deadlines and constantly second guessing Porsche's design and progress. Even as Porsche presented three functioning prototypes in 1936, RDA had the advantage of reality on its side since it could always point to the impossible price that Hitler had already made public at the 1935 Berlin Auto Show.²⁶¹ Yet, the constant loggerheads of the RDA just further eroded the ground that the organization was founded upon, and Werlin, Porsche, and Hitler would increasingly bypass and exclude the RDA from the Volkswagen conversation.²⁶²

Had Hitler been content to being the symbolic figurehead of German motorization, the Volkswagen story would have a much different plot. Yet, German automotive manufacturers were obliged to acquiesce to Hitler's understanding of industry and methods of production. Yet, everything that Hitler knew about production came from Henry Ford's autobiography *My Life and Work*; a folksy ghostwritten puff piece, hardly a text book on practical production methods. Hitler's admiration of Henry Ford has developed enough interest to generate its own substantial body of work.²⁶³ Hiott discusses how Hitler read *My Life and Work* while in prison after the Beer Hall Putsch, and that Hitler kept a life-sized portrait of Ford in his office.²⁶⁴ Once he came to power Hitler would give away copies of Fords books, both *My Life and Work*, and the

²⁶¹ Ludvigsen, *Battle for Beetle*, 29.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁶³ Most commonly cited is Karl Heinz Roth, "Nazismus gleich Fordismus? in *Die Deutsche Autoindustrie in den Dreißiger Jahren*" in *Zeitschrift für Sozialgeschichte des 20 und 21 Jahrhunderts* 5 no. 1 (1990): 82-99; Neil Gregor takes issue with Roth saying that his thesis is "one-dimensional conspiracy theory that ... depends upon a great deal of hindsight, [which has] as much concrete evidence to contradict it as [it] does to support it. Gregor, *Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich*, 58.

²⁶⁴ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 58, 60,

collection of anti-Semitic diatribes compiled in Ford's book *The International Jew*.²⁶⁵ In July of 1938, Ford received the 'Grand Cross of the Supreme Order of the German Eagle,' the "highest honor the Reich could then bestow upon a foreigner."²⁶⁶ Karl Heinz Roth attempted to find similarities between German administration policies and the Fordist model of production, however, Roth's work has been called into question for over-emphasizing the control of the regime and the willingness of industry to participate in Hitler's visions. Wolfgang König explores the limits of Hitler's admiration for Ford which can be divided between Ford the company and Ford the man. In line with his autarkic preferences, in a secret order in 1936 Hitler prohibited party officials from buying Ford cars.²⁶⁷ König uses Ford to explore the ways the image of America influenced the creation of the Volkswagen, in particular the concerted effort to re-associate the concept of mass motorization away from Ford and America to Hitler and Germany.²⁶⁸

The Volkswagen was intended to incorporate important aspects of Fordism. Much like the Model T that motorized America, the Volkswagen was to be *the* single model produced in a factory configured with single purpose machines that would efficiently produce the car in a high enough volume to lower costs but retain a small profit margin. Like the Model T, the Volkswagen would be offered in a single color, but instead of black like the early Fords, the Volkswagen would be a grayish blue. Finding Fordist tendencies in production culture is one thing, distilling it as an ideology and tracing it back through policy is a far greater task. Ford's treatment of factory workers, the so called "welfare capitalism," has some definite parallels with incentives the Nazi regime imposed, particularly the Beauty of Work program that improved

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁶⁶ David L. Lewis quoted in Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 113.

²⁶⁷ König, "Hitler vs. Ford," 253.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

working conditions by focusing on improving hygiene and safety. Yet, perhaps the best known of Ford's policies never materialized in Nazi Germany: the importance of paying a competitive wage to ensure retention and to pull the worker up into the consumer class.

Yet while Hitler was stuck on Fordism and pre-World War I patterns of production and consumption, the German automotive industry had moved on. Auto manufacturers in Weimar and the Third Reich are often presented as being anachronistic or at least out of sync by favoring more flexible forms of production compared to mass production and Fordism. In reality, this was the way the wind was blowing even in the land of Fordism; America. Ford himself had to come to terms with the rise of General Motors which he convinced himself that it was ultimately due to people being "tired of seeing" the old Model T.²⁶⁹ This is obviously an over simplification that does not account for the competitive nature of automobile industry. General Motors soon supplanted Ford as the largest producer of car in the United States at the end of the 1920s. GM's president, chairman and CEO Alford P. Sloan introduced an alternative to Ford's single model by developing a line of cars, entry, mid-sized, and luxury with the hope of building customer loyalty and moving them up the line.²⁷⁰ Infamously, Sloan is credited with the pioneering of planned obsolescence, which fits with his general notions of production and consumer markets.²⁷¹ Customers who could afford a new car every few years needed a convincing reason to turn in their used car, and so, models too would be updated annually, allowing the new models to generate their own need in the cultural economy.²⁷² To ensure profits innovations would be introduced to both the car and the production process, where the

²⁶⁹ Gareth Garrett, *Salvos Against the New Deal: Selections from the Saturday Evening Post 1933-1940*, (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Press, 2002) 263.

²⁷⁰ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 244.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

²⁷² Timothy Luke, *Screens of Power: Ideology, Domination, and Resistance in Informational Society*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 228.

early developments of a model would focus on the car itself and then the focus would shift to the production process.²⁷³ It is not surprising that this development was disregarded by Hitler, because it put class divisions on prominent display in the car culture. Some German automobile firms were attempting to bypass the Fordist mass production phase seeing realizing that mass production contains its own seeds of destruction. At the end of the Weimar Republic and beginning of the Third Reich, Daimler-Benz appears to be incorporating this strategy by expanding to a three car line including the “economic” Mercedes 130. Gregor’s research also suggests Benz’s adoption of Sloanism by showing the company’s reluctance to reform their factories in such a way that would prevent the periodic update of models.²⁷⁴

C. From the RDA to the DAF: A “Watershed Moment” in the History of the Volkswagen²⁷⁵

The frustrations that the regime faced with the automotive industry were mirrored in other industries as well. This is most evident in the 1936 memorandum Hitler created introducing the Four Year Plan. The memo targeted Hjalmar Schacht’s frustrated attempts to structure the national economy for rearmament and bring big business onboard to increase output and prepare for war. Heavy industry was charged with finding solutions to inefficiency through rationalization and standardization, yet much like the RDA and the Volkswagen episode, industry found ways to resist and delay these measures. Hitler’s memo is perhaps most infamous for its reference of finding a “final solution,” which directly tied economic survival to state endorsed genocide. The memo begins by listing the difficulties that the regime had endured in attempting to force standardization and rationalization. Hitler exclaims:

²⁷³ William J. Abernathy, *The Productivity Dilemma: Roadblock to Innovation in the Automobile Industry*, (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 72.

²⁷⁴ Gregor, *Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich*, 248.

²⁷⁵ König, “Hitler vs. Ford,” 255.

It is not a matter of discussing whether we are to wait any longer... it is not the job...of government to rack...[its] brains over methods of production... either we possess today a private industry, in which case its job is to rack its brains about methods of production; or we believe that it is the government's job to determine methods of production, and in that case we have no further need of private industry...²⁷⁶

At this point in the memorandum, Hitler turns his attention to what he perceived to be the cause of this particular failing, maintaining that industry was willfully resisting standardization in an attempt to “possess... certain reserves abroad, which are thus withheld from the grasp of the domestic economy,” an action which prompted Hitler to propose “A law making the whole of Jewry liable for all damage inflicted upon the German economy by individual specimens of this community of criminals.”²⁷⁷

The RDA's principle task was the creation of the Volkswagen while other organizations negotiated other policy considerations between industry and the regime. In 1936 as the RDA's influence declined, Hitler and Göring increasingly turned to the WiGruFa, or *Wirtschaftsgruppe Fahrzeugindustrie* (Economic Group for the Automotive Industry), another collection of representatives from all of the automobile manufacturers which was founded in 1934.²⁷⁸ This committee was meant to handle the transition to wartime production by creating policies that would raise productivity and facilitate the rationing of raw materials. Getting the Volkswagen project to its current state in 1936 had taken much longer than Hitler imagined, and the problem of how to produce and distribute the Volkswagen had not been solved. As per Hitler's request, Economic Minister, Colonel von Schell, oversaw an imposed reduction in the models produced

²⁷⁶ Hitler, “Four Year Plan Memorandum” in Tooze, *Wages of Destruction*, 221-3.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ Gregor, *Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich*, 43.

by German automotive firms, moving the entire sector closer towards Ford's single model production.²⁷⁹

Neither Hitler nor von Schell could be bothered with the details of how to implement these measures and therefore, it was left up to the collection of firms represented in the WiGruFa, which resulted in infighting to protect individual firms' interests. On the face of it, the imposed reduction of models appeared to work as large and small firms alike committed to building fewer designs. Yet, all of the designs that were cut from production were small cheap cars in the lower end of the market; a prudent business decision to avoid competition with the future Volkswagen.²⁸⁰ Already, in 1936, the specter of the Volkswagen was being felt as demand for small cars dried up in anticipation of the Führer's economic supercar.²⁸¹ Industry was willing to commit to this new market focus despite the finality of dropping models as the introduction of new models had to be approved by the regime. The other important measure was von Schell's literal retooling of the industry. Redesigns and updates were common for the consumer market and to facilitate these, Daimler-Benz preferred multi-purpose tools that could be reconfigured to create new models.²⁸² Yet, the utility of redesigns was deemed subordinate to efficiency for a wartime Germany. Despite some reluctance, von Schell could claim some minor victories, Gregor's research indicates that the government's insistence paired with a shrinking pool of skilled labor encouraged Daimler-Benz to adopt more automated machinery.

Yet while there was a push for rationalization, the issue of improving efficiency was hamstrung by the rationing measures the regime simultaneously imposed. For the years 1936 and 1937 there was a backlog of orders for passenger cars at Daimler-Benz; however, this had

²⁷⁹ Tooze, *Wages of Destruction*, 291-3.

²⁸⁰ Gregor, *Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich*, 50-1.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*

little to do with growing demand. Tires were distributed to automotive factories at a rate that would keep production going four days a week, likewise, iron and steel would be reduced annually by one quarter. The primacy of the military's use of resources combined with the depressed wages for workers are the two primary reasons that historians cite when evaluating the meager consumer culture of the Third Reich. Sometimes this explanation is seasoned with references to the Nazis' anti-materialist, backwards-looking ideology.²⁸³ Adam Tooze's interpretation is particularly unique in that he sees no distinction between the two programs of military expansion and consumer culture held together with a deeply materialist ideology committed to raising the standard of living.²⁸⁴

Saddled with the imposed transformations and restrictions coming through the WiGruFa, car manufacturers could no longer entertain the Volkswagen fantasy. In 1936 BMW's General Director Franz Popp suggested a plan to the RDA and the regime that the state could build the car in a new factory that could handle the high volume needed to recoup costs.²⁸⁵ Popp went as far as to suggest that it could be rolled into Robert Ley's organization, the *Deutsche Arbeitsfront* (DAF), which replaced all other forms of worker representation including labor unions in Nazi Germany.²⁸⁶ The DAF's main programs at this time were the Kraft-durch-Freude (KdF) or Strength through Joy projects which offered middle class leisure activities like vacations and modest improvements in working conditions. In reality, the Nazi government was already moving the project in this direction independently of the existing automotive concerns. Before Popp proposed relinquishing the RDA's control of the Volkswagen project, Porsche made two

²⁸³ Peter N. Sterns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire*, (London: Routledge, 2001) 64-5.

²⁸⁴ Tooze, *Wages of Destruction*, 162-4.

²⁸⁵ Tooze, *Wages of Destruction*, 154.

²⁸⁶ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 39.

trips to the United States to observe mass production techniques. Porsche made his first trip in 1936 with the Auto Union race team but remained in the United States for four weeks. Porsche found many German emigrants who had come to the United States in the inter-war period to work for Ford. Later in the year, Porsche returned to the United States with the authority to extend contracts to specialists in mass production to come to Germany and work on the Volkswagen production lines. Porsche collected some twenty such contracts.²⁸⁷

Robert Ley was all too happy to accept the responsibility of making Hitler's vision a reality. The DAF confiscated the coffers of all of the trade unions that the organization replaced in the *Machtergreifung* and continued to collect dues from workers to fund the DAF's various projects.²⁸⁸ Such an endowment meant that DAF could fund the project without additional state support, making the DAF an obvious choice for the project from a financial standpoint. The DAF was first proposed in November of 1933 and after successful negotiations concerning the structure and purview of the organization, which gave the majority of power to individual employers, the DAF became codified in the January 1934 law *Gesetz zur Ordnung der nationalen Arbeit* (National Labor Law).²⁸⁹

KdF evolved from a precursor, After Work, which Robert Ley lifted from Italian fascism's successful leisure program *Dopolavoro*, literally "After Work."²⁹⁰ After Work entertainment programs were marginally popular with workers, although Ley felt that After Work had fatal shortcomings. First, the program was exclusively for the worker which emphasized the worker/employer rift that Ley ultimately hoped to bridge. Second, After Work

²⁸⁷ Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 95-101.

²⁸⁸ Shelley Baranowski, *Strength Through Joy: Consumerism and Mass Tourism in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 52-3.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54

was limited to precisely that the hours away from the shop floor.²⁹¹ Ley began working on a new organization that matched his ambitions, creating the Strength through Joy organization that could promote cultural activities, community, and improve the aesthetic and hygiene of working conditions. While the KdF was diverse in its offices and its programs, far and away the crown jewel of the organization was the Office for Travel, Hiking, and Vacationing, which was able to carry on largely un-effected by the rearmament rush of the Four Year Plan.²⁹²

Unlike the RDA, Ley intended to sell Volkswagens and identified three main obstacles to the Volkswagen's success. First was the problem of creating a factory that could produce the Volkswagen in sufficient numbers to offset the cost of production. Porsche was in a position to manage the necessary technological features of the factory; however, finding a place to construct the factory and handling all of the necessities beyond the shop floor was beyond his expertise. Hopfinger's account of Porsche's extended obligations to the Volkswagen project paints a picture of reluctance, insisting that Porsche was hesitant to anything beyond designing the car.²⁹³ Quite opposite to this, Rieger's account notes how Porsche took the initiative, wanting to remain as involved as possible in the production of the car.²⁹⁴ This exposes one of the main weaknesses with Hopfinger's narrative, which is undoubtedly a cornerstone for subsequent research on Volkswagen. Hopfinger's work was based on oral interviews in the late 1950s, when many were still trying to disavow collaboration and participation in Nazi programs and, in general, distance themselves from the Nazi nightmare. Rieger's use of archival material seems to produce a less biased account, and it seems likely that Porsche would want to protect his vested interest in seeing the car put into production since he had negotiated payment based on a licensing fee. The

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁹³ Hopfinger, *Volkswagen Story*, 75.

²⁹⁴ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 81.

more cars that the factory could produce, the more money Porsche would stand to gain, so his involvement in the factory design was an investment on future returns.

The second issue Ley recognized was the problem of distribution. Had the automotive industry brought the project to completion, the Volkswagen could have been sold through the existing distribution networks that the auto-firm already had in place. Yet, the RDA had made the industry seem too untrustworthy to handle the sale of Hitler's cars. Moreover, Ley more often than not preferred to use his own organization to handle such matters and thereby retain complete control of the entire process. Ley's solution was to pass the distribution responsibility on to the customer, who would have to venture to the factory to pick up his or her new car.²⁹⁵ As a byproduct, this scheme had built in propagandistic potential as the customer could tour the factory floor and see the involved processes that go into making such a car. Such a journey could be highly ritualistic and laden with symbolic content: traveling by train into the factory city and leaving a member of the *Verkehrsgemeinschaft* (traffic community) would be a highly emotional event akin to an initiation. At the very least this would present the opportunity to forge firmer links in the association of the automobile and the motorization of Germany and the personality of Hitler.

The third obstacle, perhaps the most significant of the three obstacles, was the fact that even at the 990RM price tag, most German workers could not gather 1000RM as disposable income. König believes this exemplifies the Nazi's failure to create a consumer culture, namely they "focused on mass production and neglected the prerequisites of a mass market."²⁹⁶ Ley's office sought to overcome this by creating a savings program (*Sparkarte* or savings card) where subscribers would pay 5RM a week for four years. Each week that subscribers paid they would

²⁹⁵ Hopfinger, *Volkswagen Story*, 107.

²⁹⁶ König, "Hitler vs. Ford," 249.

receive a stamp which would go on into a booklet, once the booklet was complete it could be redeemed for a car. Through the *Sparkarte* scheme over 300,000 KdF-Wagens were presold. Mostly this figure has been used to demonstrate the success of Ley's venture and product hungry Germany of the late 1930s. Yet this number does not tell the entire story. As König details the demographics, the intended market for the small car was clearly missed: "more than 40 percent came from the commercial establishment. They wanted to increase their car fleets with the Volkswagen. 29 percent were employees, 17 percent public servants, and only 5 percent were workers."²⁹⁷ Moreover, measured against the regime's own ambitions 300,000 seemed paltry, the factory was designed to be developed in three stages that would roughly produce 500,000 units a year *each*. Thus, even the first stage would have been able to produce more than 300,000 units in the first year. Ultimately, the production capacity would dwarf that figure. The number that Hitler repeated year after year starting in 1937 was 1.5 million cars per annum; more conservative estimates place the figure closer to 1 million.²⁹⁸

While in speeches Hitler emphasized such production numbers as a cultural triumph of German superiority, producing the high volume of Volkswagens was critical to recoup the costs of production.²⁹⁹ The regime could not deny that they were looking at taking a loss of almost 1000RM per unit produced. Hitler and his advisors wrote off these losses with vague references to new forms of rationalization that would make the car profitable.³⁰⁰ By the time Hitler took the platform in Wolfsburg for the *Volkswagen Werk*, 350 Million Reich Marks were raised and set aside for the building of the factory.³⁰¹ With the factory running at full tilt, the optimum plan for

²⁹⁷ König, "Hitler vs. Ford," 258.

²⁹⁸ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 144.

²⁹⁹ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 66.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 10.

the small car, for which no one could account for the practical features, had a profit margin of 100RM per unit. At that rate, 3.5 million units would have to be sold before the first signs of profit would be seen. It would take nearly eight years of break-neck production just to recoup the initial investment.³⁰² Yet, even if this production miracle was achievable, it would also require a miracle in the realm of sales. In 1936 the Berlin Institute of Business Research found that the demand in the car market would cap at around 1.6 million for all of Germany.³⁰³ This suggests another connection to Tooze's argument about a war of expansion being central to the Nazi economy, for the Volkswagen to ever work it would need a larger market.

Yet even as Ley's office was re-imagining the social and cultural life of the Volkswagen, they were also busy making the necessary preparations to ensure the production of the car. Envisioning the new factory city was difficult and had many constraints. It had to be near a rail line or canal for raw materials to be brought in, and it also needed to be near one of the newly planned autobahn highways so that customers could accept deliver of their cars. Geographically, it needed to be constructed on flat lands and some concerns were expressed over its defendability from aerial raids during war, which also needed to be considered. Most of all, it needed to be big. The original proposal looked to appropriate 20 square miles which would be used to construct the largest automotive factory in Europe as well as housing for the 90,000 people who would work and live in the new city.³⁰⁴ Adding the factory to an already established city was not considered for a few reasons. First, such a large factory would pull workers from other industries of importance for the Reich at a time when unemployment figures were in the negatives and Germany was importing workers from Italy. The designers and Nazi functionaries

³⁰² Tooze, *Wages of Destruction*, 155.

³⁰³ König, "Hitler vs. Ford," 257.

³⁰⁴ Hopfinger, *Volkswagen Story*, 112-6.

believed that by building the city in an undeveloped area, workers would be pulled more evenly from across Germany. Second, the new factory city was meant to serve as a model of Nazi modernity, not just for the product that it created, the Volkswagen, but also through the organization and creation of the factory and the city.³⁰⁵ The hope was to offer an alternative utopian vision of progress and productivity that could contrast and dwarf the factories of capitalism.

Ley delegated the job of finding a location to his second in command, Dr. Bodo Lafferentz, who, after an exhaustive search, selected an area near Schloss Fallersleben, a 14th century castle. Upon receiving the news that two thirds of his estate, which had been preserved in his family for over 500 years, was to be seized by the Nazi government, Count Güntzel Graf von der Schulenberg, fought this appropriation of his land on the grounds of conservation. He argued that his land should be spared because the 80 and 100 year old oak trees that covered the grounds should be protected under the 1935 *Reichsnaturschutzgesetz* (Reich's Environmental Protection Law) under article 1 paragraph 3 which deemed *alte oder seltene Bäume* (old or rare trees) as a form of *Naturdenkmal* (Natural Monument). Despite this and other attempts by Count von der Schulenberg, Robert Ley remained unconvinced of the conservationist argument and the appropriation of the land near the castle grounds moved forward.³⁰⁶

Delivering on a people's car was important, not only in raising the standards of living of the German public, but it was also important for the "visual consumption" of Nazi ideology that was the focus of developing the autobahn.³⁰⁷ When the project of building a national highway system was announced, two ideas competed for how such an endeavor should be undertaken.

³⁰⁵ Hans Mommsen and Manfred Grieger, *Das Volkswagenwerk und seine Arbeiter im Dritten Reich* (Düsseldorf Germany: ECON Verlag, 1997) 155-60.

³⁰⁶ Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 110-12.

³⁰⁷ Thomas Zeller, *Driving Germany*, 138.

One school of thought followed the example of railway lines and thus promoted straight highways that could create the most logical network of transportation that would be more affordable, safer, and cost efficient to build. This plan was rejected for the idea championed by Fritz Todt. Todt saw the highways as a means to educate the public about the importance of the nation. Equal parts engineer and Romantic landscape painter, Todt's roads were built onto the sides of mountains and through valleys, winding through woods and circling lakes. The hope was that by traveling the highways Germans would experience the awe and majesty of nature which would enforce a sense of community.³⁰⁸

Yet, in 1936 Todt and Hitler's vision was facing a serious threat. Several thousand kilometers of road were already constructed and many more thousands of kilometers of roads were under construction and in the planning stages.³⁰⁹ If the principle reason for the roads was meant to foster a sense of community, as the choice to go with Todt's vision seems to indicate, then the fact that only the wealthy middle class could use these roads undermined the entire enterprise, making the highways another class divisive element. The complaint that national highways would only be roads for the rich was a familiar argument in the 1920s when the roads were first proposed before the Nazi seizure of power.³¹⁰ If the value of the roads could be harnessed, and if the German public was to be transformed sufficiently to engage with nature and comprehend the importance of community, the missing element was a car that every German could own.

For the Nazis, the main point of nature and conservation to the Nazi regime was to instill a mystical sense of belonging to the racial nation. As long as nature remained isolated from the

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 33-6, 127-60.

³⁰⁹ Hopfinger, *Volkswagen Story*, 114.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

public, it served no educational function, hence the impetus for building a national highway system. Yet, nature's secrets and mysteries would still be obscured as long as these highways remained empty, hence the drive for building the largest automobile factory in the world. It was neither the case that conservation was unimportant in the grand scheme of things, nature was highly important for conveying the non-materialist agenda of emphasizing *Volksgemeinschaft*. Yet, it would be equally naive to suggest that the entire goal of creating the Volkswagen was to help Germans escape the city and experience nature, the car was meant to live in town and country. More accurately, one can say that the evidence presented here indicates that Nazi conservation, construction of the autobahn, and Strength through Joy programs that subsidized vacations, improved working conditions, raised the standard of living, and created consumer products including the Volkswagen, were all put into the service of the concept of *Volksgemeinschaft*, a racial community where the individuals would be willing to make the necessary sacrifices to the common wheel.

On May 26th 1938, the *Volkswagen Werk*, conceived to be the world's largest automotive factory, laid its cornerstone with the usual fanfare which one expected from a Nazi project.³¹¹ This day loomed large in the regime's imagination, as it was the first tangible evidence that indicated the long promised affordable car would become a reality. Hiott characterizes the event as perfectly choreographed and rehearsed with the brick masons dressed in white coveralls and top hats and the carpenters dressed in black velvet.³¹² Despite the size and complexity of the factory its design and construction took less time than Porsche had spent developing a functioning prototype of the car that would be built there.³¹³ In an exercise of stoicism, many

³¹¹ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 9.

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ *Ibid.*

prominent members of the RDA were in attendance and mingling and glad-handing Porsche, Ley, and Werlin despite their anxieties concerning their future. Reportedly, Werlin approached Robert Allmers, chairman of the RDA, and made some disparaging comments about Allmer's choice to wear a light colored his funeral.³¹⁴ Allmers had every reason to take Werlin's threat seriously. Nazi architect and one time head of the KdF program Beauty of Work, Albert Speer said after the war that had Germany won, the KdF-Wagen would be the only car produced.³¹⁵

The DAF was committed to seeing this project to fruition where the auto industry had failed, and implemented a policy of dissolving every problem in liquid capital. But deep pockets would not be enough; the factory had to appropriate American knowhow wherever it could. The industrial workshop was modeled on Henry Ford's River Rouge plant.³¹⁶ The majority of the tools and heavy machinery could not be built in Germany and were sourced from the United States.³¹⁷ As the cornerstone was being laid twenty German emigrants who had worked on Ford's assembly lines were training a new workforce in a facility in Braunschweig.³¹⁸ By the autumn of 1938, given Germany's zero percent unemployment, the factory could only be completed when Mussolini sent thousands of unemployed Italian workers. Hopfinger remarked that the experience of these Italian construction workers foreshadowed the experience of the forced laborers co-opted to produce wartime armaments on the shop floor. As early as 1938 the Italian guest workers "lived in wooden huts surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers."³¹⁹

Yet, despite this colossal effort, the factory would be immediately converted for war production. The RDA's stall tactics had worked and not a single car would be produced for

³¹⁴ Hopfinger, *Volkswagen Story*, 121.

³¹⁵ König, "Hitler vs. Ford," 258.

³¹⁶ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 105-7.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 144.

³¹⁹ Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 124-5.

private use as the goal of motorizing Germany was deferred until the close of a successful war.³²⁰ Once the factory was converted for rearmament in 1939 the inflexibility of the factory's design made it extremely inefficient for the task of building bombs.

D. The Linchpin to Nazi Modernity: The Volkswagen's Meaning in the Third Reich

Moving the Volkswagen project under the umbrella of KdF also gave Ley a chance to re-brand the small car and re-conceptualize its role in German society. Ley's office was experienced in creating advertisement campaigns to sell vacation and tourism packages. This know-how was imperative for updating the image of the Volkswagen which was still using production and industrial imagery. The KdF advertising department was able to soften the harsh lines and re-imagine the car as an instrument of leisure and a part of daily life. Using Porsche's prototypes, the ad men at KdF held a photo shoot for promotional material particularly aimed at young couples. The first image shows a couple courting with the KdF-Wagen which gave them the freedom to travel to the countryside to enjoy each other's company. The second image shows another young couple that traveled to the countryside for a camping trip by the lake. What is most valuable in both images is not the material object which is incidental to the scene, rather what is most important is the situation that the material object facilitated.

In the same series, there is a photo of a family of six (who knows how they all fit in the VW) on vacation. Note that the *Volksempfänger* in the foreground was placed there to help illustrate the interconnectedness of Nazi modernization policy. It is possible to image that these vacationers bought a weekend excursion package through the KdF, traveled to their destination in their KdF-Wagen on Hitler's Highways, and now are enjoying radio programming through the portable *Volksempfänger*.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

E. Conclusion

Rieger and König's works are exceptional in that they attempt to reveal what the car meant for the Nazis and why creating a Volkswagen topped the Nazi's priority list.³²¹ Discussing Nazi modernizing policies, including the construction of the *Autobahn* and the Volkswagen, has many potential pit falls. Some automotive historians have carefully bracketed off this aspect in German historical works while others have avoided the topic all together. Hiott insists that the entire motorization process under Hitler was aimed solely at military expansionism and the creation of *Lebensraum*.³²² Rieger discredits this position saying, "attempts to render the motorcar accessible to the wider population possessed only tenuous connections with the aggressive expansionist agenda."³²³ Rieger, in the vein of Sachs and Jeffery Herf, unflinchingly reconciles the Nazi modernization policy with their atavistic characteristics: "The Nazis sought to create a highly technicized environment permeated by a spirit of modernity in which unalterable racial characteristics of the German people would flourish powerfully."³²⁴

The ambitious goal of the Nazis was to end class conflict in the *Volk* by eliminating the outward signs of superiority that one could achieve in a consumerist society. If everyone drove a car to work, then it would be easier to treat everyone else as an equal, whether he or she worked on the factory floor or on the board of directors. Somehow, this was the message that Hitler saw in the success of Ford's Model T. Yet in the changing contexts of the 1930s Hitler saw America's success as both an example and a threat. Many of the same central elements of uniformity revealed in the prescribed solutions the Nazi regime handed down to the automotive

³²¹ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 44.

³²² Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 105-7.

³²³ Rieger, *The People's Car*, 44.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

industry are also found in social programs like the attempt to create a *Volksgemeinschaft*, through their solution to labor, the *Deutsche Arbeits Front* (DAF), *Hitler Jugend* (Hitler Youth) and as well as their most infamous policy of racial purity through genocide. Yet, the claim that Nazism draws from a particular reading of Fordism is a much larger question with different objectives and formative questions from the current understanding of the creation of the Volkswagen. It would first have to disconnect from a capitalist philosophy in an anti-capitalist society. As Mary Nolan points out, the idea of “rationalization,” such as Ford’s production methods, was synonymous with Americanization in Weimar Germany.³²⁵

The failures of Nazi economic policy mirror the same patterns as their military and evolving Jewish policy--they fought the economic war on too many fronts ensuring wartime success and developing a consumer society while pursuing autarky overtaxed the available resources. Instead of reconsidering the development of the Volkswagen in light of the overwhelming evidence that the car would be a financial mistake, they doubled down on the investment and prayed for a “miracle weapon” in the form of future gains in rationalization to offset the cost of building each Volkswagen. Just as they would do with linking the problems of disease and Jews in the Ghettos, they saw the problems that they created, a failing consumer economy due to low wages, as evidence of what they already believed, with inadequate *Lebensraum* Germany would continue to have a low standard of living compared to the United States and the West.

Both the debates on rationalization and the desire to improve the quality of life through consumption were in response to the rise of America. Tooze considers America’s rise the principal insight for explaining the trajectory of the Nazi economy. He states plainly in his

³²⁵ Nolan, *Visions of Modernity*, 58, 83.

preface that “America should provide the pivot for our understanding of the Third Reich.”³²⁶

Roth suggests a strong link between the American production methods and the character of the “total society” of the Third Reich, and questions the Americanization of Germany during the Third Reich, the importance of the automotive industry, and the impact that it had on the worker.

³²⁷ Tooze helps not only answer Roth’s questions but in explaining Hitler’s American inspired vision of a consumer culture, he elaborates on this development in order to give real insights into the Nazi mentality. The failings of *Volksprodukte*, as evidenced in the Four Year Plan Memorandum, could be laid at the feet of the usual enemies of the Reich. Tooze states: “Whilst Germans were constrained to inhabit an inadequate *Lebensraum* hedged around by hostile powers, egged on in their antagonism towards Germany by the global Jewish conspiracy, it was no surprise that Germans could not afford cars.”³²⁸ Thus, the experiment with consumer culture further proved the Nazi intuition: America’s star was on the rise in the 1920s because of its vastness, its diverse natural resources, and its class solidarity achieved through common consumption. Critically, for Germany to achieve the latter it would have to expand its own borders and find a “final solution” to the Jewish problem.

As Germany’s fate became increasingly clear in the closing stages of the Second World War, Hitler told Albert Speer: “If the war is lost, the nation will also perish. This fate is inevitable. There’s no reason to take into consideration what the people will need to continue a most primitive existence. On the contrary, it will be better to destroy these things ourselves because the nation will have proven itself to be the weaker one.”³²⁹ As the SS guards abandoned their posts at the Volkswagen factory, they acted against orders and left the factory standing.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, XXIV.

³²⁷ Roth, “Nazismus gleich Fordismus” 83-4.

³²⁸ Tooze, *Wages of Destruction* 162-3

³²⁹ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 189.

The forced foreign laborers, who were conscripted to produce armaments for the *Wehrmacht*, were isolated, starved, and angry. In the first four days, riots swept through the factory city destroying equipment and burning barracks.³³⁰

The American ground troops were in the area but, supplied with outdated maps, were unaware of the existence of the factory.³³¹ A few anxious volunteers, including a French friar who spoke some English and a German priest, took a Red Cross Jeep into the nearby town of Gifhorn to ask the American troops to restore order.³³² When the Americans arrived at the factory city, surveying the destruction, none would have wagered that they were looking at the future home and headquarters of the world's largest manufacturer of automobiles. The American troops set up camp in the nearby castle of Wolfsburg, for which the Nazi's Strength-Through-Joy-Car-City was renamed.³³³

By the autumn of 1945, Wolfsburg was left to the British as part of their occupational zone. Still facing chaos and disorder, the British put the civilians and the foreign laborers to work cleaning up the factory city, and repairing the British jeeps. Over the coming months the plant became a central workshop dedicated to servicing Allied military vehicles. Since the British Occupation Forces faced a shortage of staff cars, and after taking stock of the available supplies around Wolfsburg, the decision was made to have the civilian population start hand producing the military version of the Volkswagen. Cobbled together from existing parts, they were able to produce 713 vehicles by the end of 1945.³³⁴

³³⁰ Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 134-6.

³³¹ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 192-3.

³³² Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 136; Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 191.

³³³ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 192.

³³⁴ Hopfinger, *The Volkswagen Story*, 147.

In January of 1948, the British appointed Heinrich Nordhoff as general manager for the factory and in 1949 the British Occupation authorities signed trusteeship over to the local government of Lower Saxony.³³⁵ When Nordhoff took the helm as the General Manager of the Volkswagen factory, he realized that rebuilding would require new equipment which could only come from abroad. Cars soon started rolling out of the factory, as Hopfinger notes, Nordhoff “now found himself guiding a concern which, although it did not belong to anyone, employed 10,277 people and produced already in 1949 a total of 46,594 vehicles, of which 7,170 were exported.”³³⁶ From the end of World War II, the impulse to export was a matter of necessity rather than design. Moreover, as Hopfinger has shown, the lack of a hard currency in Germany meant that, “if manufacturers required foreign currency to purchase raw material or essential machinery, then he had to earn it with exports.”³³⁷ Survival meant exportation. So, once currency reform created Germany’s own hard currency, the Deutsch Mark, Volkswagen had created networks in Europe, the Middle East, South America, and, above all, the United States.³³⁸

IV. Rebuilding and Reimagining the Volkswagen in the Post-War Federal Republic

As the many monographs on Volkswagen demonstrate, the post-war history of Volkswagen has its own particular questions. First is the question of how the factory was able to be transformed from a war torn building with much of its equipment rusting in the surrounding forests to a major player in the automotive world in such a short amount of time. This question functions at two levels. At the economic level, the now familiar story is one of bootstrapping. Divorced from its ideological exclusivity, the car was able to flower in an environment of

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 148-52.

³³⁶ *Ibid.* For a more nuanced understanding of what happened at Volkswagen from 1945-1960, the date when legal ownership was established through turning it into joint stock company see Ludvigsen, *Battle for the Beetle*.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 159-60.

³³⁸ Schlegelmilch, *VW er läuft*, 13.

capitalism and competition. This helps explain how the car becomes a cultural symbol of the Federal Republic which raises a second question: “how does a car so integral to the Third Reich become a symbol for a country desperate to distance itself from the Nazis?” This second question is usually addressed through the re-ascribing of the small car to Porsche.³³⁹

Rieger notes that appropriating the Volkswagen from the Nazis required selective memory of the Nazis and the war which recast the German public as victims.³⁴⁰ While this is a definite feature of the promotional material and public events that Volkswagen AG (the company) generated in the immediate post-war years, the message circulated in the public did not require such treatment. Starting in November of 1950, *Der Spiegel* published a series of five articles giving a detailed timeline for the car and factory that firmly placed Volkswagen in the Third Reich and chronicled its transformation. Confrontation with the Nazi past came to a boil over the DAF *Sparkarte* program where subscribers paid into accounts for cars that were never produced. Volkswagen AG always treated the complaints from subscribers as a burden, but in reality it gave them a chance to make a clear statement about Volkswagen’s culpability and obligations. Contesting the plaintiffs’ claims, Nordhoff is quoted in a 1954 article in *Time* as stating, “They put their money and their trust in the 1,000 year Reich. Why should they profit through this trust while others lost all they had?”³⁴¹ Karl Stolz represented the plaintiffs in the post-war civil suit, yet the article in *Der Spiegel* makes it clear that in this case “in the economic

³³⁹ “Das Wolfsburger Volkswagenwerk, der gigantische Torso nationalsozialistischer Wirtschaftshybris, hat an die Porsche-Tradition angeknüpft. Es ist Porsches Limousine 1936, die auf dem Montageband gleitet. So haben sich die 23 Millionen RM Konstruktionskosten, die der leistungsfähigste Kleinwagen der Welt über den ursprünglich bewilligten Etat von 1,5 Millionen RM hinaus verschlungen hatte, wenigstens gelohnt. Politische Bedenken gegen den Erfinder bestehen nicht. Seine Heimatstadt Zell am See feierte ihn als Opfer des Faschismus, und heute baut er in Oesterreich Rennwagen für Italien.” VERKEHR: “Unproduktive Botschaft In Bildung begriffen” *Der Spiegel* May 19, 1948, 17

³⁴⁰ Rieger, *The People’s Car*, 125-6.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

situation left behind by the war, good sense is on the side of a Volkswagen. The time has passed on the DAF, on the KDF-saving...³⁴² The article surmises that

The Volkswagen campaign was in its entirety a highly political action. The strength of the German people, from which the plant to be built is broken, the joy that it intended to serve, extinguished. (in reference to the Strength through Joy Program) Despite the full force of the DAF nothing more left; the organization is forgotten, the accumulated in vast amounts of money has disappeared.³⁴³

This was an important idea within the company as well. Through hard work and determination, Volkswagen AG succeeded where the Nazis failed. Heinz Nordhoff realized the purifying quality of hard work and employed it in his 'leadership by example' style. In 1948 *Der Spiegel* ran an article on Nordhoff's management style stating, "In conversation with his staff you realize how important the role of industrial bosses as an incentive for the other can be. 'Dr. Nordhoff works 17 hour days,' it says in the anteroom."³⁴⁴ Mostly, Nordhoff deflected this attention back to the object for sale: the Volkswagen.³⁴⁵ Thus, the Volkswagen became a peacetime symbol with much of the same symbolic content of Rosie the Riveter for the wartime United States. Although the car would out sell all other models in the decade following the war,

³⁴² "Die Vernunft ist auf seiten einer Volkswagenproduktion unter den wirtschaftlichen Verhältnissen, die der Krieg zurückgelassen hat. Einer Zeit, die hinweggegangen ist über die Arbeitsfront, über das KdF-Sparen, über die Aussicht auf einen Lebensstandard, der Arbeiter Autos trägt, mit einem rohen Stiefeltritt hinweggegangen ist auch über den Volkswagenbauer Dr. h. c. Ferdinand Porsche." "Porsche von Fallersleben: Geschichte eines Automobils, Schluß" *Der Spiegel*, June 1, 1950, 22.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25 "Die Volkswagen-Aktion war in allen ihren Teilen eine hochpolitische Aktion. Die Kraft des deutschen Volkes, aus der das Werk entstehen sollte, ist gebrochen, die Freude, der es dienen sollte, erloschen. Auch von der ganzen Kraft der DAF ist nichts mehr übriggeblieben; die Organisation ist vergessen, das in ungeheuren Mengen angehäuften Geld ist verschwunden."

³⁴⁴ Der Generaldirektor ist ein Mann, der es nicht gerne hörte, wenn man ihn einen Grandseigneur der Wirtschaft nennen würde. Aber er ist einer. Im Gespräch mit seinen Mitarbeitern merkt man, wie wichtig das Format eines Industriechefs als Ansporn für die übrigen sein kann. "Dr. Nordhoff arbeitet 17 Stunden am Tage", heißt es im Vorzimmer. "Unproduktive Botschaft In Bildung begriffen" *Der Spiegel* May 19, 1948, 21.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

the car's main affective appeal was based on this story of overcoming and hard work. This production image would also provide a contrasting framework to the leisure image that was cultivated under the DAF. It stood as an example of what Germans could do in their new political and economic state.

A. International Ambassador and the Cosmopolitan Beetle

“Every German car that goes out abroad today is, at the same time an ambassador for us,” claimed Dr. Schulz-Wittuhn in 1948.³⁴⁶ Wittuhn continued: “The German car is a concept of quality and will always be in demand in countries with high traffic. But we have to deliver the quality of what the world expects from us and not get into the habit [of] the horse trader.”³⁴⁷ What Wittuhn recognized was that the automobile could give international validation for the new Federal Republic. Wittuhn's particular struggle was convincing the government of the value of setting aside precious materials for car production that could otherwise be used in the rebuilding of Germany.³⁴⁸ Wittuhn realized that the automobile could act as an international ambassador that would not only provide the means for economic growth but would integrate Germany back into the world. In an article covering the Spanish liberal philosopher and essayist José Ortega y Gasset's 1949 visit to Germany, the author stated that, “the first thing that interested the world-famous Spaniards on German soil, was a Volkswagen.”³⁴⁹ Musing over the car, *Der Spiegel*

³⁴⁶ “Jedes deutsche Auto, das heute ins Ausland rausgeht, ist gleichzeitig ein Botschafter für uns!”, predigt der drahtige Dr. Schulz-Wittuhn immer wieder seinen Autofabrikanten bei ihren regelmäßigen Produktionsbesprechungen, die aber recht eigentlich Mangelbesprechungen sind. VERKEHR: “Unproduktive Botschaft In Bildung begriffen” *Der Spiegel*, May 19, 1948, 17.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ “Von der europäischen Langstreckenfahrt kaum erschüttert, schüttelte der Philosoph im hellen Reiseanzug mit optimistischer blauer Fliege pausenlos die Hände. Das erste, was den weltberühmten Spanier auf deutschem Boden interessierte, war ein Volkswagen. ‘Ich glaube, daß Deutschland durch die Katastrophe wieder erfindungsreich, elastisch und mutig für die Zukunft

quoted Ortega as saying, “I believe that Germany is resourceful, resilient and courageous [and Germany] will come back in the future from the disaster.”³⁵⁰ Volkswagen’s new emphasis on production over consumption, evidenced by the decision to forego extensive advertising campaigns throughout the 1950s, slowly transformed into a program of consumption by way of production.

Hopfinger emphasizes the economic need to export as a way to gain raw materials for new production.³⁵¹ While this economic concern is what motivated Nordoff and Volkswagen AG to establish trade networks and sell the car abroad, it also gave another layer of meaning to the small car that would contrast the Nazi plans for the people’s car. One of the earliest Volkswagen advertisements in Germany from 1956 is titled “America says ‘Yes’ to the Volkswagen.” This ad emphasized the respect that the small car commanded abroad.³⁵² Succeeding in the American market was a particularly strong endorsement because of the deep associations between the country and the car, and American’s long experience with the automobile made them discerning connoisseurs. The advertisement reports that “American test drivers report excitedly about the car’s sensible construction, its tasteful finish (paint work), about its high build quality and precision, its robust air cooled engine and its torsion bar suspension, which one can only find on rare expensive cars in America.”³⁵³ Turning from production to American consumption of the Beetle, the ad notes how more than the economical

wird’, sagte er.” “Wir machen uns auf den Weg: Frischer Wind von Ortega,” Der Spiegel, September 1, 1949, 26.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁵¹ Hopfinger, *Volkswagen Story*, 166-70.

³⁵² Volkswagen, “Amerika sagt ‘Ja’ zum Volkswagen,” in Schlegelmilch, *VW*, 19.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

price, the car attracts attention because of its practical nature, it is easy to park, but also because in America, the car is “utterly ‘different.’”³⁵⁴

DDB incorporated this idea in one of their first ads in 1959 that appeared in *Der Spiegel*. The headline for this particular ad was, “America’s highest car is not American.” The play on words for this advertisement is that ad is actually talking about ground clearance, claiming the small car sits higher than any American car.³⁵⁵ The ad transitions to talk about other spatial features of the Volkswagen, suggesting that there is enough headroom that one can leave his or her hat on while driving.³⁵⁶ The main departure from the 1956 advertisement that uses American reception as a selling tool is how the advertisement emphasizes the car’s German heritage; the ad claims that the car, “has become as American as sauerkraut with frankfurters.”³⁵⁷

When describing the globalizing forces at play after 1945, Rieger denies the one-sided view that sees globalization simply as the Americanization of the world. Instead he claims that “a wider internationalization characterized world culture after 1945. Few commodities illustrate this trend better than a German automobile that gained international fame, not least in the United States itself.”³⁵⁸ The charge of Americanization must also be understood differently from 1945 onward than it had been used historically in Germany. Americanization from the 1880s forward described a completely self-imposed appropriation of certain aspects of modern life, such as consumerism. In the post-war period, American authorities attempted to actively impose the values associated with America on German citizenry at many levels of society. Layered on top of that is the complexity of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or economic miracle, and its relationship to

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*; “Weil er so völlig ‘anders’ ist.” Self Translation

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; “Obwohl er den höchsten Straßenkreuzer um 4.5 cm überragt.” Self Translation

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*; “Dass Sie beim Fahren ihren Hut aufbewahren können.” Self Translation

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*; “Der so amerikanisch geworden ist wie Sauerkraut mit Frankfurtern. Self Translation

³⁵⁸ Rieger, *The People’s Car*, 7-8.

the Marshal Plan and the European Recovery Program which, as Jarausch points out, “placed Germany’s revival within a larger framework while also offering short term loans to help the economy get off the ground.”³⁵⁹ While Volkswagen could claim that it never took any of the Marshal Plan money, as the company liked to tell American reporters, it is a bit simplistic to conclude that Volkswagen did not benefit from the stability and economic recovery that was partly due to such stimulus money.³⁶⁰

In the context of the cold war, the U.S. was eager to claim West Germany’s success as the result of American intervention and project claims of their superiority over the communist endeavors in East Germany. In its clearest form, this is illustrated in a cover article by the *Times* from February 15, 1954 titled “Comeback in the West,” which sets Volkswagen’s success, and by extension, West Germany’s success, in relation to America. The article argues that, “Germany’s rebirth is the kind of economic miracle Americans can understand. At a time when other European nations were leaning towards socialism, Germany plumped for free enterprise.”³⁶¹ The article attributes this success to Economics Minister Ludwig Erhard, whose hand produced for the “free world...its strongest European bulwark against Communism.”³⁶² The article demonstrates a naiveté about the actual economic model the Federal Republic implemented known as the ‘social market’ economy, which combined a free market approach with social responsibility. The article cites Erhard as saying, “Turn the people and the money loose, and they will make the country strong.”³⁶³ This is an oversimplification of Erhard’s actual policy as he explains elsewhere that, “This freedom does not mean license, and it does not mean

³⁵⁹ Jarausch, *After Hitler*, 83.

³⁶⁰ Clymer, “Report on Foreign Cars,” 288.

³⁶¹ *Time Magazine*. “Business Abroad: Comeback in the West.” February 15, 1954, accessed April 12, 2013, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,936226,00.html>.

³⁶² *Ibid.*

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

irresponsibility, but rather it means steady, obligatory devotion to the common weal.”³⁶⁴ The article’s attempt to cast West Germany as a ‘little America’ then turns towards Volkswagen’s success. The article tries to lay claim to Volkswagen’s key figure Heinrich Nordhoff by linking him to American business and connecting his experiences in America to the success of Volkswagen. General Motors briefly owned the German car company, Opel, in the 1930s where Nordhoff worked writing service manuals.³⁶⁵ “Because of his years of American training in G.M. Opel, Nordhoff did not wear the pompous, punctilious air of German industry’s traditional Herr Generaldirektor.”³⁶⁶ The article continues by describing Nordhoff as, “an engineer-salesman who combines the drive (and fluent English) of an American, with the perseverance of a German.”³⁶⁷

B. Selling the Beetle to America

On the corner of 59th and Park Avenue on July 16th 1950, the Beetle had its American début on the Hoffman Motor Car showroom floor.³⁶⁸ The potential Beetle customer would have to walk past luxurious imports such as Jaguar Mark Vs, XK 120s, and Citroën Traction Avant before his or her eye settled on the humble offerings from the newly renamed factory-city of Wolfsburg, Germany.³⁶⁹ Even among these well-known foreign imports, the Volkswagen would have seemed foreign. Author Paul Ingrassia retells a joke from that time where, “A donkey says to a Volkswagen, ‘Hey, what are you?’ ‘I’m a car,’ the Volkswagen replied. ‘What are you?’ ‘In that case,’ said the donkey, ‘I’m a horse.’”³⁷⁰ It was not just that the Beetle did not fit in on the

³⁶⁴ Ludwig Erhard quoted in Jarausch, *After Hitler*, 87.

³⁶⁵ Andrea Hiott, *Thinking*, 133.

³⁶⁶ *Time Magazine*. “Business Abroad: Comeback in the West.”

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ Paul Ingrassia, *Engines of Change*, 94.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

Hoffman Motor Car showroom floor. It was an aberration out of sync with American car culture.

Yet, the context of the new rivalry of ideology and a recovering Germany muted the distinctions between American norms of car production and consumption and the new program that Nordhoff pursued at Volkswagen. In the 1950s auto manufacturers in the United States initially dismissed the Volkswagen as a novelty. As Hiott reports, “By the mid-1950s, while most adult Americans still identified the car with Hitler and the war... the American market was generally not very open to foreign cars.”³⁷¹ Thus, it was no surprise that the French manufacturer, Renault, rather than Volkswagen had made the biggest inroads into the American market in the 1950s. But Renault’s success was fleeting, partially because the company exported the car without creating the necessary infrastructure with networks of dealerships, service centers, and parts suppliers in the United States. Nordhoff himself recognized the differences between the European and the American car when he told *Der Spiegel* in 1948 that, “The American automobile industry has become increasingly further and foreign to us. With pale envy and unreserved admiration we see...these "living room on wheels"³⁷² There is no consensus as to why the Beetle was such a commercial success abroad. Flink believes that it is partly due to the fact that the Beetle proved itself in motor sport by facing tough terrain, endurance trails, and a corporate philosophy that put “service before sales.”³⁷³ Ingrassia maintains that the Beetle spoke to Americans in a language they could understand by costing nearly half the price of the low end

³⁷¹ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 335.

³⁷² “Der amerikanische Automobilbau ist uns immer ferner und fremder geworden. Mit blassem Neid und rückhaltloser Bewunderung sehen wir finish und Ausstattung dieser "living room on wheels.” “Eine ‘Spiegel’- Seite für Heinz Nordhoff: Passion fürs Auto,” *Der Spiegel*, May 11 1948, 32.

³⁷³ Flink, *Automobile Age*, 322-4.

domestics.³⁷⁴ Volkswagen's focus in the first four years after forming a company in 1948 was using the foreign markets to shore up rebuilding the factory, but it also was an experiment to see if the Volkswagen had universal appeal.

Corporate policy towards reinvesting shifted its focus from machinery to marketing in the mid 1950s. Volkswagen had to forge an identity as a company, and their single product, the Beetle, had to be the focal point for that identity. The Volkswagen Beetle was the culmination of a distinctly German car culture which viewed things differently. Through marketing campaigns, both in the United States and in Europe, the company crafted divergent images. In the United States, Volkswagen's marketing was entrusted to the Madison Avenue agency Doyle, Dane, and Bernbach (DDB).³⁷⁵ Following the Beetle's example of breaking American car culture's norms, the agency also broke the norms of American advertising. They defied convention through "self-deprecating humor," revealed in early tag lines such as "Ugly is only skin-deep."³⁷⁶ Gaining momentum, DDB's approach reached its zenith in their most famous VW print ad which pictured a Beetle with a subscript that simply said "Lemon."³⁷⁷ These ads became a cultural phenomenon in and of themselves.³⁷⁸ But DDB's American interpretation of the car, as conveyed in their advertisements, ultimately only speaks to the meaning of the Beetle for Americans, where the Beetle merged with concepts of unconventionality in the public mind and became a symbol of its owner. The specific meaning of the Beetle is given by the consumer culture in which it inhabits. For Volkswagen advertising in America, this message does not necessarily reflect the native mass cultural meaning. The cycle of advertising, interpretation by

³⁷⁴ Ingrassia, *Engines of Change*, 96.

³⁷⁵ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 338.

³⁷⁶ Ingrassia, *Engines of Change*, 98.

³⁷⁷ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 366.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 402.

the public, consumption, then reinterpretation by the corporation, engenders a specific cultural meaning onto consumer products. In international discourse the gulf between native and ferried messages becomes most apparent in how the two advertising campaigns reacted to the Beetle's form. Yet, as Rob Kroes warns, "it is one thing to explore the programmatic strategies of the organizers and producers of such forms of mass culture; it is a totally different thing actually to gauge what the audience chooses to get out of them."³⁷⁹ Even when an advertisement goes "viral" it is difficult to divine which aspects of the advertisement elicits a response in the public. This is only exacerbated when placed into an international context.

In observing the major trends in print advertisement of the Volkswagen Beetle from 1950-68, two styles of presentation were employed: ideological and practical representation. The first type, ideological advertisement, utilized a single graphic element, a black and white photograph of the car. These are the most iconic images of the Beetle, which strictly followed self-created principles for over a decade. It made Beetle ads unique and instantly recognizable. This minimalist approach echoes the central ethos of the car's design of exalting simplicity and functionality over flashiness and ostentation. Devoid of setting and/or characters, the reader must provide the context. The total effect is that the car appears idealized, as though it exists outside of space and time. The photograph's composition varied wildly to achieve distinct consequence. There are no special effects, the lighting is uniform, and the image is in sharp focus. The use of negative space created additional layers of meaning where the white, square frame is contrasted by the roundness of a typically black car, which accentuates the flowing lines of the body. Sometimes this is achieved in such a way that the car seems to be a round peg in a square hole. The perspective of the photographs may be low or high but is rarely at eye level.

³⁷⁹ Kroes, "American Mass Culture," 86.

Rarely will the Beetle take up the entire print. Instead it is positioned in the bottom third of the frame which pulls the eye downwards to the text. Again, the empty space is most often large enough to constitute its own visual element. The advertisers realized that the best way to stand out in visually chaotic magazines was to use blank space. The care and detail which these prints require modestly transform the so called ‘ugly car’ into a thing of beauty. The remarkable thing about the advertisements was, just like the car, they were marked by absence. The lack of motivational visual aids, such as young women or hyper masculine men, common to advertisements of the time, de-sexualized the image of the car. In this way, the advertising transcended demographics and target markets, resulting in a car which, theoretically, had universal appeal. These advertisements also made use of text as a compositional tool, which enforced and enhanced the striking photographs.

The textual elements of the advertising also follow strict principles. Short, clever taglines appear in a large, bold font. Then three columns of fine print text, located below, explain the tagline. The fine print is so disproportionally small that the reader has to physically move in closer in order to read it. Smaller still is the price which sits directly below the photograph, and at a glance looks more like an artist’s signature than consumer information. Compared to other car advertisements, the Volkswagen ads are extremely text- heavy containing fifteen to twenty full sentences. In short, they are completely unique. What DDB accomplished was to take a car designed in the mid 1930’s, and make it look more modern than any other car available in Europe or America.³⁸⁰

Despite this, DDB enjoyed marketing the car as ugly, it became a motif featured in campaigns as late as 1969, long after the Beetle became integrated into the American automotive

³⁸⁰ Schlegelmilch, VW, 22.

landscape.³⁸¹ But in Germany, the Beetle *was* the automotive landscape. By 1963, Volkswagen had sold over three million Beetles to the German public.³⁸² Moreover, the German small-car market included offerings from BMW, Opel, Skoda, and imports like Fiat and Citroën which echoed the Beetle's design and simplistic character, and sold at similar costs. In Germany, the Beetle's shape was a quality to be praised rather than regretted. A 1962 German advertisement featured an upright egg with a drawing in marker of the back of the Beetle. The large print declared: "there are shapes which cannot be improved."³⁸³ Unapologetically, the fine print recounts the functional superiority of the round shape, that it is aerodynamic, streamlined, and timeless, all of which rationalizes the body shape which "embodies an idea."³⁸⁴

In an interview with *Der Spiegel* in 1948, Nordhoff stated that Volkswagen was in a unique position in that they were the only ones poised to make a small affordable car without compromising quality.³⁸⁵ In his estimation, there was no need to look for redesigns or evolving a second model as long as they had supremacy in this market.³⁸⁶ Yet the practical and the symbolic became intertwined in the continuity of the Volkswagen. This was the most common theme in the German Volkswagen advertising. The fact that the Beetle kept its shape in a world obsessed with change would be featured as a selling point in advertisements throughout the 1950-60s as proof of its strengths. "Volkswagen's Theory of Evolution," an ad printed in *Der*

³⁸¹ Hiott, *Thinking Small*, 369.

³⁸² Schlegelmilch, VW, 25.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*; "Es Gibt Formen, die man nicht verbessern kann," Self Translation

³⁸⁴ *Der Spiegel*, Nr. 52, 1962. 56.

³⁸⁵ "Einen neuen Typ will Nordhoff in den nächsten fünf Jahren nicht herausbringen. 'Es wird in absehbarer Zeit keinen Kleinwagen dieser Art geben. Der auf der Leipziger Messe ausgestellte DKW-Drei-Zylinder ist eine äußerst leistungsfähige, vielleicht gleichwertige Vorkriegskonstruktion. Aber er existiert nur in diesem einen Modell, das jetzt einem russischen Obersten gehört. Es gibt kein Werk und keine Maschinen, die den Wagen bauen könnten.' So Heinz Nordhoff." "Eine 'Spiegel'-Seite für Heinz Nordhoff: Passion fürs Auto," *Der Spiegel*, May 11 1948, 32.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Spiegel in 1963, presented fifteen identical Beetles in profile view labeled with its individual year model underneath each car. Playing on the Darwinian evolution of man drawings, the cars lined up sequentially stretching from 1949-63.³⁸⁷ This advertisement was presented in both the United States and Germany. Ingrassia sees this advertisement as DDB's continued attack on the "keeping up with the Joneses" mentality, which drove consumer culture.³⁸⁸ However, on closer inspection, this message is muddled by the last line in both the American and the German ad: 'the most evolved VW is the '63 model.'³⁸⁹ The emphasis on keeping a new, more evolved model of the Beetle may in fact show that the Beetle was not entirely as "anti-materialistic" as Ingrassia leads the reader to believe.

This is the point where the message of stability and continuity comes into conflict with a consumerist notion of progress. These issues would be reconciled in an advertisement from 1965. In this advertisement, the original model of the Beetle is pictured angled away from the viewer. The headline reads, "Many thought as early as 1948 that we should change him."³⁹⁰ The small print outlines the "approximate 2,108 changes" which have taken place over the 17 years, concluding, "when it is necessary to change everything, we will change everything."³⁹¹ Designers and advertisers would often draw upon invisible changes, such as engine size. Focusing on the inner changes, while maintaining its outward appearance, divides the expectations of the American and German automobile. By focusing on the inner changes, the effect was not to change appearance but the experience of driving.

V. Conclusion

³⁸⁷ Volkswagen Ad, *Der Spiegel* August 14, 1963, 58.

³⁸⁸ Ingrassia, *Engines of Change*, 102.

³⁸⁹ Volkswagen Ad, *Der Spiegel* August 14, 1963, 58.

³⁹⁰ Schlegelmilch, *VW*, 35.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

The symbolic content of the automobile is difficult to divorce from the symbolic and mythical America. Often the creation of this association is placed at the feet of Henry Ford who first introduced rationalized and mechanized production processes to the automobile. This venture made the Ford Model T available to the average man and created the first motorized nation in the world. However, Ford cannot take all of the credit for this association between America and the automobile. Five years before Ford started production, Julius Otto Bierbaum published a book and titled it *Yankeedoodlefahrt und andere Reise geschichten (Yankee Doodle Trip and other Travel Stories)* thus giving an American face to the method of car travel.³⁹² But what conjured America in Bierbaum's mind when riding through Germany? After all, he was in a machine that had been invented in Germany at a time when there was no remarkable difference between production and consumption of the automobile in Europe and the United States.³⁹³ *Yankeedoodlefahrt* was in many ways a sequel to his popular book from 1903, *Eine empfindsame Reise im Automobile. Von Berlin nach Sorrent und zurück an den Rhein (A sentimental journey by automobile: From Berlin to Sorrento and back to the Rhine)*, the first German book to feature an automotive journey.³⁹⁴ In this book, Bierbaum writes, "The meaning of the automobile is freedom, self-possession, self-discipline, and ease," all of which were adjectives for the emerging American lifestyle.³⁹⁵ This would be echoed a half century later by Jürgen Habermas in a newspaper article, "Autofahren: der Mensch am Lenkrad" (Traveling by Car: Man behind the Wheel). Habermas was most interested in utilizing the phenomenon of driving as a series of metaphors for modern life. Perhaps this is why Habermas sees many of the same elements that

³⁹² In Wolfgang Sachs, *For Love of the Automobile*, 8.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁵ Quoted in Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 8.

Bierbaum described, concluding that driving is democratic, requires self-discipline, and even that there is a Marxian ‘alienation’ of the driver.³⁹⁶

And yet, Daniel Miller fundamentally changed the way the automobile is studied with a single sentence when he claimed that within the available literature, “there is no sense that the car might be a different cultural form or experience among different groups.”³⁹⁷ This revelation began the overturning of the normative practice of using American car culture as a measuring stick or even a surrogate for other national experiences with the automobile. Historians Rudy Koshar, Lewis Siegelbaum, and Cotton Seiler have all participated in dislodging America as the only cultural home to the automobile. While many recent works on the automobile have taken Daniel Miller’s challenge to heart, attempting to rethink and reconstruct the cultural significance of the automobile in, among other places, Germany and the United States, no one has taken the next step by tracing the cultural interaction among nations concerning the automobile.

While many cars have the potential to demonstrate this interchange, none showcase this better than the Volkswagen Beetle. First, the small car is widely recognized as a cultural symbol in both the United States and Germany. In Germany, the Beetle symbolized the growing respectability of the *Wirtschaftswunderzeit* (Economic Miracle Era), and in the United States the car was appropriated by the counter-culture of the 1960s. The Volkswagen project’s longstanding ambition was to bridge the gap between German automotive tradition and mass consumption; it is therefore a ‘German’ response to an ‘American’ phenomenon. Thus, mythical America was instrumental in the creation of the Beetle. Volkswagen’s post war success ushered in a new chapter in German car culture and automobility, which not only made Volkswagen a

³⁹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “Autofahren” 29.

³⁹⁷ Daniel Miller, “Driven Societies,” in *Car Cultures*, ed by Daniel Miller, 1-33. (New York: Berg, 2001) 12.

success but also breathed new life into all German automotive concerns. Hence, there exists a dialogue between Germany and the United States, each telling the other what they read from their partner's car culture. American and German car cultures rely on interpretation from outside of their own national-cultural frameworks for the creation of their own car culture which was managed through international trade.

Demonstrating this interplay problematizes the Americanization narrative of Germany during the post-war era by showing how German post-war car culture was a product of their own developments rather than an imposition or an appropriation of American car culture. Certainly the image of America played a role in this formation, but two central points can be made to assuage claims of Americanization in post-war Germany. First, Germany, at times consciously and sometimes inadvertently, created its car culture on a different set of values, aesthetics, and with different objectives than car culture in the United States. Thus, the two countries developed discernibly divergent car cultures. Second, the process of grappling with perceived 'American' ideas, most notably the rationalized production lines and consumer driven society, has a long history in Germany. Suggesting that these developments appear all at once in the post-war period not only neglects this long history, but also presupposes that American ideals supplant German ideals in an extraordinary framework outside of the essential cultural changes that all societies undergo. Depending on who is commenting on these cultural changes, the 'American' qualities are often imbued with malevolent or magnanimous agency. Indeed, as Christoph Hendrik Müller summarizes in his work on Americanization, invoking America often justified pessimistic views of modernity in an attempt to make modern life seem foreign.³⁹⁸ Thus, the

³⁹⁸ Christoph Hendrik Müller, *West Germans Against the West: Anti-Americanism in Media and Public Opinion in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1949-68*. (New York: Palgrave, 2010) 10-1.

image of America was a device used in the debates and responses to cultural change in Germany; however, historical analysis must not mistake this binary cultural identification for the actual processes underway in Germany. In short, the shifting imagology of America that Germans employed in constructing their own meanings for modernity and, in this case, the automobile should not be conflated with a process of Americanization. Mary Nolan brings us closer to understanding this relationship through the analogy of American fascination with Japan in the 1970s and 1980s. Nolan believes this interest in a rising global power mirrors the German fascination with America in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany. Applying the Japanese metaphor to this issue of cultural change, it is useful to note how America interpreted Japanese messages and changed its culture; however, it would be difficult to argue that America underwent Japanization during that time.

Yet, if Americanization failed to encapsulate the cultural transformation experienced in Germany, any alternative theory concerning cultural exchange must first investigate the limits and possibilities of national forms of production and consumption. Since the automobile can be approached from many different sources and methodologies, this work has attempted to access a variety of historiographies and thereby connect conversations which have previously stood in isolation. Extending and evaluating these theories to Volkswagen not only provides answers pertaining to car culture, but also points to the amorphous behavior of culture as a whole. The central question regards the role of material culture and the world of everyday life in the creation of the national identities through the experience of production and consumption.

Following Wolfgang Sach's lead, I posit that the car itself is one of the best indicators of norms and values. However, evaluating car design for this purpose has many potential downfalls as it is suspect to criticism concerning the car's subjective content verses its objective function.

One of the main areas overlooked in the history of Volkswagen has been in taking these aggregate cultural representations in marketing and public reception in order to illuminate the car's national dimension. As Koshar explains,

Scholarship on the United States' cultural impact on Europe—and on European responses to 'Americanization'—is perhaps one of the most promising areas of research on the national dimensions of consumption... Such research remains rather scattered and unfocused for historians... and some of it takes the national dimension for granted.³⁹⁹

Yet, it would not be beneficial to reconstruct a national car culture which is either too universal to function as a national descriptor or too narrow to encompass the majority's experience of the automobile within a country. This can be summarized by the question: what is German about German car culture?

As the shifting historiography relating to the concept of the nation, national identity, national traditions, and meanings evidences, one cannot assume that the nation provides the best framework for evaluating cultural experience. This is particularly true with a modern cultural artifact such as the automobile, which struggles to place itself into a national tradition, invented or otherwise. Michael Billig and Tim Edensor are able to provide a way to posit positive parameters for discussing national cultures.⁴⁰⁰ Billig argues that "the whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices" which "(re)produce national identity are reproduced in the banal realm of the everyday as part of the 'endemic condition' of nations."⁴⁰¹ Edensor gives this observation a central role in his thesis by arguing that "the national is constituted and reproduced, contested and reaffirmed in everyday life," which helps construct

³⁹⁹ Rudy Koshar, "Seeing, Traveling, and Consuming: An Introduction," in *Histories of Leisure*, ed. Rudy Koshar (New York: Berg, 2002) 6.

⁴⁰⁰ Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, (New York: Berg Publishers, 2002).

⁴⁰¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 11.

national “unreflexive identifications.”⁴⁰² This emphasis allows Edensor to exchange the role of culture and nation, where the nation had once been charged with the creation of culture, Edensor maintains that it is largely culture which provides the cohesive elements to the nation. National cultural patterns thereby become a common sense phenomenon by virtue of their “unreflexivity” in practice and experience.

The current literature has been working away from these ideas as Rieger, Hiott, and Patton all utilize the same sets of advertising to make claims concerning the reception of the Beetle in Germany and the United States in a search for the “universal meaning of the universal car.”⁴⁰³ One potential problem with Volkswagen’s advertising campaign was that it was conducted by a third party advertising corporation, in this case the American agency Doyle Dane and Bernbach. This problem can be dealt with more indirectly because authorship is less important to the larger argument concerning the development of a public image because the finalized advertisement is necessarily a consensus among the advisor, company, and publisher. Ultimately, as Micheal Schudson argues in *Advertising the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society*, this framework is advertisements’ main source of power and influence over society. This implies that advertisements are subject to and reflective of larger cultural currents rather than being manufactured from the outside of culture.

The advertisements provide the generalized image of German car culture and through changes in marketing and responses in re-design by the car manufactures, these messages create the outline of a car culture. For example, in the early days of advertising, Volkswagen sought approval by using American sales as an example of the car’s worthiness for the German public.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁰³ Rieger, *The People’s Car*, 15.

The automobile itself is a powerful primary source. Wolfgang Sachs acknowledged this when he wrote:

Automobiles are a means of communication. Their material characteristics as such do not stimulate demand, so much as the messages that they encapsulate. They are like a language that allows one to enter into relations with oneself and other. They communicate outwardly the owner's self-conception and sense of place in society, and in an internal dialogue they reveal themselves as a source of gloating self-confirmation.⁴⁰⁴

Once the study demonstrates that the Volkswagen represented German car culture and presented a unique alternative to American car culture, tracing the changes in American automobility at a basic level is surprisingly simple. Ford and GM both introduced cars in the late 1950s and early 1960s which attempted to directly mirror the Volkswagen. The Chevrolet Corvair is perhaps the clearest example of this as it was small, competitively priced, and even featured a rear engine design. However, the most dramatic transformation would come from the Japanese invasion and displacement of American domestic dominance of the 1970s and 1980s. The Volkswagen Beetle was not only a powerful precedent for the Japanese "invasion," it also provided a model for design and distribution.⁴⁰⁵

Until very recently, cultural aspects have not been the historical focus on Volkswagen. The process of distancing the Beetle from the Nazis began to take shape at the close of the war, but was cemented in historical works such as K.B. Hopfinger's 1971 monograph, *The Volkswagen Story*. While Hopfinger does not ignore Hitler's role in the creation of a "people's car," by focusing on the design and development of the Beetle, he casts Dr. Porsche as his main character to the detriment of the larger structural and cultural explanations absent in his text. This pattern is then perpetuated in much of the literature concerning Volkswagen. In *Birth of*

⁴⁰⁴ Sachs, *Love of the Automobile*, 146.

⁴⁰⁵ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 423.

the Beetle: The Development of the Volkswagen by Porsche, Chris Barber openly states that his book's *raison d'être* is to remind the world that Porsche was responsible for the world's most popular car.⁴⁰⁶

Most technological items do not carry the same emotional appeals that cars do. Cars offer a version of freedom and self-expression that no other mere machines allow. As individualistic as the car is, it also operates in the social environment. As these social environments change, so too do the meanings around them. In post-war Germany, Volkswagen had to find its own authentic voice, based on a car culture which began with Carl Benz. Rather than being a rejection of American car culture, the Beetle was a part of the continuities of Germany's particular car culture which drew from a lineage of German ideas about modernity. Since the Beetle never underwent any major redesigns in all the years it was produced, retaining its shape could signify the Volkswagen's rejection of the American car construct, and it may further reveal the limitations of the concept of Americanization. Germany looked to America for insights concerning modernity, but in their selective interpretation they created their own meanings for the automobile. These attitudes followed Volkswagen's lines of distribution abroad and in the United States where the Volkswagen provided an alternative vision of what the car could be.

⁴⁰⁶ Chris Barber, *Birth of the Beetle*, 7.

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