

Just Another Car Factory: Lean Production and Its Discontents. by James Rhinehart,  
Christopher Huxley, and David Robertson. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997.  
Pp. xi +249

Richard Florida

Heinz School, Carnegie Mellon University

*Amerian Journal of Sociology* (forthcoming 1998).

Just Another Car Factory is a welcome and useful addition to the growing body of research on Japanese automotive factories in North America. Spurred by a wave of Japanese investment beginning in the mid-1980s, these "transplant" organizations captured the attention of social scientists interested in the transfer of Japanese-style management abroad, the adoption of innovative "high-performance" work systems, and the more general question of the shift from traditional "fordist" mass production to new and more advanced modes of economic organization.

The book focuses on the experiences of workers at the CAMI plant in Canada - a joint venture between General Motors and Suzuki- opened in 1986. It provides a comprehensive and highly readable account of factory life based upon a wealth of empirical information culled from shop-floor observation; personal interviews with managers, union officials, and factory workers; and survey research on the adaptation and commitment of

shopfloor workers. The authors - two Canadian sociologists and a representative of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Union - use this information to advance two interrelated arguments.

The first argument is steeped solidly in their empirical case. The authors basically contend the CAMI factory is similar in fundamental respects to the traditional mass-production factories operated by the Big Three. They muster considerable evidence from interviews and surveys to show how worker commitment to the plant declined steadily over time, as did worker involvement in participative activities, leading ultimately to a major strike - the first at a transplant factory - in 1992.

The authors move from this empirically based argument to advance a second, more critical, thesis. Taking aim at the generally accepted view that transplants are at the cutting edge of the shift from traditional mass production to a new and more efficient system of lean production, they contend that the problems experienced at the CAMI plant stem fundamentally from the limits, tensions, and internal contradictions of lean production systems. They go on to argue that lean production essentially represents a more insidious form of mass production, designed to pump more work out of workers through a combination of a fast-paced work and peer-enforced discipline. They take issue with those who suggest that lean production has transcended mass production, arguing that such a view is misguided and premature.

This second argument, while certainly provocative, is not persuasive. While it is always problematic to generalize from a single case, the CAMI case is particularly challenging, because the plant is unique among the broader population of transplant factories.

CAMI is a joint venture between General Motors - the world's largest automaker and a company which has long exemplified many of the core features of mass production - and the much smaller Japanese automaker, Suzuki - a company which is not known for its commitment for advanced work and production organization. Certainly, no one would argue that Suzuki represents either the workplace innovation or the economic power of a Toyota - the company which is most closely associated with lean production. Furthermore, the plant's workforce is represented by the CAW union, which has actively opposed team-based work and other features of advanced work systems.

While the authors' effectively make the case that CAMI is neither an advanced work environment nor a workers' paradise, they are ultimately unconvincing in their attempt to generalize from these specific facts to a sweeping indictment of the transplants and advanced production systems. It is especially difficult for the authors to score, because their work flies in the face of numerous case studies of other transplants, of careful plant-level comparisons such as those carried out by the International Motor Vehicle Program at MIT, and of several survey-based studies of both Japanese transplants and of U.S.-owned manufacturing plants.

The authors should be commended for the quality of their empirical research and for highlighting the negative conditions which can occur in specific transplants. While CAMI may well be "just another car factory," even such a well-documented case study will fail to convince a broad and knowledgeable audience that there is nothing new in the transplants or in the lean production system.

Word count: 714 words