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The 800-page book-of-a-German-Ph.D.-thesis on the history of footwear under review here is one of the most interesting things I can remember reading. This is not a sentence I ever imagined myself writing. Yet in this outstanding account of the history of the shoe in Germany between the 1920s and the 1950s the author succeeds not only in her ambition to place the study of material culture at the interstices of histories of both production and consumption, but also places it at the centre of histories of science, fashion, retail, semiotics, knowledge-transfer, globalization, violence, ritual, trade, transnationalism, regulation, and more. As if this were not a challenging enough undertaking, the German example is placed firmly within a comparative context. At regular intervals, the author draws in material on the British and American shoe industries to great effect. The author’s grasp of the huge variety of historical and scholarly discourses needed to make sense of these various stories is remarkable. It is a phenomenal achievement.

At the start of the period under review, the culture of shoe-wearing was in a state of transition. Hitherto, shoes had been regarded solely as items of practical utility, as something to protect the feet and keep them warm. The use of footwear as an item of decoration and display was the preserve of very specific, mostly elite groups, such as the military. In rural areas, in particular, many people still did not wear them as a matter of habit. While patterns of shoe ownership naturally mapped at least partially onto patterns of wealth, however, this also reflected enduring beliefs about both health and propriety: many believed that walking bare-foot was better for one’s health, and that shoes ought properly to be worn only to school and to church. How long a shoe would last was the most important criterion for a purchaser. Shoe and boot design changed little as a result; manufacturers produced comparatively large production runs of a limited range of designs; and the processes whereby the product was brought to market were also simple and comparatively stable.

At the same time, the 1920s saw the emergence of new patterns of demand and habits of consumption driven by fashion: all of a sudden, colour mattered. Advances in anatomical understanding also
placed new demands on manufacturers to supply shoes in correct shapes and sizes. This led in the 1920s to a great proliferation of the range of models, shapes, and sizes a retailer needed to stock in order to keep his customers happy. In a later era manufacturers would learn to use these factors to their advantage, fostering a culture in which parents felt obliged to get their children’s feet measured every six weeks and buy new shoes at the first minor signs of growth, and in which adult consumers could be encouraged to own several pairs of shoes and buy yet more, even when their existing ones were not worn out. Yet in the 1920s manufacturers and retailers regarded the growing complexity of the market and its increasing fickleness with a great deal more unease: how to cope with the need to supply the market with such massive variety of models in much smaller production runs whilst keeping costs down? What to do with all those bright blue shoes just made at great expense now that consumers had decided they simply must have this season’s red instead? Combating such ‘market imperfection’ and remaining competitive was even more of a headache in the challenging economic environment of the 1920s and the Depression in particular, especially given the presence of vigorous competition from the Czechoslovakian firm Baťa, which flooded the market with more cheaply produced footwear in this period.

Drawing on insights provided by the burgeoning rationalization and scientific management movement, manufacturers reacted in a number of ways. In the first place, the introduction of sizing norms made it possible to make some components of the shoe in larger volumes and thus more cost effectively. They also introduced new machine tools, leased from America, facilitating more cost-effective production. Machine-tool production also accelerated the experimentation with synthetic materials and thus served, at least in part, to displace the stitching and nailing of footwear by practices of moulding or gluing. Meanwhile, larger manufacturers built up retail chains that enabled them to distribute more cost-effective large production runs nationally, sending a few examples of each shoe or size to a large number of outlets simultaneously. This was the era in which household name footwear chains emerged, in Germany as in Britain. A nascent market research industry also emerged, with the support of the retailers, to try to understand and thus predict changing patterns of demand, in the hope that the wastefulness called forth by the fickle dictates of fashion could be reduced.
tools gradually displaced older work methods, and thus placed old-style craft production under strain, with all the known political and social strains that caused; likewise, the new networks of distribution placed pressure on small retailers who struggled to compete. Nonetheless, the comparatively small production runs of each shoe model meant that a genuine mass production regime was never achieved in the shoe industry.

Two of the main obstacles to cost-reduction, mechanization, and a more efficient utilization of raw materials were the expense and variability of the hides used in traditional leather shoes. Many of these were also imported, which, given Germany’s foreign exchange situation and the political imperatives of the Nazi regime, posed an additional challenge. Hitherto scholarship on the economic history of the Third Reich has tended to assume that the foreign exchange regime of the Four-Year-Plan, its drive for synthetic substitute materials, and its attempts to regulate various market vagaries ran counter to the interests of the consumer goods industries. However, as the author shows, the regime’s encouragement of synthetic materials coincided with this particular industry’s desire to use them, leading to significant advances in the use of substitute materials in footwear in the 1930s; similarly, the regime’s fostering of rational consumption habits in the interests of autarky and national economic efficiency chimed with the desire of the industry to rein in consumer choice and limit its product palette. The production of shoes from pig leather and fish skin did not, in the long run, catch on, but the use of (synthetic) rubberized soles, for example, did. Here, in particular, the comparative dimension of the book comes into its own. For, as the author shows, processes which, seen within a purely national frame, might appear to be the product of adverse political regulation peculiar to the Third Reich, were similarly underway in the United States, if less so in Britain where the predilection for leather shoes remained strong.

At the same time, the author is careful not to allow her account of the presence of rationalizing, modernizing dynamics in this particular technical sphere to generate an image of a shoe industry making great strides towards efficiency in an environment sealed off from the violence of the Third Reich. In so far as the industry retained access to supplies of leather during the war, it was largely on the basis of plunder: Germans’ supply of footwear, no less than their supply of
iron ores, rested on industry’s implication in the war of genocidal destruction in the East. This was not all. In pursuit of more scientific understanding of the durability of various synthetic shoe components, the industry connived in the establishment of a shoe-testing facility at Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1940. An unaccounted for number of prisoners were forced to walk, march, or perform sporting exercises in shoes for hours on end, day after day, in a practice which claimed the lives of many, so exhausting and brutal was it. The shoes, meanwhile, were measured for their signs of wear and tear.

In the limited literature on this phenomenon, which mostly comes from survivor accounts, it has understandably been written about as a form of the pointless, ritualized torture which was one part of the dynamic of violence meted out by the SS. However, using materials from the various trade bodies, research institutes, and organs of self-regulation connected to the shoe industry the author demonstrates how private companies, scientists, and other researchers—including those working for the Wehrmacht—not only knew about the research, but made good use of the findings in their pursuit of more efficient product design and specification. Some of the findings made their way into standard industrial handbooks on shoe design in the 1950s, while the researchers concerned made good careers in the industry or its trade bodies. The broad outline of this trajectory is hardly surprising, in so far as we know all about similar histories from studies of Nazi medicine, but the author’s account of the chains of agency, interest, and knowledge-transfer linking the commercial consumer sector of the economy to the murderousness of the concentration camps is exceptionally persuasive and hard-hitting. As if this were not enough, she then demonstrates how the photographed piles of shoes that have become such iconic signifiers of Nazi mass murder and thus of the imagined singularity of the regime were embedded in chains of recycling in which commercial shoe manufacturers and repairers were also directly implicated. In a sad irony, one of the companies most associated with this was Salamander, one of the Jewish-owned companies that had been ‘Aryanized’ before the war.

There is far more to this marvellous book than a short review can capture. Given its remarkable qualities it seems churlish to offer criticism. For a study focused on diverse aspects of rationalization in the 1920s and 1930s one might have expected some engagement with the
pioneering works of Tilla Siegel, Thomas von Freyberg, and Carola Sachse, whose insights laid the ground for much of the work on which the author draws. Inevitably, there are sections in an 800-page book where the reader’s spirits flag, and where one wonders whether some editing down might not have improved the readability of the book at little cost to the comprehensiveness of its argument. No self-respecting German Ph.D. monograph would spare its reader a fifty-page discussion of the state of research, Fragestellung, and methodology; a suitably earnest discussion of the definition of a shoe is also, of course, a must. Yet life is short, and the half-hour I devoted to mastering the different kinds of shoe polish available to consumers in the 1920s is a half-hour of my life that I will not get back.

On the other hand, scholarly monographs, like shoes, have their own product history—they can no more be seen as isolated objects, standing outside of time and space, than the things with laces that we wear on our feet. In that sense, any such critical remarks are as much a comment on the academic habitus that consistently produces such books as it is on the book itself. The culture of subsidy which permeates German scholarly publishing, combined with a scholarly environment which places such emphasis on thoroughness, can all too easily permit indulgence. Rather like the German manufacturers this book describes—ambivalent about their customers, and irritated by their habits—one often feels that German academic authors ought to take their readers a bit less for granted. Who knows, they might then, like those shoe manufacturers this book brings to life so superbly, even produce objects that can compete without subsidy in the marketplace.

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