Tin Lizzie Dreams: Henry Ford and Antimodern American Culture, 1919-1942

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Abstract
“Tin Lizzie Dreams: Henry Ford and Antimodern American Culture, 1919-1942” is an interdisciplinary cultural history combining close analyses of print and broadcast media, music and dance, technology, and built environments to argue that Henry Ford, one of the most popular modernizers in American history, actually espoused and popularized a personal philosophy that was distinctly antimodern. “Tin Lizzie Dreams” shows how Henry Ford’s cultural projects, most often discussed as a side item or supplement to his career as an automaker and industrialist, were in fact indicative of an essential antipathy and even resistance toward the modernity he was helping to create through the rise of the Ford Motor Company and Model T. With projects such as the renovation of the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts, and the practice of holding weekly “old fashioned dances” in Dearborn, Ford created a working antimodern philosophy related to that which T.J. Jackson Lears first traced among East Coast elites at the turn of the twentieth century. Ford then brought his anti-intellectual slant on antimodernism to a mass audience with the creation of the popular Edison Institute museum and Greenfield Village, opened in 1929, and the Ford Sunday Evening Hour radio show, which reached 10 million listeners a week at the height of its 1934-1942 broadcast run. The wider argument of “Tin Lizzie Dreams” is that antimodernism, as an American cultural phenomenon, was not only the purview of Gilded Age elites but also enjoyed broad popular appeal until the outbreak of World War II.

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Henry Ford was nearly 40 when he founded Ford Motor Co. in 1903. His dream was to create an automobile that everyone could afford. The Model T made this dream a reality. Simpler, more reliable and cheaper to build than the Model A, the Model T-nicknamed the "Tin Lizzie"-went on sale in 1908 and was so successful within just a few months that Ford had to announce that the company couldn’t accept any more orders—the factory was already swamped. Ford reasoned that if each worker remained in one assigned place and performed one specific task, they could build automobiles more quickly and efficiently. To test his theory, in August 1913, he dragged a chassis by rope and windlass across the floor of his Highland Park plant—and modern mass production was born. The Model T, also known as the “Tin Lizzie,” changed the way Americans live, work and travel. Henry Ford’s revolutionary advancements in assembly-line automobile manufacturing made the Model T the first car to be affordable for a majority of Americans. For the first time car ownership became a reality for average American workers, not just the wealthy. More than 15 million Model Ts were built in Detroit and Highland Park, Michigan, and the automobile was also assembled at a Ford plant in Manchester, England, and at plants in continental Europe. The Model T was an automobile built by the Ford M