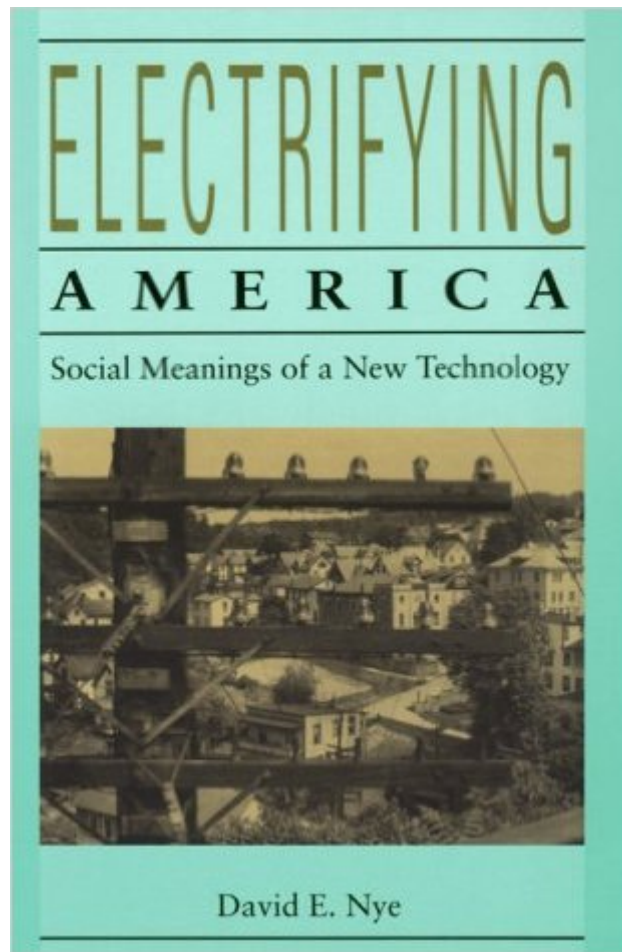


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Electrifying America: Social Meanings Of A New Technology, 1880-1940



Synopsis

How did electricity enter everyday life in America? Using Muncie, Indiana -- the Lynds' now iconic Middletown -- as a touchstone, David Nye explores how electricity seeped into and redefined American culture. With an eye for telling details from archival sources and a broad understanding of cultural and social history, he creates a thought-provoking panorama of a technology fundamental to modern life. Emphasizing the experiences of ordinary men and women rather than the lives of inventors and entrepreneurs, Nye treats electrification as a set of technical possibilities that were selectively adopted to create the streetcar suburb, the amusement park, the "Great White Way," the assembly line, the electrified home, and the industrialized farm. He shows how electricity touched every part of American life, how it became an extension of political ideologies, how it virtually created the image of the modern city, and how it even pervaded colloquial speech, confirming the values of high energy and speed that have become hallmarks of the twentieth century. He also pursues the social meaning of electrification as expressed in utopian ideas and exhibits at world's fairs, and explores the evocation of electrical landscapes in painting, literature, and photography. Electrifying America combines chronology and topicality to examine the major forms of light and power as they came into general use. It shows that in the city electrification promoted a more varied landscape and made possible new art forms and new consumption environments. In the factory, electricity permitted a complete redesign of the size and scale of operations, shifting power away from the shop floor to managers. Electrical appliances redefined domestic work and transformed the landscape of the home, while on the farm electricity laid the foundation for today's agribusiness.

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Customer Reviews

"Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940" by David E. Nye, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1990. This 479 page paperback provides a detailed look at the social implications of electrification in America. Thomas Edison invented the electric incandescent light, but in the process he also invented the electric utility. Just as the integrated circuit led to the personal computer and a host of new technologies, electrification lasted from 1890 to 1930, and for most of that period was the largest consumer of invested capital. (The railroad investment age is given as 1835-1890; the automobile investment age must be 1910+.)The focus of the book is Muncie, IN, a mid-size American city which has been much studied by social scientists. It is sometimes called "Middletown" in these studies. The book covers street and commercial lighting, streetcars and interurbans, electrification of industry, and rural electrification. Arc lights were the first artificial electric lights. They were known from 1802, but a power source was problematic until 1877, when Philadelphia's Franklin Institute concluded the Charles F. Brush dynamo (Brush Electric, 1880) was most practical. Orders poured in. An arc lighting system was installed at the courthouse in Wabash, IN, in 1880, four months after Edison demonstrated his electric light at Menlo Park. By 1881, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Montreal, Buffalo, San Francisco, Cleveland and other cities had Brush arc light streetlight systems. By 1882, St. Louis had a Brush arc system installed for its Fall Festival. (Brush Electric became part of General Electric in 1891.)Developers soon realized lighting up the night attracted crowds.

Electrifying America is one of the most interesting books I've ever read. Reading it is almost like traveling back to the time of gaslight and candles when homes had no appliances and electric streetcars allowed creation of the first suburbs. The book is more about the impact of electricity on everyday life than about the great personalities of the influential innovators like Edison, Tesla, Insull and Ford, who are only given casual mention. Electrifying America begins at the time of the great expositions, or Worlds Fairs, such as the Pan American, Trans Mississippi, Panama Pacific and the tremendously popular Columbian (Chicago 1892-3) where there were elaborate displays of lighting and exhibits of the latest electrical equipment. It also tells of the early public demonstrations of street lighting. Being an engineer and a researcher of productivity, I especially appreciated the discussion of the enormous manpower savings made possible by electrifying factories. An example

given was a glass jar manufacturing company that replaced manual glass blowers with machinery and used things like an overhead (bridge) crane to move heavy items across the factory. In addition to drastic labor savings total output increased several fold. Electric lighting greatly improved working conditions in factories and also greatly reduced fires, with large reductions in insurance premiums, often enough to pay for the lighting. Another well described example is the Ford River Rouge plant, which was the world's largest factory, built for maximum efficiency and the first large scale center of mass production. Nye describes how electricity made completely new plant layouts possible and how electric motors revolutionized machine tools.

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