The People’s Car is a terrific book. It is a history of a car that held different meanings for different people in different places over time. The book is well researched, carefully argued, and beautifully written. Rieger’s primary focus is German history despite the book’s title. Although grounded in a global context, the book does not succeed as a work of global history, but it comes close.

The VW Beetle is often assumed to have a Nazi past, and it does, but Rieger reveals its ultimate roots in Germans’ fascination with Henry Ford, the Model T, and Fordism. Ford’s vicious anti-Semitism added to Hitler’s interest in the man and his ideas about automobility, production, and consumption. The most appealing things about Ford, though, were his ability to mass produce a robust vehicle at affordable prices. Weimar Germany did not produce anything that could compete with Ford’s Model T or the cars made by General Motor’s Opel subsidiary. Early on, Hitler embraced the idea of a German car that would be available to the broad population and that would allow drivers to experience real freedom of movement. The vehicle was to be transformative for the people who produced it and those who owned it. Rieger is careful to point out that the Nazi use of the word „volk“ was intended to invoke a racially exclusive sense of the people. Freedoms of movement and enjoyment of auto ownership and travel were Aryan and so highly circumscribed.

Rieger tells the story of the struggle to design and build the initial Volkswagen. No German auto company could manufacture the sort of car Hitler wanted at an inexpensive cost, so automotive engineer Ferdinand Porsche stepped in. With significant financial backing from the state, Porsche designed a small, affordable car with a rear-mounted, air cooled engine that would become the Beetle and, with modifications, stay in production through the early 1980s. Porsche also initiated the construction of what would become the VW factory and surrounding town in Wolfsburg. Although the Nazis failed to produce the Beetle, key aspects of the car’s design were used for the Kübelwagen, which was widely deployed by the German army in World War II.

The Beetle’s global context was again important when British administrators, eventually with the help of German engineers and managers, who had worked at GM’s Opel, created Volkswagen out of the rubble of the post-war occupation. VW’s success was tied to German recovery and later the Federal Republic’s ability to export cars, particularly to the coveted U.S. market. Rieger does an excellent job of telling this story and demonstrating how VW’s success in the Federal Republic and the U.S. made the Beetle’s Nazi roots increasingly unimportant. VW’s rise mirrored and contributed to the 1950s German „economic miracle“. The car also benefited from its unique place in U.S. culture, driven in part by the work of Jewish Americans at an upstart Madison Avenue advertising firm. The Beetle took on a life of its own and its Nazi origins were largely forgotten or ignored in the U.S. and Germany.

One of this book’s greatest strengths is its analysis of the politics of the Beetle as an object. German consumers read the little car as a symbol of their national recovery and ingenuity. U.S. consumers embraced the Bug as an alternative to everything they found wanting in Detroit’s offerings. The Beetle was at first just a stripped down, utilitarian mode of transportation, but as a deeper critique of the status quo in the America of the 1960s developed, the Bug became that rare consumer commodity that somehow served as a critique of consumerism. Rieger touches on the reasons for this, but does not get to the heart of the matter: The vast majority of Americans were dependent on the car, especially with the growth of the suburbs in the post-war era, so they could not reject cars per se. The Beetle allowed them to live in the States without having to embrace aspects of American culture they found to be wanting.

Rieger’s analysis of the Beetle as an object onto which different nations, cultures, and subsets of people could write their own mean-
ings is one of the book’s most significant contributions. Rieger not only details the different ways different people read the VW, he also shows how those readings changed over time within individual social formations. One of Rieger’s most interesting findings along these lines is how the so-called New Beetle, which was designed in California, engineered in Wolfsburg, and is manufactured in Puebla, Mexico is the ultimate in transnational commodities, and yet is largely read as an American car.

Rieger’s other major contribution, beyond having written a terrific biography of an iconic car, is that he puts the Beetle in a global context. He focuses on Germany, Great Britain, the United States, and Mexico. This is largely very well done, particularly the chapter on the „Vochito“ as the Bug was known in Mexico. Rieger details the relationship between VW and Mexico from the early 1960s to the present. He does a fine job showing the complexities of working with Mexico’s then government (a one party state that claimed to be the champion of peasants and labor, but largely was not) and how Volkswagen’s growth in Puebla mirrored important developments in Mexico. These include the government’s disregard of peasant rights (the land on which VW built the factory was bought for centavos on the peso) to rise of an alternative union movement in defiance of the regime’s corporatist structure to the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its impact on production and sales. Rieger conducted original research for his analysis of VW in Mexico and it complements the material on Germany well. He integrates the two by showing the ways Germans never failed to celebrate VW’s international success, but then ignored its less savory work in crushing the popular, insurgent union movement in Puebla.

My one critique of this excellent book is perhaps an unfair one: Rieger’s analysis is almost global, but not completely so. He mentions VW’s presence in Africa, Asia, and South America, but does not do much beyond that. By doing so, Rieger avoids writing an encyclopedic account that would be helpful to researchers but unappealing to readers, so he no doubt made the right decision. As a historian of Brazil, though, I could not help but want an even more global perspective. While the Puebla plant produced for Mexico and the United States, VW’s factories in Brazil manufacture vehicles for the much larger Brazilian market and for export to Africa and elsewhere. Moreover, the Beetle is synonymous in Brazil with a certain sort of modernity that was also expressed through the building of a new, car-oriented capital in the interior, Brasília, and the elevation of automobile workers to a place of political prominence through the Workers’ Party and the election of a former unionist from the sector, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010), as Brazil’s president. Given what I know about the place of the „Fusca“ (as the Beetle is known in Brazil), I wanted to know more about its meaning in other social formations beyond those Rieger studies.

My desire for more is a mild criticism and at the same time a compliment. Rieger has produced a wonderful book that does a terrific job analyzing a consumer product in a wide variety of national settings. He also has done the historical heavy lifting of detailing the rise of Volkswagen from essentially a West German start-up created in the ashes of the Second War World to a transnational behemoth in the age of Neo-Liberalism. The People’s Car is a triumph of historical scholarship. It is original, compelling, and thought provoking.