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Review/Reseña

Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009.

Fordlandia

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Fordlandia represents a significant departure from Greg Grandin's previous work on subaltern challenges to state structures in Guatemala. The story that Grandin relates is a fascinating and little known one. In 1927, car magnate Henry Ford purchased a huge tract of land buried deep in the Brazilian Amazon to grow rubber for export to the United States for use in the automobile industry. Ford never visited the settlement that carried his name, and his managers never were able to make the settlement flourish. Grandin focuses in particular on Ford's failure to import western modernity into the Brazil Amazon.

By the time of Ford's arrival, Brazil had long since passed the height

of its 1890s rubber boom. Despite attempts to return to those glory days, labor problems and a variety of environmental and ecological factors meant that there was no going back. In 1876, Henry Wickham famously stole rubber seeds from Brazil, planted them in Asia, and ended Brazil's monopoly on latex. As an exotic species without natural predators, the rubber trees grew much better in Asia and Africa than they had in the wild in Brazil. When Ford's managers sought to reimport rubber in the form of a plantation economy as it was now grown in Asia and Africa, they met disaster. Insects and leaf blight spread rapidly through the canopy on closely spaced trees. This was not an unknown or foreign threat, but very serious and present realities that led tappers to harvest rubber from trees growing wild and spread throughout the forest. Coming from the United States, the Ford corporation simply ignored this knowledge. Eventually, Ford's genetic engineers made significant advances in splicing three different resistant strands of rubber together in an attempt to create a species that could thrive in a plantation setting in the Amazon, but it was too little too late. After World War II, petroleum-based synthetics rapidly replaced natural rubber. In 1945, with Ford already dead, the company sold the plantation back to the Brazil government for the cost of severance wages of workers at the plantations. Ford's managers returned to the United States without hardly saying goodbye. They left much of their belongings behind, most of which still remains scattered around the remains of Fordlandia.

Fordlandia begins with the story of rubber leaving Brazil, but then it takes a long detour back to Henry Ford and his trajectory and maverick behaviors that led him to becoming one of the leading industrialists in the United States. To be sure, this is an important and colorful tale of an increasingly eccentric tycoon who was known for his anti-Semitism as well as his populist policies that, arguably, created the middle class as we currently know it in the United States. As an industrialist, Ford also looked for ways to speed up factory lines, and fought against those who sought to undermine his attempts to increase worker productivity. As Grandin notes, Ford had three great hatreds: Jews, war, and unions.

This story of Ford as an industrialist consumes fully the first fourth

of the book, before we finally return to the Brazilian Amazon. Grandin reveals little new information about Ford, and weaves a narrative focused on United States corporate actions seemingly in a fashion for consumption by a general North American readership. Even when we return to Brazil, the story is still largely told from the perspective of Ford's managers rather than a subaltern Brazilian point of view. Grandin says little about the people who lived on these lands before the rubber tappers or the Ford corporation arrived. He calls the Amazon a jungle, implying a foreign savagery, rather than a forest with its own internal logic. In a book published by a mainstream press and obviously destined for popular consumption, it is hard to tell how much of these framings were editorial decisions designed to make a more marketable book, and which ones were Grandin's preferences as an author. I also recognize that this complaint touches on a much broader discussion of audience and charges of commercialization that successful historians face when they begin to pen volumes that appeal to much larger audiences than the typical, narrowly focused historical monographs that most of us write.

Once the story returns to the Amazon, Grandin expertly traces out the range of problems that the Ford corporation encountered, including being overcharged because of a lack of awareness of the local economy, culture clashes between the industrial rhythms of Detroit and the slower speed of the Amazon, language gaps, malaria, corruption scandals, etc. The result was chaos and mismanagement. Ford's time clocks, square dances, and puritanical policies clashed with local desires and sensibilities. Ford was motivated by the dual goals of making a profit from the rubber production while also engaging in a social engineering project of "civilizing" the Amazon. Grandin contextualizes his endeavors in Fordlandia with his similar attempts elsewhere, including Iron Mountain in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, to the point of drawing comparisons between the type of tree-lined avenues and bungalows that Ford had built in both places. Not only was the housing Ford imported into Brazil inappropriate for the tropical climate, but he also attempted to introduce foreign concepts such as recreational activities and golf courses. Not understanding or appreciating the local environment was a fundamental problem that Ford

faced in the Amazon.

Grandin makes a passing comparison between this colony and the equally under told story of confederates who migrated to the Amazon after losing in the civil war in the United States so that they could continue to profit from the slave systems that still persisted in Brazil. Both communities remained insular and provincial, with little contact with the broader Brazilian society. This isolation hindered commercial and cultural success of both endeavors. More broadly, the failure of Ford's efforts to colonize the Amazon were similar to the failures that the Spanish and Portuguese (and the Inkas as well, although Grandin does not mention this) faced in their efforts to "civilize" and remake the Amazon in their image.

Part of Ford's problem was that because of his profit motive he was never really dedicated to the economic development of people who were already living in the Amazon. Although Grandin does not overtly frame his study as emerging from a dependency theory perspective, what he describes is Ford importing everything needed to build the rubber plantation—except the underpaid local labor force. He insisted on wage labor, but this was foreign to the contract system to which the rubber tappers were accustomed. Between low wages and a lack of a consumer society mentality that would force people to work beyond the level necessary to fulfill their immediate needs, the plantation had trouble retaining workers. This heightened cultural conflicts, leading Ford's managers, who were accustomed to rigid time keeping systems, to see the local workers as lazy and unproductive. In essence, Ford failed to import a capitalist mentality into the Amazon. The situation quickly spun out of control to the point where alienated workers went on strike and burned down the rubber plantation.

At this point in the story, someone familiar with Grandin's earlier writings would hope that he would explore in depth the roles of the workers. Who were they? Where did they come from? What were their demands, and how were they organized? Other than one discussion of attempts to bring in workers from Mundurucú, there is little discussion of, or sympathy for, indigenous perspectives, agendas, or interests.

Instead, unfortunately, after the strike that destroyed the rubber plantation, Grandin takes the story back to the United States and Ford's famous anti-unionism and anti-communism, and his seemingly contradictory ability of simultaneously holding fascist and pacifist ideologies. Ford opposed government intervention in industry, and took a strong stand against FDR's New Deal plans. As he grew older, Ford became increasingly reactionary and interested in historical preservation. In a way, Fordlandia became another museum piece like the eclectic collection he assembled at Greenfield Village. Grandin describes Ford as being irrationally dedicated to the success of Fordlandia, and after the strike he attempted to weed out the radicals and criminals and relaunch the rubber plantation.

One of book's best parts is Grandin's discussion of the inherent social and ecological contradictions that surfaced when Ford attempted to relaunch Fordlandia after the strike destroyed the plantation. While Ford was now more successful at controlling labor, unforeseen ecological problems disrupted his grandiose plans. Grandin launches into an excellent and extended discussion of how Amazon variations make rubber plantations unworkable, how rubber was too adapted to the Amazonian environment to be farmed commercially. The same blight that led to the collapse of the rubber boom in 1910s also doomed Ford's plans to failure. Ford's anti-intellectual tendency to act first and then plan later further compromised the success of his schemes. Ford, in essence, could subdue people but not nature. In addition to these ecological considerations, Grandin weaves in a variety of political and economic factors that led to the collapse of Fordlandia. The failure of the importation of Ford's style of capitalism with high wages, humane treatment, and moral improvement meant the reversal of attempts to import the "American Dream" into the Amazon.

Ford's arrogant attempts to subdue the forest, and his desperate efforts to recreate in the Amazon a simpler world that his factory system was largely responsible for destroying in the United States, is indeed a compelling story. But it is also a story of a northern industrialist and how he viewed the world rather than an analysis of subaltern challenges to the

imposition of capitalist systems into the Amazon. Even ending on a romantic note of the current residents of Fordlandia still waiting for the arrival of Ford betrays the perspective of this book. Similar to Brazilian president Getúlio Vargas, whose visit to Fordlandia led him to launch a comparable campaign to subdue the Amazon, the populist promise undermined more radical labor organizing efforts.

Ford's adventures in the Amazon is part of a fascinating story and one that deserved to be told. The best part of the book, from my perspective, and where Grandin really shines, is in the last several pages where he turns his discussion to a damning critique of free trade policies. Rather than Ford's capitalist policies of paying high wages and providing decent benefits in order to generate consumer demands and grow a middle class, corporations now follow neoliberal economic policies that depress wages and benefits as part of an insane race to the bottom that underdevelops and deindustrializes Latin America. Now huge corporations such as Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) destroy the forest with the monoculture planting of soybeans instead of rubber. The consequences for the Amazon are similar to those resulting from the policies that Ford followed 80 years earlier.