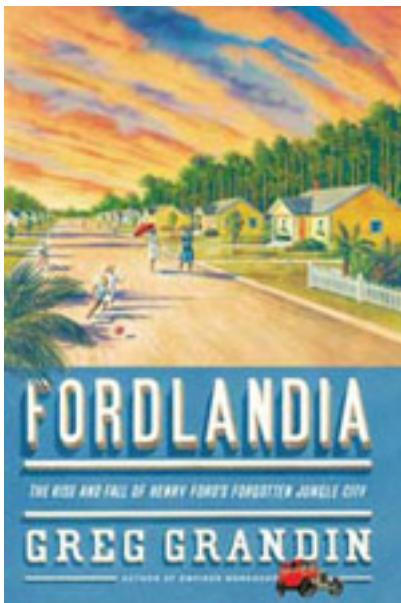


Greg Grandin's *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City*

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Henry Ford is famous for saying “history is more or less bunk.” Greg Grandin’s gripping historical account of the Ford Motor Company’s effort to create a rubber utopia in the Brazilian Amazon proves otherwise. Grandin, a professor of History at New York University, has produced a well-researched account of a little-known project undertaken by one of the 20th century’s most notorious figures. Why it has taken so long for this fascinating story to be told in such detail is a mystery.

Like Fitzcarlido, the eccentric title character of Werner Herzog’s epic film, Henry Ford was “planning something geographical” in the Amazon, something to “outrubber” his competition. To meet these ends Ford would create a picturesque industrial town called Fordlandia, which he believed would produce enough latex to keep Detroit in tires, and in the same stroke civilize the indigenous workers. In 1928, the automobile tycoon sent his managers to the Brazilian Amazon to conquer the rubber market, a commodity sector he felt had been unfairly hijacked and subsequently controlled by a British-Dutch monopoly.

After securing 2.5 million acres of rainforest along the Tapajós River, a landmass just slightly smaller than Connecticut, the Ford Motor Company entered into the rubber business. Despite Ford’s best intentions, his venture in the Amazon did not go as planned. Through Grandin’s narrative we learn that workers objected to the excessive control over their lives by the

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company, which involved identification cards, prohibition, forced medical examinations, obligatory square dancing, and a regime of “healthy” American foods served cafeteria style. Eventually, the workers rioted, destroying much of the town.

However, it was not only the Brazilian workers who acted against the Ford Motor Company’s desired standards of decorum and professionalism. In character-driven prose, Grandin lets the story of Fordlandia unfold episodically, with each new manager sent from Michigan failing in some new, spectacular way. Like lemmings, they seem unable to change course, even as they march toward their own demise. Through failures both personal and organizational, the managers give into alcoholism, despair, and hubris. It is this last indulgence that proves to be the most damaging for the endeavor. Confident in their engineering abilities, Ford and his managers choose not to employ *mateiros* (native naturalists) or any botanists in the development of Fordlandia’s rubber tree fields (302). This leads to a multitude of errors that could have been easily avoided, including the use of substandard seeds, planting in the wrong season, and—most catastrophically—planting too closely together, which ultimately causes the crop to fail. Grandin suggests that Ford’s engineers considered trees simply as “machines” that they could operate in rational and regimented ways (298).

Despite the catastrophe of Fordlandia, Ford was not yet ready to give up his dual dream of controlling his own rubber supply and creating an ideal North American-style town in the Amazon. As Grandin shows, the more it became apparent that the company would not make a profit in the Amazon, the more the venture focused on sociological, rather than financial rewards. After the failure of Fordlandia, the Ford Motor Company even made a second attempt with a new town, Belterra. This town would also fail to yield any rubber for the company—in fact, not a single drop of latex from Belterra or Fordlandia ever made it into a Ford automobile. The project’s most significant contribution to Ford’s cars was the exotic wood that graced the side panels and dashboards of luxury models.

The whole operation would come to an end in 1945. The Ford Motor Company had invested twenty million dollars but sold the remains to the Brazilian government for \$244,200, the exact amount owed to the workers. The failure of Fordlandia has been touted as a “parable of arrogance,” and Grandin agrees, but he turns the old saw about one man’s hubris into something richer and more complex (356). Instead of saddling Henry Ford with complete responsibility for Fordlandia’s failure, Grandin makes a more nuanced argument about the underlying logic of industrial capitalism—a force that Henry Ford himself helped set in motion. As contemporary critiques of capitalism and suburbanization have shown, the forces of industrial capitalism obliterate the ideal American town of Ford’s nostalgic dreams. Yet, even in his last years, Ford failed to realize that this force, once set in motion, cannot be stopped, either through the creation of his “village industries” or by relocation to the Amazon.

In the epilogue, a far more sobering picture of destruction is relayed, one much more

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devastating than a string of automotive managers hopped up on hubris and quinine nightmares. While Ford's efforts to graft his ideal Midwestern town onto an Amazonian landscape proved disastrous, Grandin argues that compared with more recent corporate and organization schemes visited on the Amazonian region, Ford's attempts seem "relatively benign" (372). Grandin points out that, ironically, one of the most harmful industries operating in the area today is one of Ford's pet products, soy. Soy is one of the leading causes of deforestation and unemployment and has taken over large swaths of South America, including Belterra and its surrounding areas (367). The connection he draws between unchecked industrialist endeavors and the immense waste of both human and natural resources is perhaps the most valuable point of Grandin's parable.

Lindsey Freeman is a PhD student in Sociology at the New School for Social Research. Her current research is concerned with modern industrial utopias of the twentieth century, collective memory, and the manipulation and reconfiguration of space. She is currently an adjunct lecturer at Rutgers-Newark University and a Graduate Teaching Fellow at Eugene Lang College, The New School.