

2010

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Roundtable Review *Roundtable Editors:* Dustin Walcher and Diane Labrosse

www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables *Roundtable Web/Production Editor:* George Fujii

Volume XI, No. 27 (2010)

25 May 2010

Greg Grandin. *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City*. New York: Metropolitan Books, June 2009. 432 pp, 54 b&w photo; 1 map. ISBN: 978-0-8050-8236-4 (hardcover, \$27.50); 978-0-312-42962-1 (paperback, \$16); 978-1-4299-3801-3 (eBook, \$9.99).

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XI-27.pdf>

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Introduction by Dustin Walcher, Southern Oregon University

It is all too rare for a book by an academic historian to receive the widespread and positive attention of Greg Grandin's *Fordlandia*. A finalist for the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and, most recently, the Pulitzer Prize, *Fordlandia* has captured the attention of readers well beyond the academy's walls. Its reception can be attributed in large part to the convergence of Grandin's skill as a storyteller and the richness of the material with which he worked. Perhaps Emily Rosenberg puts it best, writing, "Grandin has crafted a history so fantastical that it sometimes resembles a work of magic realism." But the reviewers would agree that Grandin has not traded his academic *bona fides* for popular success; in addition to telling an engrossing story, Grandin contributes – albeit at times subtly – to nothing less than our understanding of the transnational history of capitalism.

Fordlandia examines Henry Ford's efforts to apply modern commercial agricultural techniques to rubber tapping in the Brazilian Amazon. In 1927, at the pinnacle of his success, the auto magnate worked to establish a rubber plantation along the banks of the Tapajós River, one of the Amazon's tributaries. The venture took shape with the creation of the town and plantation of Fordlandia. As the reviewers point out, the expected *Heart of Darkness*-like story – in which ethnocentric Yankee capitalists, infused with hubris, see their expansive dreams of exporting modernity crushed by the savage forces of nature – only partially materializes. Certainly Ford men were overly enamored with their own abilities, were ethnocentric, sought to introduce modern plantation agricultural techniques, and did fail. But, as Barbara Weinstein observes, Grandin "insists that there's more Mark Twain than Joseph Conrad in the episodes he recounts." There was no substantial difference between Ford's failure in the Amazon and his failure to create model communities merging modern industrial techniques with an idealized pastoralism in Muscle Shoals or Michigan's Upper Peninsula. It was not that the tropics were uniquely ill suited to Ford's methods, but that his overarching vision itself was flawed. In this way, Grandin challenges the longstanding dichotomy between civilization and barbarism by telling a multifaceted story featuring complex, and indeed self-contradictory, historical actors. Although the central subjects of the book – particularly Ford – emerge in multiple dimensions, and although it is sometimes delivered with subtlety, there is nonetheless no mistaking Grandin's ultimate indictment of a system of unrestrained and under-regulated global capitalism.

In addition to appealing to non-academic readers, *Fordlandia* engages the interest of an unusually large number of professional historians – an increasingly noteworthy accomplishment as the subfields of historical inquiry become ever-more narrowly defined. Historians of Brazil, business, the environment, the United States in the twentieth century, Latin America, inter-American relations, and U.S. foreign relations all stand to benefit directly from Grandin's scholarship. That diversity of interests is in part captured by the makeup of this roundtable, which is comprised of two Brazilianists and two specialists in the history of U.S. foreign relations. Each is impressed with *Fordlandia* and judges it to be an important book. While they point toward areas that Grandin could have analyzed more

fully, and suggest aspects of the Fordlandia story that remain for future scholars to engage, the reviewers are on balance effusive with their praise.

Barbara Weinstein brings to bear years of studying the Amazon rubber trade (her first book analyzed the Amazon rubber economy).¹ She recounts her surprise when Grandin told her that he was going to write a book on Fordlandia, which she had concluded would be a story of “the doomed enterprise initiated by the owner of an iconic multi-national corporation.” In light of that background, Weinstein describes *Fordlandia* as “a revelation.” In particular, she credits Grandin with recognizing that Fordlandia’s story is fundamentally a transnational story. Grandin is among the best historians at seamlessly crossing national borders that have long been a mainstay of the historical profession. The transnational approach, Weinstein argues, is ideally suited in this case. Ford, after all, attempted to reconcile his reverence for pastoral tradition with the modern industrial infrastructure and processes that his company did so much to champion in both Michigan and the Amazon. Fordlandia was another example of, in Weinstein’s words, “Ford’s ongoing but futile attempt to reconcile the industrial leviathan represented by the massive River Rouge automobile plant with a continuing fondness for small-town and agrarian life.”

Steven Topik, a Brazilianist who has done significant work on international economic history, praises *Fordlandia* as a “hybrid work ... unlike any that has come before,” and “a sweeping study of international history and biography.”² Although he does not use the term “transnational,” Topik agrees in principle with Weinstein that Grandin’s strength lies in situating Fordlandia in its global context. Topik goes on to offer two significant observations. First, he points out that the book is primarily about Ford, and not the inhabitants of the rainforest. Consequently, there is an opportunity for future historians to examine more fully the socio-economic effects of Fordlandia on the Amazon’s inhabitants. Second, while agreeing with the general thrust of Grandin’s critique of modern global capitalism, he disagrees with the conclusion that the present neoliberal integration of the Amazon city of Manaus into global markets shares any substantial historical lineage with Ford’s experience in his neighboring jungle enclave.

Emily Rosenberg approaches *Fordlandia* first and foremost as a historian of U.S. foreign relations. Few scholars can match Rosenberg’s sustained analysis of the international activities of U.S. businesses during the first half of the twentieth century.³ She brings that larger context to her analysis – drawing comparisons between Ford’s project and Harvey

¹ Barbara Weinstein, *The Amazon Rubber Boom, 1850-1920* (Stanford, 1983).

² For examples of Topik’s globally-themed work, see especially Steven Topik and Allen Wells, eds., *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850-1930* (Austin, 1998); Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank, eds., *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000* (Durham, 2006).

³ Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York, 1982); Emily S. Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930* (Durham, 2003).

Firestone's Liberian plantations, for example. Indeed, Rosenberg observes that the Henry Ford who emerges from Grandin's examination was unusual in at least two respects: he was far more resistant to working cooperatively with the U.S. government than most other corporate leaders who operated internationally during the 1920s, and despite having (or perhaps because he had) reached the pinnacle of wealth and corporate power, he evinced more interest in bringing his vision of an ideal community to life than he did in Fordlandia's profitability.

Whereas Rosenberg places the story of Fordlandia in a broader international context, Bevan Sewell, a specialist in U.S.-Latin American relations, situates it in a broader chronological context. Specifically, he suggests that Ford's efforts to export his ideals amounted to an early attempt to export an American vision of modernization. In light of Grandin's analysis, he suggests, it is useful to consider Fordlandia as a precursor to the projects undertaken by postwar modernization theorists. That is not to argue that Ford and somebody like Walt Rostow adopted identical frameworks, or that they thought about their larger missions in exactly the same way – only that they were intellectually related. Consequently, in his reading of *Fordlandia*, Sewell appears to endorse implicitly Grandin's effort to highlight continuities in U.S. engagement with Latin America across the twentieth (and indeed into twenty-first) century.

In a larger sense, *Fordlandia* exemplifies trends within the discipline of history. First, in the ongoing discussion as to whether or not good academic history can also be made accessible to educated non-specialists, Grandin answers in the affirmative.⁴ *Fordlandia* features both an engaging narrative and analytic punch. Second, Grandin points toward some of the advantages of working in transnational history. Transnational historians are not concerned primarily about relations between nation states, or even how national power, constructed between the state and private groups, was projected abroad. Without denying the significance of the nation state, practitioners of transnational history consciously ask questions that permeate national borders. The establishment, operation, and failure of Ford's "forgotten jungle city" were issues that certainly transcended any one nation, and in which national governments were secondary actors. Thankfully, Fordlandia is forgotten no longer.

Participants:

Greg Grandin, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, is the author of a number of prize-winning books, including most recently *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (Metropolitan 2009). A finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, *Fordlandia* was picked by the *New York Times*, *New Yorker*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, and NPR for their "best of" lists. Grandin is also the author of *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Empire* (Metropolitan, 2005), *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America*

⁴ Most recently, see Gordon Wood, "In Defense of Academic History Writing," *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* 48:4 (April 2010): 19-20.

During the Cold War (University of Chicago Press, 2004), and *Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Duke University Press, 2000), which won the Latin American Studies Association's Bryce Wood Award for the best book published on Latin America in any discipline. A professor of history at NYU, Grandin writes on U.S. foreign policy, Latin America, and human rights. He has published in *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Nation*, *The Boston Review*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The American Historical Review*. He has been a frequent guest on *Democracy Now!* and has appeared on *The Charlie Rose Show*. Grandin also served as a consultant to the United Nations truth commission on Guatemala and has been the recipient of a number of prestigious fellowships, including the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. His most recent book, edited with Gil Joseph, *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War*, will be published by Duke University Press in September.

Emily S. Rosenberg is professor of history at the University of California, Irvine. Two of her books, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* and *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930*, deal with the intersections of culture and economics in U.S. international relations. Another book, *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (also translated into Japanese), examines the issue of collective historical memory in a media age. She is a coauthor of *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People* (5th ed.). She has served as president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR); an editor of the *Oxford Companion to United States History*; a Board member of the Organization of American Historians; and co-edits the "American Encounters, Global Interactions" book series for Duke University Press.

Bevan Sewell is a Lecturer in American History at the University of Nottingham. He is the author of "A Perfect (Free Market) World: Economics, the Eisenhower Administration, and the Soviet Economic Offensive in Latin America," *Diplomatic History* 32: 5 (November 2008), and is currently working on a book examining the Eisenhower administration's economic policies toward Latin America.

Steven Topik is Professor of History at the University of California Irvine where he teaches Latin American and world history. He has published on Brazilian political economy, *The Political Economy of the Brazilian State* (University of Texas Press, 1987); international relations, *Trade and Gunboats, the United States and Brazil in the Age of Empire* (Stanford, 1996); and international trade and especially commodities, *The World that Trade Created* co-authored with Ken Pomeranz (M.E. Sharpe, 1999); *The Second Conquest of Latin America* co-authored with Allen Wells (U. Texas Press, 1998); and co-edited *The Global Coffee Economy, 1500-1989* with William Clarence Smith (Cambridge University Press, 2003) as well as *From Silver to Cocaine, Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy* with Carlos Marichal and Zephyr Frank (Stanford, 2006). He is currently writing a world history of coffee for Princeton Press and finishing an extended essay with Allen Wells on international trade in the period of 1870 to 1945 in a Harvard Press world history volume.

Barbara Weinstein earned her doctorate in History from Yale University in 1980, with a specialization in modern Brazil. Her earliest research focused on the intersection of social history and political economy. Her first book, *The Amazon Rubber Boom, 1860-1920* (Stanford University Press, 1983) revised the conventional view of the Amazonian rubber trade as a boom-bust economy whose trajectory was entirely dictated by international demand, and in which rubber tappers labored under conditions of near enslavement. A Portuguese-language edition of this book was published in 1993. Prof. Weinstein's next major research project dealt with the state of São Paulo, home to Latin America's largest industrial economy. With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Fulbright-Hays program, Prof. Weinstein spent two years in archives in Brazil studying programs created by the industrialists of São Paulo to "re-make" Brazilian workers into the employers' vision of the model factory operative. This study, *For Social Peace in Brazil: Industrialists and the Remaking of the Working Class in São Paulo, 1920-1964* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996) challenged longstanding assumptions about both industrialists and workers in Brazil. It appeared in Portuguese translation in 2000. In 1998, Prof. Weinstein received a Guggenheim Fellowship for research on race, gender and regionalism in Brazil. She is currently completing a manuscript tentatively titled *Race, Region, Nation: São Paulo and the Formation of Brazilian National Identities*, to be published by Duke University Press. In addition to these book-length projects, Prof. Weinstein has published dozens of articles and book chapters on a variety of themes, including the abolition of slavery in Brazil, the Good Neighbor Policy in the Amazon, and the dilemmas facing world historians with the decline of grand historical narratives. Before joining the history faculty at New York University, she taught at Vanderbilt University, SUNY-Stony Brook and the University of Maryland. With Daniel Walkowitz she co-edits a book series for Duke University Press called *Radical Perspectives on History*, and she recently finished a five-year stint as senior editor of the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, the leading scholarly journal in her field. In 2007 she served as President of the American Historical Association.

Dustin Walcher is Assistant Professor of History at Southern Oregon University and a review editor for H-Diplo. He received his Ph.D. in 2007 from the Ohio State University. A specialist in the history of U.S. foreign relations, his current project examines the failure of U.S.-led development initiatives and the rise of political violence in Argentina during the late 1950s and 1960s.

In the first years of the twentieth century, the U.S. government waged a bloody and controversial war to establish a colony and subdue an insurrection in the Philippines. Then, it turned away from formal territorial colonialism. Presidents and internationally oriented businesses found alternative ways of enlarging their country's spheres for trade, investment, and access to resources. By the 1920s, U.S. private banks were working with government officials to extend loans to a number of governments conditional upon allowing American administrators to establish supervisory regimes. In addition to working with bankers, administrations worked to anoint other private businesses as "chosen instruments" of policy. Officials could cooperate with businesses to help accomplish a range of strategic goals abroad – pursuing financial stabilization and control, securing strategic resources such as oil and rubber, and dominating air routes. In rather rough analogy to the use of joint stock companies in an earlier age and to neoliberal privatization schemes of the 1980s and 1990s, the U.S. government of the 1920s hid its hegemonic aspirations within the market. Many businesses were happy to oblige: they felt that cooperating with governmental foreign policy objectives would surely make policymakers more obligated to assist their own profit-making agendas abroad.

Greg Grandin's fascinating new book shows that Henry Ford and his Fordlandia project in Brazil were different. Scorning government, especially after Congress failed to permit his grandiose proposal for a development at Muscle Shoals, Ford pursued his dream in the jungles of Brazil not to cooperate with the U.S. government but to avoid it. He went not to expand America's strategic reserves of rubber but to make his own Ford Motor Company more independent and, mainly, to prove that his model of industrial capitalism could remake people in ways that he believed state action could never do. Ford avoided becoming a chosen instrument of U.S. policy and distained those who eagerly carried such favor.

His rival, Harvey Firestone, by contrast, cooperated with the State and Commerce Departments, which after 1922 were desperately trying to encourage American business to develop strategic rubber sources independent of British price controls. Together, U.S. governmental officials, the Firestone company, and private bankers put together an unprecedented contract to establish a rubber plantation in Liberia. Bringing the Liberian government under tight administrative control and to the brink of bankruptcy through forcing upon it outsized loans, Firestone then imprinted enormous plantations upon the sensitive jungle ecology and instituted a draconian labor regime to work them. The notorious "Firestone Loan" became a matter of public controversy in the mid 1920s. In the African-American and anti-imperialist press of the day, the Firestone loan and the rubber plantations it facilitated in Liberia were cast as the face of U.S. dollar-driven imperialism and racism.

If Firestone was all about the profits, Ford seemed all about the vision. Where Firestone schemed to extract money from his plantations, Ford poured money into his. Greg Grandin's story of Fordlandia seems very different from the more well-known stories of

Firestone, United Fruit, Standard Oil, Morgan banks, Pan-American Airways, and the many other business giants who often threw their weight around with the substantial support of the U.S. government.

In some ways, however, the results were the same. In the case of both Firestone's Liberia and Ford's Amazon, a U.S. company challenged the jungle, wreaked destruction over the once-timbered rainforest, and came to stand for broken promises and imperious behavior. Ford may have had contempt for government, but his Fordlandia nevertheless became a U.S. strategic resource during World War II. Its rubber served the war he had once opposed and came under the direction of the presidential administration that he despised. Neither could Ford's often expressed pacifist-internationalism prevent Fordlandia from becoming a tool in America's military arsenal. On a number of levels, Grandin's book explores how Ford could not contain the contradictions of his endeavor.

The book *Fordlandia* presents little of this broader history of U.S. economic expansion in the early twentieth century and only hints at the comparisons with Firestone's plantation, but it tells a perhaps even more fascinating and suggestive story. The more Ford's style of industrialization transformed human relationships, built cities, and shaped "modern" lives, the more Ford clung to the belief that he could engineer a virtuous agricultural/industrial harmony. The very qualities that Fordism undermined were those that Henry Ford insistently tried to call into being in a jungle that he never visited. The detailed schemes of this early-twentieth-century *Fitzcarraldo* are too amazing to be conjured as fiction: the neat temperate-climate homes; the insistence on garden plots; the phobia against expertise; the hospitals wrestling with whether or not to serve those migrants who were not able enough to be employed but would not leave; the surveillance, especially over temperance policies. The sums of money that Ford was willing to spend on his venture in molding "new men" seems extravagant and, at first blink, anti-capitalist. Out of the Ford archives, Grandin has crafted a history so fantastical that it sometimes resembles a work of magic realism.

In this book, Ford's singular and almost bizarre experiment in environmental, technological, and human engineering clearly functions as a very complex symbol.

At times, Grandin appears to see Ford symbolizing America, or at least a strand of American utopianism. Ford's aspirations are consistent with the persistent longing for purification and regeneration that Jackson Lears evokes in his new book *Rebirth of America*.¹

Ford also becomes a symbol of empire, a word which I think does not appear in the book. As I read his account of Ford's willful ignorance of the land and people he hoped to transform, of his distrust of expertise, and of his insistence against not admitting that his dreams had failed, the parallel story told in Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* kept coming to mind. Especially when read against Grandin's earlier books,

¹ Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York, 2009).

especially *Empire's Workshop*, Grandin's Ford could certainly be an emblem for the kind of utopian imperial dreams and follies represented by President George W. Bush's advisers.²

Toward the end of the book, Grandin advances another possibility. He writes that through Fordlandia "runs the history of modern capitalism." (360) Ford may have been a captive of ebullient hopes but, in the end, America's style of twentieth century capitalism ushered in the industrial-scale ecological devastation in the Amazon that began with Ford and has accelerated into our own day. Fordlandia ended up revealing the same "insatiable appetite" that Richard Tucker has shown in his history of what other U.S. companies brought to other tropical environments.³

In my reading, however, Fordlandia became less the epitome of capitalism than of a utopian and paternalistic industrialization that was just as commonly pursued in twentieth century states with highly controlled and planned economies. The high modernist programs that came from "seeing like state" and from seeing like Henry Ford provide rather similar models of grandiose plans stumbling within complex unknowabilities. Fordlandia's trajectory may chart a capitalist story, but its capitalism seems to be only one category of a broader kind of industrialization that involved Taylorized efficiencies policed by pervasive social surveillance and justified by a discourse of uplift.

Ultimately, for me at least, the ambiguity over what Fordlandia stands for — human hubris and contradiction, American-style utopian regenerationism, empire, capitalism, or disciplined industrialism—proves to be an asset rather than a liability. It is a testament to the book's complexity and power. If Grandin advances different significations and resonances at different times as his account unfolds, it is because imposing historical figures such as Henry Ford cannot be easily summoned into any simple constellation of symbolism and meaning. By not straightjacketing his claims, Grandin seems to encourage people to consider multiple significations. Fordlandia may have been no typical case of U.S. investment abroad, but its story nonetheless evokes many themes that seem all too familiar.

² Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* (New York, 2006); Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York, 2006).

³ Richard P. Tucker, *Insatiable Appetite: The United States and the Ecological Degradation of the Tropical World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000).

There is a point, about midway through *Fordlandia*, where the impact that Henry Ford's attempt to build a model American town in the Amazon had on the lives of those peoples indigenous to the area becomes strikingly evident. At the same time, however, the essential futility of Ford's efforts is also made demonstrably clear. The introduction of a U.S.-style factory whistle, mounted atop Fordlandia's 150-foot water tower, began to govern the lives of those in the area. "The whistle was piercing enough not only to reach dispersed road gangs and fieldhands," Grandin notes, "but to be heard across the river, where even those not affiliated with Fordlandia began to pace their day to its regularly scheduled blows" (222). Introducing the whistle – as well as the simultaneous imposition of pendulum punch time clocks around Ford's plantation – brought the problem of imposing modern U.S. working practices and ideas to an agrarian environment to the fore. "Before the coming of Ford," Grandin neatly explains, "Tapajos workers lived time, they didn't measure it – most rarely ever heard church bells, much less a factory whistle" (222).

The clash between Ford's American idyll and the reality on the ground in Brazil, then, ultimately left the American magnate's attempts in tatters. For in spite of his determination – and that of his workers – neither the local population nor the geography of the region could be bent to Ford's will. The Brazilian people rejected the principles that Ford sought to introduce and impose in his colony; efforts to develop a prolific rubber plantation, meanwhile, fell foul of the region's ecological nature. This extract cuts to the heart of the story that Grandin narrates in *Fordlandia*.

The book is an examination partly of Henry Ford himself, partly of the vision of 'America' that he believed in and wanted his company to represent, and partly an assessment of the ultimately flawed attempt to export these ideals to the Tapajos region of the Amazon Rainforest. On all three of these levels the book works superbly. The author has mined the Ford archives and uncovered a rich seam of details regarding this era, while the way he describes the main cast of characters – and their individual roles in the story that unfolds – is masterly. Indeed, the writing style throughout the book is highly evocative – conjuring images in one's head, at varying times, of life in the Amazon, the bustling nature of major Amazon port cities like Belem, and, of course, the dynamics and nature of life in Ford's major American towns and factories.

Throughout the book Grandin neatly links analyses of Ford the man, the business, and its experiences in Brazil. What entails from all of this is a stark juxtaposition: one that pitches Ford somewhere between Populism and Progressivism – at once beholden to both a pastoral ideal of what America should be and an adherence to visions of modernity that characterised the rise of the Ford Motor Company. And yet that polarisation is only part of the story. Ford's idealistic vision of an American pastoral existence – a vision that, as Grandin notes, led him to try and construct idealised communities in America as well as Brazil – is also countered by other less savoury traits. Ford's anti-semitism, of course, is well known; the shift in his thinking with respect to working practices as he got older is

less familiar but, in Grandin's telling, equally important. The crackdown that Ford launched on unionism in his factories, coupled with his creation of a virtual private security force (headed up by Harry Bennett) that was charged with ensuring that Ford's employees adhered to his moral doctrines, points to a zealotry that underwrites his failed attempt to export Fordism to Brazil.

As a study of Ford, 'Fordism' and the story of what happened in Fordlandia, then, the book succeeds admirably. Often, the author links broader events in Ford's world to what was happening in his Brazilian colony – an approach that works particularly well in the chapters "American Pastoral" and "Good Lines, Straight and True," where the interplay between artistic representations of Fordism at work at the River Rouge plant by Diego Rivera, mounting tensions related to the Great Depression, ongoing attempts by Ford to create his "ideal" vision of America at Greenfield Village, and the impact that this had on Fordlandia provides an exceptional overview of the workings of Ford's world. That Fordlandia was ultimately going to fail is never in doubt; but the reasons it did are a complex mix of short- and long-term, American and Brazilian, Ford and non-Ford, factors.

As the book reaches its conclusion, the ever-present threat that hung over Fordlandia finally triumphs: leaf-blight, mites, and plagues of caterpillars render the entire concept of constructing a flourishing rubber plantation in the Amazon a failure. Not even innovative techniques in bud-grafting or the decision to abandon Fordlandia and move to another location at Belterra could save Ford's mission. This came, paradoxically, at a time when the social engineering aspects of Fordlandia had been achieved. As recommendations for a move upriver began to appeal to Ford, Grandin notes that "there now existed the orderly town that had long been imagined" (310). When the plantations at the new site also fell foul of blight and caterpillars, however, the tragedy of Ford's Brazilian conceit was complete.

In the spirit of engagement, I want to finish by going beyond what is in the book and drawing out a feature that seemed worthy of further elucidation: namely, the implications that Grandin's tale has for studies on development and modernization during the Cold War era. As Grandin argues in the conclusion, hubris and arrogance played some parts in what transpired; more important, however, was the fact that Fordlandia "represents in crystalline form the utopianism that powered Fordism – and by extension Americanism" (356). By examining such processes in a period beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, the book provides an important case study of the sort of problems that are often encountered when exporting one's ideals. This is an approach that ties in with recent works that have sought to provide a long-view of American efforts to export modernization.¹ Furthermore,

¹ David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010); Frank Ninkovich provides a different take on this – outlining the prevalence, in the nineteenth century, of a developing sense of American internationalism that served as precursor to many of the events explored by Grandin. Ninkovich, *Global Dawn: The Cultural Foundations of American Internationalism, 1865-1890* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009)

it fits neatly into emerging discourses about both America's interactions with the world and the way that actors outside the nation state have influenced these interactions.²

Ford's failures in Brazil, then, foreshadowed those that would confront the U.S. government in the 1950s and 1960s. To be sure, the theory was by no means the same. Ford's model was less one of economic and political improvement, more one of social and botanical engineering. But in its universality – and attempt to export a singular model – it bore similar characteristics to the model that would emerge under President John F. Kennedy.³ More importantly, though, it concurs with – and, chronologically speaking, pre-empts – a series of recent articles in *Diplomatic History* that charted the problems that Kennedy-era modernizationists faced in applying generic theories to specific locations. The consensus of those pieces, broadly speaking, was that while there were undoubtedly flaws with the general concept of modernization theory its ultimate failure came when policymakers sought to implement it in particular countries that predictably had their own views on how they wanted their development to proceed and their own interests which they were determined to pursue. The local context of these examples was as important as the global.⁴ Henry Ford's experiences in Brazil, therefore, demonstrate that this was not a phenomenon unique to the 1960s. His attempt to bring American principles to the Amazon jungle, had they been more widely analysed by the appropriate officials, could have provided a salutary lesson for those advocating a U.S.-defined blueprint for modernity. If the extensive resources and innate determination of the Ford Motor Company could not succeed in fulfilling its aims in Brazil, then how was the U.S. government likely to succeed where Ford had failed?⁵

To my mind, it might have been useful if Grandin had developed some of these themes further in his conclusion (though his discussion of the ills of contemporary globalization and its impact on the Tapajos region is superb). Equally, there appeared to be more scope to incorporate a wider discussion of the impact of political changes in Brazil – with the centralised, top-down state that emerged under Getulio Vargas in the 1930s seemingly more supportive of Ford's endeavours than the more federalised system it replaced. I am, however, nit-picking here; and possibly being unfair in making calls for greater discussion

² For another example of this in the Brazilian setting: Elizabeth Cobbs, *The Rich Neighbor Policy: Rockefeller and Kaiser in Brazil* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1992); for a wider discussion of this aspect of new work in the field of diplomatic history, Thomas Zeiler, "The Diplomatic History Bandwagon: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* Volume (March 2009), 1060-5

³ Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000)

⁴ See: David Engerman and Corinna Unger, "Introduction: Towards a Global History of Modernization" and the essays that follow in, *Diplomatic History* Volume 33, No. 3 (June 2009)

⁵ For an intriguing discussion of some of these issues in the same era, William O. Walker III, "Crucible for Peace: Herbert Hoover, Modernization, and Economic Growth in Latin America," *Diplomatic History* Volume 30, No. 1 (January 2006), 83-117

in areas that, to a large extent, are beyond the book's purview. It is, instead, testimony to Grandin's achievements in *Fordlandia* that the reader is left wanting more as the complexity of issues that he deals with – social engineering, botany, development, modernization, Populism and Progressivism – opens up so many different avenues of investigation.

Greg Grandin's much acclaimed *Fordlandia* is a gracefully written, impressively researched hybrid of a study that straddles various fields and disciplines.¹ Henry Ford, by some accounts the father of the modern world, arguably the first billionaire, and the inventor of a system so unusual that it received his name – Fordism – has been much studied.² Amazonian rubber has also received attention from various perspectives in excellent studies that concentrate on the scientific “Struggle for Rubber,” international disputes in the heart of the Amazon, or Henry Wickham's life and times in the British Empire as he spirited out rubber seeds to the East Indies.³ The local political system in the Amazon has also been perceptively detailed.⁴ But *Fordlandia* itself, though hypnotizing to the world press who published predictions of world shaking transformations in the Amazon when initiated, and then dismissed it with international derision when it failed, has not until now received a detailed examination.⁵

This hybrid work is unlike any that has come before. It is a hard book to review because it is so provocative and suggestive. Even though the subtitle focuses on “the rise and fall of Henry Ford's forgotten jungle city” the book is not so much a monographic case study as a sweeping study of international history and biography. But unlike other works on rubber, no British or U.S. empire is involved here. This is the private empire of a multinational corporation with states receiving little attention.

Fordlandia's unusual form is partly because Grandin is neither a historian of the United States nor of Brazil. He brings to the topic a keen eye based on his earlier studies of Guatemala and of U.S.-Latin American relations. He places the *Fordlandia* experiment in a broad international context – particularly within the context of the rapid changes transforming the face of the United States. I do not mean this observation to be taken as a provincial effort at turf protection. It is wonderful and most welcome that scholars come to study Brazil even if it is not their main concern.

¹ I am aware of *Fordlandia's* acclaim in the *New York Times* and Amazon books. I have decided not to read any other reviews in order to leave mine relatively pristine, but assume those reviews were favorable.

² There have been over a hundred biographies that at least in part study Ford. The most recent is the fine man and his times 2003 study by Douglas Brinkley, *Wheels for the World* (NY: Penguin, 2004).

³ Warren Dean, *The Struggle for Rubber*, (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Michael Stanfield *Red Rubber, Bleeding Trees: Violence, Slavery and Empire in the Northwest Amazonia, 1850-1933*; Joe Jackson, *The Thief at the End of the World: Rubber, Power, and the Seeds of Empire* (NY: Viking, 2008).

⁴ Barbara Weinstein, *The Amazon Rubber Boom, 1850-1920* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983).

⁵ Brinkley's 800 page tome does not even mention *Fordlandia*.

Perhaps the most important reason Grandin's study diverges from those that have come before is because of when it was written. Fordlandia comes to us as the Detroit motor companies are being bought off or bailed out, as the dollar slumps and United States's prestige wanes. At the same time Brazil is experiencing unprecedented prosperity and international prestige. As a result, the tropes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — the American industrial success story; the civilizing mission abroad; the industrial/scientific conquest of the tropics; the superiority of Yankee ingenuity; even the imposed will of the world's last remaining "super power" no longer seem so compelling. This is, I think, a study of Ford for the twenty-first century. Grandin reflects on globalization, neo-liberalism, and the (ruthless and uncontrollable) transforming power of international capitalism.

Not that the study directly makes this case. *Fordlandia* is a beautifully written, even poetic account, in a narrative replete with paradoxes and contradictions, wonderful character sketches, and telling anecdotes. (I do worry that it is such a subtle and well told story that readers might miss its hard-edged implications.) It seems to be more about the acts of people than the crush of the forces of history. The title is revealing because the book is in many ways a study of its first word, "Ford." He is the engineer in charge, the head tinkerer. But far from hagiography, or even a Great Man in History account, Grandin's study uses Ford to reveal contradictions in the American success story and to unveil the seamy, even tragic side of Fordism. Indeed, in the end it is as much a tale of decline and fatal flaws as it is a heroic quest. This is superbly done. What this is not is a study of Brazil, which is mainly the setting, or of Brazilians, who are mostly a faceless cast. Given Grandin's deep concern revealed in his first two books with the plight of Guatemala Maya, it is a bit surprising that the Brazilian Mundurucú and other indigenous peoples are so tangential to the story. But the sources he used, principally the rich Ford archives, do not permit an in-depth discussion of the native population.

This is not meant as a criticism. Grandin is more concerned with Ford, both in Michigan and in Pará than with the local Brazilian consequences. His choices have led to an impressive study that will be widely read. My point is only that he has not exhausted the topic. There is still room for a specialist who wants to understand Ford's meaning and impact on Amazonia.

It is hard to pigeon-hole the book as a study of international relations, a case study of foreign investment, or a character study of Henry Ford's dreams, ambitions, and manias. It is all of these. It is not really a study of rubber, though the struggle to create a plantation is one of the fundamental actions in the account.

It is not a commodity chain approach because poor planning, incompetent leadership, and the resistance of the Amazon, prevented Fordlandia from creating much rubber for Henry's fleets of cars in the United States. Indeed, even Brazil began importing rubber for the tires of its emerging automobile industry rather than tap its own indigenous supply. One of the most striking of the many ironies in this tale, an irony already pointed out by Warren Dean and recognized by agronomists familiar with latex, is that plantations failed in Brazil *because rubber was indigenous*. The forest had not only developed the various species of

latex yielding trees, but also was host to diseases and insects that had developed the ability, and even the need, to devour rubber trees. The problem was not exactly that rubber had natural enemies in the Amazon. Rather, the fault was with Ford's men (and this is a story almost exclusively of men), driven by the Fordist values of efficiency and productivity, who regimented the trees just as they had disciplined men in the world's largest and most integrated automobile plant in River Rouge, Michigan. But what seemed rational in Michigan did not conform to the logic of the tropics. In the Amazon trees spread out to protect themselves from pests. They sought survival, not maximum productivity. Rubber plantations succeeded in Malaya and Indonesia because they had the appropriate climate and labor force, and because colonial officials transported rubber cultivar but not the pests.

This sort of counter-intuitive outcome obeyed the law of unintended consequences more than the logic of capital accumulation. Through comparisons of River Rouge and Fordlandia (though again he does not overtly preach) Grandin shows that the conventional stories of the white man in the jungle where his civilized traits fail him was not really applicable to the two Ford sites. To some extent he is following in the tracks of a number of historians of international business like Thomas O'Brien, Thomas Kluboch, Jonathan Brown, and Miguel Tinker Salas who have compared the cultural consequences, as well as the economic and political ones, of corporate enclaves of extractive industries like copper and petroleum in various Latin American settings from Chile to Mexico to Venezuela.⁶ Or, perhaps the more fitting comparison would be with the United Fruit Company in Central America which, as John Soluri has expertly shown, also tried to tame the tropics only to see its bananas eventually fall to Panama disease.⁷ But Grandin makes few comparisons with these other examples of U.S. overseas corporate adventures. It seems that Henry Ford, flush with being the world's most successful and wealthiest man, shunned experts and ignored the lessons of other places and products because of the immense self-confidence that his unprecedented success had fostered. As Grandin points out, although Ford was an instrumental part of the Progressive world, he himself was wary of experts and laboratories. Instead, he preferred tinkerers like himself or like his friends, Thomas Edison and Orville Wright, who would attempt to export the lessons they made in the USA. Grandin ignores the similar undertakings of other U.S. corporations overseas probably because his objective is broader than understanding how a specific American corporation behaved and fared abroad. Rather than skewering individual companies, he is indicting global capitalism more generally. It is striking that rather than sharply contrasting the developed global North with the underdeveloped global South as is too common, or the industrious capital-rich North with the indolent labor intensive South, Grandin cleverly depicts similarities. He points out that this was not the typical El Dorado tale because

⁶ Thomas O'Brien, *The Revolutionary Mission: American Enterprise in Latin America 1900-1945* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Thomas Kluboch, *Contested Communities: Gender, Class and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904-1951* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Jonathan Brown, *Oil and Revolution in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Miguel Tinker Salas, *The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁷ John Soluri, *Banana Culture. Agriculture, Consumption & Environmental Change in Honduras & the United States* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.

rather than the Amazon being the mother lode that would enrich the explorer, it was Ford who was El Dorado and who (it was hoped) would enrich the Amazon. Grandin could have also referred to European philosophers such as Montaigne, More, and Voltaire for whom the Amazon was not only naturally wealthy, but whose people were naturally virtuous and whose societies were far superior to those of Europeans. This lesson Ford did not learn.

Nor was this the view of Ford's men, who brought with them the racist and cultural imperialist views so common for their time (and unfortunately still not vanished). But Grandin turns their outlook on its head. At several points, for example, he quotes visitors to the immense River Rouge plant – the “cutting edge” technology in automated assembly lines – who describe it as a “jungle.” The famous Mexican muralist (and Communist), Diego Rivera, painted the automobile factory as a jungle. And Henry Ford became obsessed with combating the jungle of the market place in the developed North by promoting organized capitalism in the form of his enormous, almost self-sufficient, corporation. Instead of relying on the market place, at least at first, he bought up forests, mines, built railroads, roads, power plants, and created company towns so labor could be both placated and controlled. Ford's self confidence in the Amazon derived in part from the fact that he actually had already undertaken an enterprise similar to Fordlandia – in Michigan's remote, forested, under populated, northern peninsula. His five dollars a day revolution and the affordable automobile brought the possibility of mobility. But anti-union thugs and spies on the company payroll, strict enforcement of temperance and food standards, as well as intensified labor demands undercut the early promise of freedom. Both the North and the South experienced coercive forms of feudalism, alienation, and exploitation. This is not a tale of dependency and neocolonialism because although Brazilian officials and compradors anxiously awaited Ford's arrival, the environment defeated Ford's venture.

Grandin's last chapter packs an unexpected twist which changes the meaning of the entire book. Rather than chalking this episode up as another example of man's arrogance succumbing to nature's mindless resistance – the unchanging, unbending, unyielding tropics which Europeans, or indeed any humans, cannot tame – Grandin sees the Amazon at the turn of the twenty-first century as relenting to global capitalism. He argues that Ford was *not* defeated even though Fordlandia lay covered by vines and rust and was “forgotten.” He maintains that the forces Ford put into motion: automation, automobiles, trucks, combines and earth-moving behemoths, dumbing down, standardizing, regimenting labor, and its natural consequence of out-sourcing, have changed the face of the Amazon. Forests have been cut down, vast fields of soy planted, and giant cities like Manaus – a free port – have swelled due to tax incentives to foreign multinational corporations. This is not exactly the triumph of Americanism, however, because at the same time that industry in the Amazon grows, Detroit and indeed much of the United States, and particularly the Midwest, is becoming deindustrialized and forsaken.

This is a stunning moral to Ford's morality play in which the hearty, virtuous, northern Protestants are supposed to restrain and save the lusty, lazy, southern Catholics. The course of Christian western civilization is put into doubt when Brazil is prospering (perhaps just for the moment but probably for a long time) as never before. Is it that “Deus é Brasileiro” (God is Brazilian) and has abandoned the U.S.?

As mentioned above, the one part of the story that is underplayed in *Fordlandia* is the role of Brazilians. Grandin dedicates the book to one of his mentors at Yale, the eminent Brazilian historian of Brazil, Emília Viotti da Costa. He also clearly is treading on the path broken by his predecessor at NYU, Warren Dean. Both of these fine historians concentrated on the industrial heartland of Brazil, São Paulo, before turning to the Amazon. They both recognized that events in Brazil had internal trajectories crafted by domestic struggles and resources; they were not merely the product of decisions made externally.⁸ The move to the Amazon was a natural extension of the *Marcha à Oeste* which Paulista *Bandeirantes* had begun in the seventeenth century. Searching for gold, diamonds, and slaves they created a hollow frontier at first. But eventually they and their neighboring Mineiros from Minas Gerais peopled the interior and financed development. São Paulo and Minas Gerais provided the steel, roads, and automobiles to capture the imagination of generations of Brazilians as Joel Wolff's new book so eloquently demonstrates.⁹ Seeking to distance themselves from the corrupting influence of foreign merchants and investors in Rio de Janeiro, Brazilians had sought a national capital in the interior since 1891. Brasília was finally realized by a Mineiro President, Juscelino Kubitschek, in 1960. This march to the interior was not principally caused by foreign capital. And even when adopting and adapting the latest technology combined with foreign capital, Brazilians turned away from American auto manufacturers toward Europeans and Japanese. Mr. Ford was not so victorious after all.

The Brazilian military also strongly sought to develop the Amazon both for reasons of national defense and for economic development. It stressed national sovereignty and control of the national territory. General Golbery, key architect of the military dictatorship between 1964 and 1985, advanced a Doctrine of National Security that placed geopolitics and control of the Amazon square at its center.

These forces were far more important in shaping today's Brazilian Amazon than was *Fordlandia*. Certainly it is not unfair to argue that some of the current internationalization and degradation of the Amazon is a descendant of *Fordlandia*, but it is a distant relative. Ford's legacy in Brazil is much more São Paulo with its huge factories; Fritz Lang "Metropolis" cityscapes; its powerful metal workers' union; the Workers' Party (PT); and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the first industrial proletarian and union leader to be elected president in the history of Brazil, and indeed in the history of all the Americas, North and South.

There might be convergence between the two cities that star in Grandin's account: Detroit and Manaus. But rather than Amazonia looking much like the U.S. Midwest of Henry Ford's day, the United States is being Latin Americanized by the neoliberal forces of the global

⁸ Emília Viotti da Costa, *Da Senzala à Colônia* (SP: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1966) and Warren Dean, *The Industrialization of São Paulo, 1880-1945* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966).

⁹ Joel Wolfe, *Autos and Progress. The Brazilian Search for Modernity* (NY: Oxford, 2010).

market. Greg Grandin's entertaining and disturbing account seems to be warning us that convergence and the race to the bottom could be Janus faces on the same gateway to modernity.

Fordlandia after the Transnational Turn

Many years ago, contemplating the “leftovers” from my research on the Amazon rubber boom, I briefly considered writing something—maybe a book, probably an article—on Fordlandia. Even though the chronological endpoint of my dissertation and then book on the rubber boom was the decade following the “bust” (roughly, 1910-20), I had originally thought I might take the study up through 1945, and therefore had done some research for those additional 25 years. Like any historian, it seemed to me a shame to let good archival material go to waste.

The problem was I could not figure out an angle that excited me and that I thought would intrigue other scholars. Fordlandia struck me as a curiosity, a mere footnote—if a costly one—to the Amazon’s century-long involvement with rubber production. I could only see it as Henry Ford’s folly, an experiment that confirmed what I assumed everyone in the Amazon already knew: that it was a fool’s errand to try to produce rubber in the region by planting *hevea brasiliensis* in stands, making the tree immediately vulnerable to its many natural enemies. Since time immemorial, all rubber in the Amazon had been tapped from wild trees, found in highly dispersed patterns, and that rubber had remained wildly profitable only so long as there were no rubber plantations elsewhere (that is, in places where *hevea*’s natural enemies were absent). Once Asian plantations began producing at higher rates and lower cost, the only way to sustain the rubber trade in the Amazon was either through extreme exploitation of the workforce or through a routine in which tappers combined rubber gathering with other subsistence or market-oriented activities. Amazonian rubber was wild rubber, period. Ford’s attempt to make it otherwise seemed like a classic case of the Amazon’s tropical particularities foiling the universalizing thrust of First World managerial and scientific “know-how.”

This cautionary tale of failure in the tropics did have a certain seductive quality for a scholar of the “less developed world” always on the look-out for examples of the hubris of the eurocentric. And there were also some intriguing episodes of labor protest in Fordlandia that conveniently confirmed (to my mind) arguments I had made about resistance to proletarianization in the region. But my own work on the Amazon had been so oriented toward emphasizing the agency of local actors as a means to challenge dependency theory’s undue attention to the way the core of the world economy structured the periphery, and on thinking about the Brazilian Amazon as a constitutive region of the Brazilian nation, that a doomed enterprise initiated by the owner of an iconic multi-national corporation seemed unappealing as a research topic. Over the next few years a handful of books and articles appeared that devoted some or most of their attention to Fordlandia, and these by and large confirmed my sense that this was not a story that would produce robust historical insights. So I packed away my archival leftovers and more or less forgot about Fordlandia, until Greg Grandin (full disclosure—my colleague at NYU) mentioned that he was planning to write a book about it.

To be honest, I thought it an odd choice, both because of my own previous “history” with Fordlandia, and because it seemed unconnected to anything Greg had written about in the past. But I had already become fully convinced that he could do an innovative and important book on virtually any subject, so I refrained from saying “you’re kidding me?” and eagerly awaited the result. Given all of the above, the reader can take me quite literally when I say that *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford’s Forgotten Jungle City* was a revelation to me—both the book itself, and its very favorable reception beyond the confines of academia. This has prompted me to consider how a topic that, back in the mid-1980s, I regarded as a historical dead-end, or a marginal curiosity, could emerge as the theme of such a compelling and fascinating book, one that I wish I had written myself (though certainly very different—and more successful—than the one I would have written). An easy answer would be that Greg Grandin simply has a better eye for the potential insights something like the history of Fordlandia can yield. But that’s a rather dreary conclusion (at least for me!), so I prefer to approach it in terms of the way the field of history has changed over the past 25 years, and how those changes have made it possible to conceptualize the history of Fordlandia in a different and more intellectually rewarding way.

Perhaps the most significant shift influencing the way the topic gets framed in Grandin’s book is what has been called the “transnational turn.” In the past one might have asked whether *Fordlandia* was principally a book about the United States or about the Amazon, and that would have been a reasonable question. But as a transnational study, Fordlandia is about both or, more accurately, it is about a series of developments that manifested themselves in particular locations but that represent interests, aspirations, political initiatives, and life stories that are studied most productively in the realm beyond regional or national frameworks. There is, of course, a substantial bibliography about U.S. corporations and their initiatives in Latin America, often referred to as “enclave economies,” but these studies generally have not been written from a transnational perspective except in the most literal sense. Typically they present the U.S.-based corporation as embodying a standardized modernizing strategy of resource exploitation and labor discipline that evokes at first reluctance and then outright resistance from its Latin American workers, who view the corporation as threatening or destroying their more “traditional” ways of being. Also, significantly, this bibliography tends to get read and cited by Latin Americanists far more than by historians of the United States, and not surprisingly since rarely do such studies offer new ways of thinking about the corporations or U.S. American individuals involved, constructing instead a predictable schema in which North American capital is the homogeneous hegemon and the Latin American location is the site of subalternity.

So how does Grandin’s transnational approach diverge from the above? First of all, the Ford Motor Company in his book does not rise from the Upper Midwest as a fully formed and stable entity prepared to impose its will on a prostrate Amazon. Instead, we get a beautifully rendered account of the many tensions, instabilities, and experiments percolating within the world of the Ford Motor Company in the state of Michigan. Indeed, one of Grandin’s crucial points is that several Ford ventures such as Greenfield Village or Pequaming in the Upper Peninsula emerge from the same thinking that produced

Fordlandia, and were, for the most part, equally (if less spectacularly) unsuccessful. Far from seeking to implant a certain modern corporate order in the Amazon that would obliterate its natural environment, Ford sought there—as in rural Michigan—to create a model community that blended new technology and production standards with the (imagined) orderly existence of the pre-industrial village—which, as Grandin reminds us, is the very way of life that “Fordism” was helping to destroy. While the failure of Ford’s contradictory vision—his desire to reconcile factory and farm—was most dramatic in the Amazon, his experimental villages in Michigan yielded similarly dismal results. In other words, this is something very different from the clichéd narrative of modernity “out of place,” frustrated by the radical alterity of the dense, fetid, disease-ridden, bug-infested jungle.

To be sure, nobody can entirely resist this aspect of the story—Grandin opens one chapter with the admission that it is nearly impossible to write about Fordlandia without reference to *Heart of Darkness*. As one might expect, *Fordlandia* contains vivid accounts of catastrophic caterpillar invasions as well as the inevitable swarms of relentless mosquitoes, not to mention the heartbreaking experience of one Ford employee and his wife who left four of their five children, stricken by malaria, buried at Fordlandia. There’s even an instance of one errant Ford employee who, apparently driven mad by life in the Amazon, committed suicide in the waters near the city of Manaus. One can almost imagine him muttering “the horror, the horror” as he leapt into the dark waters below.

In most of the Amazonian chronicles and histories that attract a readership beyond a small scholarly circle, these anecdotes and incidents are the whole point, and at a superficial level, one can understand the appeal of stories that narrate the haplessness of “outsiders” in the tropical environment. But their upshot typically is some predictable cautionary tale about the mysteries (i.e., alterity) of the jungle, or about the existential crisis that reduces modern man [sic] to a savage when faced with the dangers and demons of the tropical rainforest, a narrative that ultimately reinforces the usual stereotypes about civilization and barbarism. Grandin, in contrast, insists that there’s more Mark Twain than Joseph Conrad in the episodes he recounts. And more significantly, he situates this Amazonian enterprise within a broader transnational frame that makes the Fordlandia fiasco—which went well beyond the inability to conquer leaf blight and other impediments to rubber tree cultivation—part of a larger pattern of ill-conceived Ford ventures, and Ford’s ongoing but futile attempt to reconcile the industrial leviathan represented by the massive River Rouge automobile plant with a continuing fondness for small-town and agrarian life.

Approached in this way, the history of Fordlandia not only illuminates the many reasons why the Amazon was an unsuitable location for a large-scale rubber-tree planting enterprise, but also what its conceptualization and troubled realization tells us about Ford’s vision of his corporate empire. Anyone interested in the history of industrial power, and its limits, would do well to read *Fordlandia*. Again, a crucial feature of this book is its refusal to fall into the classic pattern of contrasting North American economic rationality and corporate productivity with stubborn traditionalism, irrationality, or arbitrary power in the tropics. Ford’s delight in removing new, more efficient furnaces installed in River Rouge by his beleaguered son, Edsel, simply to re-assert his status as the alpha male of the

Ford Motor Company, is all the information we need to conclude that arbitrary power played as central a role in this modern industrial enterprise as it did in the stereotypical Latin American rural estate. Not to mention the violence and brutality visited upon the River Rouge workers by Ford's favorite lieutenant, Harry Bennett, and his armed thugs. And there are other practices in the Ford empire that blurred the stereotypical distinctions we tend to draw between centers of modern industry and tropical enclaves, including Ford's policy of allowing auto workers to take off the months from May to August to sustain a connection with the agricultural economy. This routine only ended in 1927, when consumer demand for greater variety in car models and colors made stockpiling interchangeable parts no longer feasible.

Fordlandia also presents a much more varied and intriguing cast of Brazilian characters than the usual study of the Ford enterprise in the Amazon, which either foregrounds the frustrations caused by the natural environment or the intermittent challenges staged by the local workers. These get their due in Grandin's book, but we also meet a full roster of local merchants, politicians (regional and national), petty officials, and smooth operators, some of them scheming to entice Ford into investing in the Amazon, others wary of the North American magnate's motives, and still others refusing—for reasons good and bad—to bend the rules to accommodate Ford and his minions. At the head of the line of smooth operators is Jorge Dumont Villares, a slippery character from the state of São Paulo who saw the Ford venture as a chance to unload nearly worthless property along the Tapajóz River, and who could count on the U.S. consul in Pará as accomplice. Dumont Villares might seem the perfect embodiment of the privileged Latin American from an oligarchic family whose scheme to turn a quick profit based on guile and personal connections (his uncle was the renowned aviator Santos Dumont) provides a sharp contrast to Ford's accumulation of wealth through genuine entrepreneurship and innovation. But it is worth noting that Jorge's brother Luís Dumont Villares was a partner in São Paulo's leading construction firm, and founded the Atlas Elevator Company, a major manufacturing enterprise. In other words, national origin by no means determined what role an individual played in this transnational saga of foiled social engineering.

In short, I would argue that Grandin's transnational conceptualization of the history of Ford's venture in the Amazon, by situating his story on a larger stage, is one key to the book's broad appeal. The other is his riveting prose and remarkable ability to weave together disparate threads of evidence into a powerful and profoundly engrossing narrative. Whether we are reading about the myriad disasters that attended the process of building Fordlandia (everything from tugboats running aground to a housekeeper having her arm bitten off by an alligator), or the travails of the long-suffering Edsel (who had the misfortune not only to be the namesake of one of history's ugliest cars, but to have the patriarchal father from hell), we are able to appreciate on every level the grandeur of Henry Ford's vision, and the inanity of his presumption that he could bend the forces of industrialization to his will. To be sure, an academic reader might quarrel with Grandin's decision to forego an interrogation of the evidence in favor of a smooth, unreflective style of narration. But I have no doubt that had he subjected his sources to the sort of interpretative approaches that became de rigueur with the linguistic turn, he would have lost at least half of his audience. And that would be a shame for there is no better time than

the present for a book that instructs us so engagingly in the perils and follies of unbridled wealth and power.

Response by Greg Grandin, New York University

I want to thank professors Barbara Weinstein, Emily Rosenberg, Steven Topik, and Bevan Sewell for their generous and thoughtful comments on my book, and to Dustin Walcher and the staff at H-Diplo for organizing this roundtable. When first approached with the idea of this forum, I didn't think *Fordlandia* the kind of book that lent itself to this sort of discussion. It's a very particular story, and I tried to keep much of its conceptual assumptions implicit, avoiding programmatic instructions for further or comparative scholarship, which I feared would limit engagement. I'm pleased that wasn't the case, and that the book did prompt charitable debate from scholars whose work I greatly admire and have, both in this work and past projects, drawn from. I'm also pleased because, while *Fordlandia* has been widely and well received, it has tended to elicit in reviewers a desire to retell the story, literally. And though I appreciated the favorable notice, many of these reviews invoked the kind of jungle genre – madness, Conrad, the horror, the horror – I tried to avoid, even counter-invoking at key moments, as Barbara Weinstein points out, Twain or Chaplin to argue against. I must admit though that one of my favorite reviews of *Fordlandia* did say that “the story spills out in precisely the right tone—about midway between Joseph Conrad and Evelyn Waugh,” which is nice considering I've never read Waugh except for his polemical 1939 travelogue, *Robbery Under Law: The Mexican Object-Lesson*, an early attempt to equate Nazism and Communism as a unitary phenomenon, with *Cardenismo* its vector – and that book was short on wryness.

Speaking of fascism, I intended the book to be a study of ideology, of Henry Ford not just as an avatar of Americanism but as a key to explaining why his growingly dark brand of the *ism* – his tendency to blame the social problems generated by economic abstraction on concrete objects (namely Jews, Wall Street, and unions) – didn't mutate into the marching kind. I first became aware of *Fordlandia* from Alexander Cockburn's and Susanna Hecht's *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers, and Defenders of the Amazon* and then from its mention in Barbara Weinstein's *The Amazon Rubber Boom* and more extended discussion in Warren Dean's *Brazil and the Struggle for Rubber*.¹ As a graduate student working with Emilia Viotti da Costa, I even considered for a moment writing my dissertation on the subject. Having read an early draft of the manuscript, Emilia, to whom the book is dedicated, accused me of being something of a “caterpillar-determinist.” “The bugs,” she said, “everything is the bugs.” She here was referencing, and endorsing, Barbara Weinstein's disagreement with Warren Dean over how best to explain the failure of the local rubber elite to modernize production to compete with low-cost Asian latex. Weinstein emphasizes, rightly in my opinion, regional economic and political relations, and

¹ Alexander Cockburn and Susanna Hecht, *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers, and Defenders of the Amazon* (Chicago, 1989); Barbara Weinstein, *The Amazon Rubber Boom, 1850-1920* (Stanford, 1983); Warren Dean, *Brazil and the Struggle for Rubber: A Study in Environmental History* (New York, 1987). See also Elizabeth D. Esch, “Fordtown: Managing Race and Nation in the American Empire, 1925-1945,” dissertation, New York University, 2003, which, part of a broader analysis of the Ford Motor Company's international labor relations, has an excellent chapter on *Fordlandia*.

the ideas those relations produced, while Dean places much more stress on environmental factors, or, “the bugs” as Emilia put it.

My concern, though, as I mentioned, had more to do with what the episode had to say about ideology. I think this had less to do with methodological trends in historiography than with changes in U.S. governance over the last three decades, particularly with the rise of the New Right and the extension of its project, in response to the crisis of the 1970s, to remoralize markets and militarism to the point where today, it seems, the relationship of ideas, interests, and actions has unraveled.

In any case, the story of Fordlandia encapsulated many aspects of Americanism, obviously since it was a conscious attempt to reproduce America in the Amazon. The contrast between the man who turned routinized monotony into an ideology and the most complex ecosystem in the world yielded an endless supply of scenes that illustrated, as Emily Rosenberg points out, similar seeing-like-a-state “models of grandiose plans” that stumble “within complex unknowabilities.” Likewise, the sense of salvation that comes from such standardized efficiency, the belief that the United States represented a rejuvenating, revolutionary force in the world was amply on display in Fordlandia. But the story of Henry Ford’s jungle city represented not just the arrogance but the disquiet and vulnerability behind that faith, and this is where I think Fordlandia is different from other company towns, like those operated by United Fruit. And this is where I think my work departs from other critiques of modernization discourse and projects, including some highlighted by Bevan Sewell.

Since the end of World War II, when a postwar generation of critical scholars tried to move beyond the economism of progressive historians, there have been occasional critics who grasped the fundamental instability of Americanism, its mania irreducible in any direct way to position or politics, to the point where they themselves seemed to be caught up, either personally or analytically, in the mania (I’ve always wanted to teach a course called “Undone by America,” where the reading list would be D.H. Lawrence, Louis Hartz, Norman O. Brown, William Appleman Williams, Leslie Fiedler, Michael Rogin, Anthony Lukas, and WJ Cash). In the case of *Fordlandia*, I think the only explicit conceptual reference I name is Harvard historian Perry Miller, whose work on the Puritans, particularly his “Errand into the Wilderness” essay, did much to restate the importance of ideology in the founding of U.S. history, particularly on how the corruption inherent in notions of perfection generates a restless disquiet that can only be calmed, for a time, by further expansion.² What put Ford on the road to Brazil was a similar sense that all was not right at home.

The history of Fordlandia is very specific to the history of Henry Ford. It was a project that came late in his career, and paralleled the last two decades of his long life. It brought together the many different modernist and reactionary strands of his social philosophy in one last bid to export reform abroad after failing to achieve it in the United States. That what he sought to reform was largely the dislocations caused by his own method and

² Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA, 1975).

product, along with the fact that he was implicated in many of the vices he condemned – finance capital, racism, military production, unregulated urban growth, labor strife, and increasingly superficial consumerism – hastened his psychic flight to the Amazon, where he, in Miller’s words, sought to erect a “purer community” for the faithful back home. Recognizing that Fordlandia, at least in Ford’s mind, had less to do with Brazil than with the United States allowed for an appreciation of, as Barbara Weinstein points out, the tensions and instabilities within the Ford Motor Company, along with the many parallels between the Amazon and Ford’s projects in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (along with recognizing Henry Ford’s unrealized Muscle Shoals pastoral-industrial utopia as the bridge linking the Upper Peninsula to the Amazon). There also was a remarkable equivalence between the organizational “types” that made up Ford’s Dearborn metropole and those in his Brazilian peripheral branch. Harry Bennett, who ran the factory floor as if it were an extension of the wild west, Charles Sorenson, the hands-on, trial-and-error engineer, and Edsel Ford, who hoped to rational industrial administration and human resources all had their counterparts in Brazil, where Fordlandia’s relationship with the consolidating Getúlio Vargas government inverted the Ford Motor Company’s hostile relationship with the consolidating Franklin Roosevelt administration (the plantation welcomed Vargas’ efforts to exert control over the regional elite who made life difficult, though it did try to fight, unsuccessfully, Vargas’ extension of labor rights and social welfare).

If Fordlandia was specific to a moment in Ford’s life, that life was specific to a certain moment in the history of capitalism – a moment that was more generative, more open to alternative possibilities, be they advanced by its enemies or its captains, than what has come since. Ford was not just any titan, but the man who revolutionized industrial production with his assembly line and factory system, economics with his Five Dollar Day, and social relations with his democratic car. As such, he embodied capitalism’s promise and oppression like no other – exactly the kind of contradictions Emily Rosenberg points to at the end of her comments. It would be easy to identify many of his ideas and tactics as fascist. These include not just his anti-semitism, open flirtation with Nazism, probable financial support of the radio priest Charles Coughlin, and reliance on the violent Bennett to prevent unionism, but also his valorization of the countryside as a repository of virtue, his Nietzschean reading of Emerson, and his increasingly racist world view. But then there is his anti-militarism and pacifism, which, however much he compromised it by turning over his factories to wartime production, was real, as was an individualism that resisted being conscripted into nationalist jingoism, and which probably served to break a fall into full-fledged fascism. It stood in bitter opposition to another variety of Americanism, Theodore Roosevelt’s, which had a better claim to both those traditions. Ford’s commercial, and imagined pacific, Americanism and Roosevelt’s martial variety both shared a mutually reinforcing expansionist logic which ultimately led to their fusion. Yet the clash between the two Americanisms in the years leading to and during the involvement of the United States in World War I indexes an irrecoverable moment in capitalism’s history, when someone of Ford’s stature and power could credibly advance an alternative way of organizing society – be it in Muscle Shoals or the Amazon.

As the above remarks would suggest, I agree with Steven Topik that I was more concerned with Ford than with local Brazilian consequences, though I did try to incorporate these into

the story. I also agree that the rise of Manaus as a sprawling free trade city does not indicate the triumph of Americanism. Rather, it symbolizes the splitting of Fordism in half, the separation of its drive for ever greater efficiency from its promise to create better, fulfilled lives and communities. Though I'm not sure convergence is the word I would use to describe the relationship of Manaus and Detroit. The former vibrates in tune with the current global arrangement, while the later is a city of the past. If there is convergence, it is between Fordlandia and Detroit, where, according to recent reports, planners intend to let a good many blighted neighborhoods return to nature.

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