

Fordlandia

Author: Greg Grandin

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Genre: Non-fiction / History

Setting: Dearborn, Michigan; Brazilian Amazon

Accolades: Finalist, Pulitzer History Prize 2010; Finalist, National Book Award - Nonfiction 2009

Synopsis

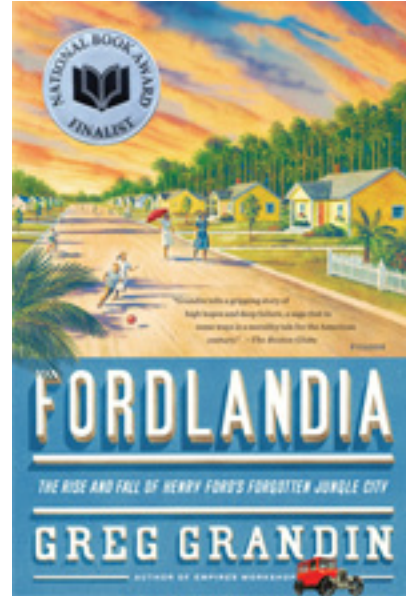
In 1927, Henry Ford acquired a land concession of nearly 2.5 million acres on the Tapajós River in the Brazilian Amazon. Originally, he had planned to plant rubber trees to produce latex for Ford cars, yet this objective was never realized. As the rubber plantation failed, Fordlandia evolved into a complex corporate colonization project, attempting to overlay an idealized rendering of small-town America on the Amazon. Grandin suggests that Ford's motivations were interwoven with a deep nostalgia, and a sense that something had gone wrong with industrial capitalism in the U.S. The book provides a fascinating study of Ford's complex and contradictory character, as well as documenting the unraveling of his utopian vision for the Amazon.

Questions for Reflection

1. If Henry Ford had asked you to oversee Fordlandia, what would you have done differently, and how might Catholic Social Teaching have guided your decisions and actions?
2. In what ways did Henry Ford's utopian vision align and fail to align with the CST concept of authentic human development? How did reality differ from his vision? What lessons might Fordlandia present for international development projects today?

Fordlandia is indeed a parable of arrogance. The arrogance, though, is not that Henry Ford thought he could tame the Amazon but that he believed that the forces of capitalism, once released, could still be contained.

-- Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia*



3. Who was included in decision-making regarding Fordlandia? Who was excluded? How could the CST principle of participation have been implemented, and how might that have changed the dynamics and outcome of the project?
4. In what ways did Fordlandia foreshadow current threats to the Amazon?
5. How did the justifications for the project change over time? What would have defined success at Fordlandia, according to the different actors involved? How would you have defined success?
6. What responsibilities do employers have to their workers? To affected communities? To care for creation? In what ways did Fordlandia meet or fail to meet those responsibilities? In what ways did Ford's U.S. operations? Is there a discrepancy between the two, and if so, why?
7. Reflect on Henry Ford's pacifism. Did he maintain a consistent outlook, or did his point of view shift? How is Ford's understanding of pacifism similar or different to your understanding of pacifism? How did his vision of pacifism relate, or fail to relate, to his industrial vision?



Catholic Social Teaching Connections

Dignity of Work

Through work, individuals share in the activity of the Creator, develop their God-given talents, and contribute to social well-being. People are the subjects of work, and not merely a means of production; therefore, the well-being of workers takes precedence over the efficiency, productivity, and profits of business. “Any form of materialism or economic tenet that tries to reduce the worker to being a mere instrument of production, a simple labour force with an exclusively material value, would end up hopelessly distorting the essence of work and stripping it of its most noble and basic human finality. The human person is the measure of the dignity of work: ‘In fact there is no doubt that human work has an ethical value of its own, which clearly and directly remains linked to the fact that the one who carries it out is a person’” (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 271).

Care for Creation

The planet’s diverse ecosystems and natural processes form not only the delicately balanced foundation of human habitat, economy, and food production, but also its finite limitations which cannot be violated with impunity. “There is an order in the universe which must be respected, and the human person, endowed with the capability of choosing freely, has a grave responsibility to preserve this order” (Pope John Paul II, *World Day of Peace Message 1990*, 15).

Human Rights

Human rights originate in the fundamental dignity and sacredness of the human person, created in likeness of God. They are universal in scope, applying to all people without exception, and correspond to the essential elements a person needs to live a life of dignity. Human rights are considered to be the minimum conditions for life in community.

Common Good

In Catholic Social Teaching, the common good refers to the conditions of social living that allow each individual to attain his or her own fulfillment, including economic, political, cultural, and environmental dimensions of human wellbeing. In other words, the common good is the totality of circumstances which create the opportunity for authentic human development for all women and men - not only for a majority. “Today perhaps more than in the past, people are realizing that they are linked together by a common destiny, which is to be constructed together, if catastrophe for all is to be avoided” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 26).

Authentic Human Development

Within Catholic social thought, development cannot be reduced purely to economics, but also involves social, political, and spiritual dimensions. Laws and policies - whether enacted by government or business - cannot be judged by their economic merits alone, but must consider potential impacts on human dignity and wellbeing. Authentic human development should promote the innate talents and capabilities of each person in service to the common good. According to Pope Paul VI, “[development] cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each [person] and of the whole [person]” (*Populorum Progressio*, 14).

Participation

All people have the right to partake in decision-making that affects their lives. Participation is a political, social, and economic right, and is a fundamental means of respecting human dignity and achieving authentic development. Indeed, all peoples have the right “to become the principal architects of their own economic and social development” (*Justitia in Mundo*, 71).