

## “Kill the Americans!”

The U.S. Government, Citizens, and  
Companies in Latin America  
from the Panama Canal to Plan Colombia

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Aviva Chomsky, *Linked Labor Histories: New England, Colombia, and the Making of a Global Working Class*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.

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

Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal*. New York: Penguin Press, 2009.

Crowds of U.S. soldiers and civilian employees of the Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC) celebrated the Fourth of July 1912 by carousing in the Cocoa Grove red light district of Panama City, outside the U.S.-controlled Canal Zone. Swaggering and disorderly, the crowd clashed violently with the Panamanian police, resulting in one dead, twenty injured, and others arrested, all U.S. citizens. The U.S. State Department was quick to denounce the Panamanian abuses while sworn statements by U.S. witnesses claimed their countrymen had been singled out on streets full of

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“natives, Negroes, and Spaniards” (Greene 325–6). This fraught episode, explored in depth in *The Canal Builders*, was echoed eighteen years later on Henry Ford’s Brazilian plantation property in the Amazon. Greg Grandin devotes several pages to a December 20, 1930, clash that, growing out of a mess hall dispute but with no reported deaths, was followed by a general *quebra-quebra* (break-break, i.e., vandalism), accompanied by drinking, that included a chant of “Brazil for Brazilians. Kill all the Americans” — again reported by U.S. sources (Grandin 228–33).

“Kill the Americans” carries a very different charge from “Kill the bastards,” even during a drunken tumult, and that difference provides an avenue to explore conflicts across identities, citizenship, and legal jurisdictions. Yet such stories of apparent threat and mild violence are placed into perspective by Aviva Chomsky’s *Linked Labor Histories*, which begins with a 1913 strike in Milford, Massachusetts, resulting in one picketer’s death, and ends in contemporary Colombia. While five thousand, five hundred are officially reported to have died during canal construction, Colombia has seen the deaths of tens of thousands over the past sixty years. By offering us brief statements by terrified victims, a persecuted union leader, and a Colombian general, Chomsky brings us onto a terrain of social struggle, riven by internecine armed conflict and marked by innumerable killings, assassinations, massacres, and bombings, even without cries of “kill the foreigners.”<sup>1</sup>

All three books are rooted in the U.S. Progressive era that produced such larger-than-life personalities and projects as Teddy Roosevelt, Henry Ford, and the Panama Canal. As Greene admirably demonstrates, the U.S. canal building project from 1904 to 1914 was as much an achievement in the organization and management of labor as it was a triumph of U.S. engineering and medical science. With a polyglot multinational workforce of fifty-seven thousand at its height (Greene 225), the world’s largest dam and lock system became a source of powerful patriotic celebration in the United States, an achievement rivaling the Suez Canal, which opened in 1869. The 1913 Milford strike that opens Chomsky’s book took place when the Model T and five-dollar-a-day wage brought fame to the Michigan farm-born Henry Ford. Based on fully integrated assembly-line production of automobiles, the Ford Motor Company’s workforce had soared from four thousand in 1911 to fourteen thousand two years later as the car, the man, and the factory system became icons of U.S. efficiency.<sup>2</sup> It produced the fortune that allowed the sixty-one-year-old Henry Ford, twelve years later, to launch the Amazonian venture that is the focus of Greg Grandin’s engaging popular history. When the contract for what would become Fordlandia was signed in 1925, the Ford Motor Company employed fifty thousand hourly workers in the United States while his planned rubber plantation, at the height of construction, employed four thousand on the Tapajós branch of the Amazon explored in 1913–1914 by ex-President Theodore Roosevelt.

Addressing a U.S. audience, Greene, Grandin, and Chomsky exemplify our current U.S. scholarly interest in “rethinking the relationship between U.S. domestic

and international history" (Greene 7). They exemplify the new transnational history trend as well as ongoing efforts, in the case of Greene and Chomsky, to execute transnational labor histories.<sup>3</sup> An able U.S. labor historian, Greene has made a successful transition to become an accomplished scholar of a key episode in Central American and Caribbean history. With *Fordlandia*, Grandin, a specialist in twentieth-century Guatemalan history, makes his second U.S. incursion in a book that accompanies his U.S. actors as they touch down within Brazil. The third historian, Chomsky, specializes in Central American and Caribbean history, but her book opens with three episodes in the history of labor and immigration in her home state of Massachusetts before moving to contemporary Colombian cases and their relationships with Massachusetts, whether based on economics, immigration, or labor solidarity work.

These authors are inspired by the critical insights of Karl Marx and William Appleman Williams.<sup>4</sup> Chomsky does diverge stylistically, however, as she hammers home her book's bottom line: "The story that this book tells us is . . . simple, linear, and repetitive. Capital seeks inequality, because inequality allows capital to profit from low wages," thus producing "an endless race to the bottom" on both sides of the North-South divide (294).<sup>5</sup> Far more circumspect, Greene and Grandin successfully reach a mass nonacademic audience through accessible prose and good storytelling while eschewing political lessons directly aimed at the reader. In Chomsky's book, narrative takes second place to the fierce urgency, activist energy, and bracing anger with which she crafts hard-hitting vignettes that establish surprising connections between working people and capital in two very different countries.

One of Greene's stated aims is to explore how "diverse visions, expectations, hopes, dreams, and realities clashed" in this decisive period of the U.S. emergence as a global power (12). It was a triumph that "articulated American expansionism as a positive, humane, and beneficial activity. . . . Emerging as the apparent antithesis of empire, the Panama Canal ironically helped make American empire possible" (9). In domestic U.S. politics, it was hailed by progressive reformers and even socialists as an efficient government-run enterprise, what one reformer called a "rocky ledge in the sea of American *laissez faire*."<sup>6</sup> And in the long run, its genius was that the canal "seemed unconnected to imperialism; instead, it was seen as a display of America's domestic strengths in a world setting" and an exemplification of U.S. progressivism: "efficient, orderly, and just" (9, 206).

The global U.S. self-image that crystallized after 1898 drew upon peculiarities of the nation's ideological and religious inheritance. "The capitalists who invested in New England's early industries," Chomsky observes, "brought to their operations a curious ideological heritage" that included "a strong dose of utopian engineering," practical Christianity, and a "paternalist view of social betterment and urban uplift" (18–20, 83–5).<sup>7</sup> In the early twentieth century, U.S. citizens gained a new icon in Henry Ford, who "represented the vigor, dynamism, and the rushing energy that defined American capitalism" in that era (Grandin 4). It is in this

sense that Grandin describes Fordlandia as a “quintessentially American story” marked, from its inception, by a “frustrated idealism” (9). At the outset, the motives for Ford’s Amazonian venture might have been economic, but Grandin argues that it quickly “became more and more a museum piece, Ford’s vision of Americanism frozen in amber” (262).<sup>8</sup> While neither plantation produced even a pound of commercialized rubber during twenty years of Ford ownership, Grandin suggests that these well-ordered U.S.-style towns deep in the Amazon could be seen as “shining examples of the American [U.S.] dream” (346). Although Henry Ford never made his promised visit, the story of “Ford men lost in the wilderness” serves as the basis for his extended meditation on “Americanness.” Grandin finds “something more Mark Twain than Joseph Conrad’s [*Heart of Darkness*], more Huckleberry [Finn] than homicidal” (202). Rather than an enterprise marked by the “mortal racism that gripped [Conrad’s] Kurtz,” he sees something quintessentially “American” about their “blithe insistence that all the world is more or less like us, or at least an imagined version of ‘us’” (204).

Structured as a rise-and-fall narrative, Grandin’s account does not neglect Ford’s anti-Semitism, the ferocity of his company’s opposition to labor, or his personal pacifism. For his narrative, he chooses to highlight Ford’s critique of contemporary U.S. society as well as the positive dimension of Fordism: “the early twentieth-century promise of humane development” through industrialization (256). By unleashing unfettered capitalism, he suggests, Ford undermined not only the “heartland Americanism” he sought to defend but in the long run helped produce the “waste, slavery and ruination” that Grandin sees in the Amazon today (372). As a story about “U.S.,” *Fordlandia* works splendidly and provides readers with much food for thought<sup>9</sup> while inviting energetic young scholars, likely Brazilian, to offer a deeper rendering from within the Amazon looking out.<sup>10</sup>

Ford’s problems with Brazilians, including the 1930 riot, stemmed in part from the rigidity of his dedication to efficiency (regimentation), hygiene (cleanliness, order, and diet), and upright living (including gardening). Disdaining politicians (graft) and government (inimical to private-sector leadership), his moralistic efforts to eliminate vice and debauchery included attempts to ban alcohol sales and the brothels that sprang up nearby. In this regard, the Panama Canal’s chief engineer George Goethals was eminently more sensible than the innovative industrialist. While the Panama Canal operated within the same discursive structures, those charged with managing the vast construction project and its ever-shifting workforce were far more practical precisely because of the overwhelming urgency of completing the task (unlike the Fordlandia venture). As Greene notes, alcohol was in Goethals’s judgment less a disturbance than “a source of contentment” if safely delivered and properly managed (288). As she rightly observes, Goethals and his colleagues had to constantly “adapt their ideas about government to the needs, desires, and demands of a diverse population . . . [while balancing] the symbolism of the

canal versus the gritty reality of social relationships on the ground, and the design of officials versus the demands of those they sought to govern" (368).

In brilliant chapters of real analytical depth, Greene explores the lives of canal builders on and off the job. She also tackles the kaleidoscopic terrain of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and national diversity in both its gendered dimensions. While Grandin notes in passing that "Ford managers, like European colonialists in Asia and Africa, were fixated on race" (Grandin 203), Anglo-Saxonism, white supremacy and ethno-racial dynamics play a minor role in his story. Beyond prejudice against Indians and routine use of racially derogatory terms, the most explicit discussion involves a Ford official ascribing racist motives to the Brazilian workers who objected to hiring "foreign Negroes" from the West Indies (202, 162). It would have been impossible in the Panamanian case, however, to downplay these issues because the entire labor force was structured on the basis of race, nationality, and citizenship into "Gold" and "Silver" rolls, with distinct pay and benefit scales (the system was only abolished in 1955).

While the Gold/Silver system has long been known in Latin American and Central American scholarship, Greene offers the most extensive and penetrating analysis of its multiple hierarchies, shifts across time, and inherent contradictions. Since the privileged Gold workers were never explicitly defined by race, a few dozen skilled Afro-North Americans made it into the Gold rolls and fought against discrimination (a sensitive point for Republicans in Washington). They were eventually shifted to a "special" privileged position on the Silver rolls, which included foreign whites of various origins, as well as the African-descended West Indian majority (99–107). In her exploration of the skilled U.S. Gold workers, Greene charts their frustrated attempts at unionization before they realized the power of congressional lobbying. Their potential for political success led to a two-sided response: a 1908 executive order that purged aliens from the Gold rolls and a systematic ICC policy of shifting certain jobs to the Silver roll to reduce costs (92–95).

Making excellent use of rich archival material hitherto underexploited, Greene's vivid storytelling brings us the actual individuals as they voiced demands, claimed and contested their status, and made and remade their identities. As in her chapter on the Zone's female population, she captures the social distance and conflict as well as the asymmetrical interdependence that both connected and divided these varied populations. *The Canal Builders* also vastly expands our understanding of the predominantly "West Indian" labor force, itself a homogenizing fiction, she suggests, given inter-island differentiation and even linguistic differences (five thousand, five hundred French-speaking Martinicans). While white U.S. engineers, doctors, and steam shovel operators were lionized, it was the predominantly nonwhite West Indians who were, in the words of a descendant in 1999, the true VIPs of the canal-building process: the "Very Invisible Peoples" (382).

One of the most revealing chapters, a true gem, discusses the ICC's early

decision to recruit Spaniards, largely from the new U.S. protectorate in Cuba, for a “whiteness” they imagined would make them a more desirable Silver workforce. Goethals and his fellow managers were soon disabused of their illusions because of strikes and disturbances, at times led by anarchists, that led them to negative conclusions about the “excitable nature” of these European workers. Their militancy would lead the ICC to a new appreciation of West Indians because they rarely struck and their “protests were fleeting and highly subterranean” (172, 154–5). As Greene explains convincingly, the greater aggressiveness of the Spaniards stemmed in part from the ambiguities of their legal and racial status (160, 163, 165).

Whether in Fordlandia or the Canal Zone, the mess hall was particularly fraught with the potential for conflict between hungry workers and those responsible for providing decent food in a timely fashion. The 1930 Fordlandia incident arose from a management decision to implement a cafeteria-style system they believed was more efficient than table service. Amid delays caused by the recording of workers’ badge numbers, an exchange between a mason and a Ford official apparently provided the spark that led to smashing dishes, trashing the mess hall, and generalized vandalism against company property (Grandin 228). A mess hall for Spanish workers in the Canal Zone was also the site of tumult in March 1907 when managers began requiring assigned seating. Charged with enforcing the new rules, a West Indian steward told a Spanish worker to move to his assigned seat. After the man responded by punching the steward, the generalized rejection of the new dispensation included a Spanish worker jumping up on a table where he reportedly shouted, “Kill the negroes!”

While avoiding the assumption that the man on the table speaks for all Spaniards, the cry of “Kill the negroes!” points to the unique role that phenotype can play in homogenizing diversity within the powerful discursive structures of the New World’s racial hierarchy; after all, there were individuals with African-descended phenotypes among all of the New World citizens or imperial subjects working on the canal. It was clearly safer to vent against the weak and racially stigmatized than to yell “Kill the Americans!” U.S. citizens were untouchable while on the U.S.-controlled Canal Zone, but even when they entered Panamanian jurisdiction, as a Panamanian newspaper explained, they resisted being “arrested or interfered with in any way by a negro policeman; and the police of Panama are largely negro or mestizo. A large majority of the Americans feel themselves very superior to any Panamanian. This is inherent in their race, in any race of conquerors” (Greene 328).<sup>11</sup>

Not all U.S. or European citizens swaggered like conquerors in early twentieth-century Panama, as Greene shows, but their mentality, rhetoric, and behavior necessarily reflected that era of gunboat diplomacy. In 1903, the United States had wrested a province from Colombia to create a new nation divided down the middle by U.S.-held territory. The Cocoa Grove incident allows us to understand the crude imperial micropolitics of drunken carousing, while the aggressive police

behavior, directed against U.S. citizens this time, in part reflected their affiliation with a Conservative Party that, after being favored by the United States, was disappointed when its foreign counterparts allowed the election of a Liberal president. Whatever these Panamanian complexities, however, physical confrontations with arrogant U.S. "bastards" would inevitably be recorded as the action of unreasoning and vengeful foreign mobs. The nineteenth century had seen a relentless drive by powerful nations to secure extraterritorial immunity based on a double standard shaped by racism and a chauvinist disdain in dealing with weaker non-European peoples.<sup>12</sup>

Panama, highly dependent and internally divided, would in the end pay compensation to the Cocoa Grove "victims" while their policemen were humiliated in 1915 by being forced to give up their rifles (Greene 330–31). But change is the only constant, and the United States was forced to give up jurisdiction over the canal in 1979. Twenty years later, it had to turn over its fourteen military bases to Panama because of anger at the 1989 U.S. invasion that left five hundred Panamanians dead. The early-twentieth-century policemen who had confronted drunken U.S. "bastards" would have smiled if they were there: Panamanians were no longer such VIPs (Very Invisible Peoples).

## Notes

1. A major recipient of U.S. military aid, Colombia is the world's most dangerous place to be a trade unionist as well as the most important exception to the leftward trend in contemporary South America. Presenting Colombia as "the cutting edge of the U.S.-supported project of contemporary neoliberalism," Chomsky describes the horrifying violence as not only far from senseless but "integral" to capitalist globalization, indeed, "one possible future for all of us" (183–4, 188). Beyond the directness of this implied causal linkage, her book led one troubled reviewer, a leading Colombianist labor historian, to express his concern at her failure to address "issues of historical interpretation that undermine or complicate her own analysis," especially the role of the armed Left in the Urabá banana zone to which she devotes a chapter (Charles Bergquist, in his review in *Business History Review* 82 (2008): 631–34).
2. Nelson Lichtenstein and Stephen Meyer, eds., *On the Line: Essays in the History of Auto Work* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 2–3, 21.
3. Both are represented, along with this reviewer, in Leon Fink, ed., *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
4. Williams is cited by Greene, 6, and Chomsky, 317; Marx by Grandin, 180; and Greene and Grandin share dedicatory quotes from Bertolt Brecht poems.
5. The same point is also made by Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 359.
6. Originally Stuart Chase, quoted by Greene, *The Canal Builders*, 189.
7. Ironies abound: the 1913 Milford strike was against the Draper Company, which grew out of a Christian utopian community called Hopedale, and whose looms would later be used in the Colombian textile industry.

8. A discussion of Grandin's book is included in a review essay on Ford's urban planning vision by Heather Barrow, "The Reach of an Automotive Giant: Urban Implications of an Industrial Policy," *Journal of Urban History* 37 (2011): 297–301, esp. 298–99.
9. Grandin explains that he consciously avoided certain established narrative themes about the Amazon by outsiders, including seduction, the testing ground, and invitation to hubris (6, 12). His focus on Ford does indeed provide welcome coherence to his account, but readers might have welcomed a comparison with a later failed mega-project in the Amazon. Between 1967 and 1979, an aging billionaire U.S. shipping mogul named Daniel Ludwig, born in Michigan like Ford, invested \$780 million in an attempt to establish a commercial forestry and pulp factory complex on a 5800-square-mile property. Larger than the state of Connecticut, the Jari project boasted a seventeen-story paper mill and power plant that had been towed there from Japan and suffered from the same high labor turnover that affected Fordlandia. Like the Ford Motor Company in 1945, Ludwig finally disposed of the project at a great loss to a Brazilian group for a risible price in 1982 ("Billionaire Ludwig's Brazilian Gamble," *Time*, September 10, 1979, [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,920630,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,920630,00.html); Larry Rohter, "A Mirage of Amazonian Size: Delusions of Economic Grandeur Deep in Brazil's Interior," *New York Times*, November 9, 1999). Perhaps, in other words, the personal megalomania of the superrich—and our fascination with their follies—might provide the basis for an alternative reading of Ford's embarrassing failure.
10. For a fascinating account of intra-Amazonian narratives as well as external ones, see Candace Slater's excellent book *Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
11. Greene shows that the ICC's Canal Zone police force of 250 was evenly divided between whites and West Indians, but the latter were allowed to police only nonwhites. *The Canal Builders*, 87.
12. John D. French, "Commercial Footsoldiers of the Empire: Foreign Merchant Politics in Tampico, Mexico, 1861–1866," *The Americas* 46 (1990): 292–93, 298, 301, 311. It was precisely Latin American weakness that generated the exaggerated rhetoric about a foreign minority surrounded by looming threats and hostility at the hands of unreasoning and vengeful xenophobes. Serving as leverage against host countries, the records attesting to such fears should never, given the balance of power, be taken as proof of the existence of a real as opposed to hypothetical threat.