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**Book Review: The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America
by Greg Grandin**

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*The End of the Myth:
From the Frontier
to the Border Wall
in the Mind of America*

by Greg Grandin, New York: Metropolitan Books,
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reviewed by

**JOSEPH BIGGERSTAFF
& PEDER ØSTEBØ**

For many, especially for those observing the launch of Donald J. Trump's campaign from afar, the president's campaign launch in June 2015 seemed like a bizarre, almost humorous, distraction from the usual pre-election jabber that occupy foreign affairs desks all over the world when a US election is nearing. A few days after the multi-millionaire descended from the echelons of Trump Tower to declare his candidacy, Norway's daily *Aftenposten* ran a story with the headline "Why these US elections will be funnier."¹ The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Germany's paper on record, was equally dismissive, albeit in a more sober and eloquent fashion: "His candidacy is a scandal and a show, a pub brawl taking the shape of a political operation. But it will be an irrelevant one."² The apparent bizarreness of a Trump candidacy was slowly but steadily, as the national conventions and, eventually, the presidential election the following year neared, unmasked as a likely scenario. That appeared to be a sideshow, soon replaced the heirs apparent of centrist political currents as the main act.

The assumption that both elections and the political system of the United States is fundamentally centipedal, deeply rooted in political analysis as self-evident, appear today a myth. But according to historian Greg Grandin, it is not the only myth that has fallen victim to recent political developments. In his book *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*, Grandin takes on what is perhaps the most common and repeated tropes of US exceptionalism, namely the idea that an ever-expanding "frontier" has not only fueled US economic development but also transformed the American ideology from liberal republicanism to an individualist democracy. The revolutionary effect of the frontier, ironically, famously serves as a "safety valve" for revolutionary movements. Today, however, the trope of the revolutionary influence of the boundlessness of the United States of America is, according to Grandin, not only a myth, but a myth in decay. The slow but immensely impactful ideational transformation from a being a country on the frontier to being a bordered country has reached its pinnacle with the rise of Trumpism. Borrowing a line from Canadian poet Anne Carson, Grandin sees the myth dying the perilous life after unfolding, through a critical juncture, a profound crisis of political existentialism.

Grandin, who recently returned to Yale University from where he received his Ph.D. in 1999,

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- 1 Lars Glomnes and Øystein K. Langberg, "Derfor blir USA-valget morsommere," *Aftenposten* June 17, 2015, visited October 8, 2019. URL: <https://www.aftenposten.no/verden/i/kw6X/Derfor-blir-USA-valget-morsommere-av-Donald-Trump>
 - 2 Markus Günther, "Das Geheimnis des Trumpismus," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 4, 2015, visited October 8, 2019. URL: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/amerika/das-geheimnis-von-donald-trumps-erfolg-13730711-p4.html>

is no stranger to tackling the political acuteness of the contemporary moment from an historical point of view. In *Empire's Workshop* (2007), he provided a narrative that bridged the gap the intellectual-political current that shaped US interventionism in Latin America in the 1980s and the global "War on Terror". *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle* (2010), published in the immediate aftermath of the global economic crisis, served as a lens for investigating expansionist capitalism akin strangely akin to that of the pre-crash era. Finally, anticipating renewed debate on slavery and racial justice as a fulcrum of US political discourse, *Empire of Necessity* (2014) explores the interdependency of slavery and the birth of US nationhood, and the paradox that the age of American revolutions brought with an ever-increasing reliance on slave labor in the newly founded liberal republic.

Grandin's combination of rich and informed prose and a willingness to forcefully argue against dominant narrative in conventional accounts of US history is ever-present in *The End of the Myth*. Throughout the book, his main object, the concept of "the frontier" is juxtaposed with the actual frontier as a place. Whereas Frederick Jackson Turner posited in his famous 1893 "Frontier Thesis" that a democratic impulse was replenished through the process of (sometimes violent) westward settlement, Grandin—inverting the thesis—argue that "overseas" military

domination in both South East Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean "acted as a prism, refracting the color line abroad back home" (p. 139). More recently, yet equally unsettling, are the vigilante death squads of trauma-afflicted returning veterans from recent oil wars who comb the southern border. According to Grandin, the dynamics of this refraction can, as foreign wars can be traced back to the first clashes between settlers and the Indigenous Peoples of what was to become the United States, the main point of the books three first chapters.

Grandin, who in the first half of the book dedicate much space to the intellectual (counter-) history of the intellectual underpinnings of glorified expansionism and contrasts to it the brutal violence with which the expansion was executed, notes that Turner's skewed thesis was not a result of neglect but rather an ideological construct. Turner was a centrist who sought to steer thinking away from the racial determinism of his time, such as the "Germ Theory", which attributed the spread of democracy to Anglo-Saxon migration. And while Frederick Jackson Turner lamented the end of the frontier as marking a decline in American dynamism, Grandin writes that in the twentieth century "the idea of the frontier continued to advance, even as the border stayed put" (p. 149). During the New Deal, the ethos of limitless growth and expansion underwent a critical evaluation. Reformers proposed a "new social ethics" of limits and restraint. FDR's

secretary of labor, Frances Perkins, in her work *People at Work*, “drew out the gendered underpinnings of the Frontier Thesis, arguing that wealth was created by the “free labor” provided by household production (free in the sense of not being paid for.) The uncompensated toil of women and children resulted in a “pure gain in national wealth.”

The “freedom” of the frontiersman is, then, the freedom to dominate. It depended less on having a gate of escape across an endless frontier than on being able to control the labor of his family. Perkins argued for a new “awakened conscience,” based, at the very least, on adequate compensation, dignified working conditions, and limitations placed on child labor, which were the goals of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.’ (p. 175). But while the reformist program that democrats and republicans alike coalesced might have changed configurations at home, the myth prevailed as the US took on a more global role. Thus, political alignments and the meaning of government in twentieth century are perhaps reconfigured, but the flexible concept of the “frontier” was merely readapted, and the notion of freedom as expansion and domination never truly challenged. This process, fundamental to the New Deal, is through Grandin’s eyes a “socialization of frontier thesis” that expanded capitalism abroad while extending “political liberalism at home” (p. 180). The freedom to dominate, echoing Grandin’s previous works, was, as the

economic and political hegemony of the United States prevailed, its global *modus operandi*.

Concurrent to the elaboration of freedom as expansion in the rudimentary political economy of Benjamin Franklin, the moral philosophy (of freedom as movement) of Thomas Jefferson, and finally the political theory of James Madison, the frontier becomes a space of increasingly racialized violence—a blood meridian. In the Seven Years War, settlers learned to “kill their victims pitilessly” and “act if they themselves were at native to the land as Indians (16).” In a replay of events twenty years earlier following the Royal Proclamation of 1763, after the Treaty of Paris (1783) settlers continued to stream into western territories and engage in guerilla warfare with Indigenous peoples. Any interference by the federal government, which was finding new ways to dispossess native land through mechanisms of debt, was an impediment to movement and thus an assault on individual freedom. But as Grandin illustrates so clearly throughout the book, expansion is the root cause of what he sees as the country’s problem. The US construction of freedom, in Grandin’s narrative, becomes the narrative that drive a triangle of expansionism, violence and domination. It is not possible, the author argues, “to extricate ‘individual rights’—to possess and to bear arms, and to call on the power of the state to protect those rights—from the bloody history that gave rise to those rights, from

the entitlements settlers and slavers won from people of color as they moved across the land (p. 220).” First personified in Andrew Jackson, this ethos has remained strong in American politics, notably among stalwart supporters of Donald Trump.

After having been guided through a powerful retelling of how the frontier and a unique understanding of freedom persisted, only to gradually see it become an “ideological relic of a now-exhausted universalism,” Grandin turns to the present. In a very concise, and somewhat dramatic fashion, he proposes that Donald Trump’s ascendance implies that the notion of freedom of expansion is unmasked by the end of the frontier myth. In Grandin’s view, this has consequences, as the dominating political consensus that have maintained both tropes are unlikely to return. Seeing the rise of democratic socialism as a legitimate political current (arguably, for the first time in the country’s history), the crossroads proposed to the reader is one of only two paths, namely those of socialism, “or at least social democracy” and barbarism, understood as continued belief in the freedom to dominate (p. 275). Although underexplored, Grandin, as many other on the democratic left, provides a narrative leading up to a contemporary moment in which a return the center is nothing but hapless nostalgia.

The reader is, then, left with a compelling narrative elaborating on the diagnosis, but a prescription that only begins to suggest a cure. An

inherent challenge within Grandin’s narrative is that it is mediated, with some notable examples, through traditional protagonists of US history. The rise of Trumpism is nevertheless the result of popular resentment, and, especially in the latter half of the book, popular interpretations of the national myth are rarely addressed. This spurs fundamental questions on how national myths are taken up, and possibly transformed. What is, for instance, the place of Americans, simultaneously the bearers of the decaying frontier myth and the segment which, now and in 2016, favor the force that ended the myth, in a possible transcendence of national myths of domination?

Two additional fundamental challenges of Grandin’s narrative may be found in its interpretation of counter-narratives and its construction as a uniquely US phenomenon. Apart from Perkins, the notable critic of the frontier myth in the 20th century is Martin Luther King, who Grandin casts as the strongest counterforce to the dominating narrative the last time the global frontier myth was in disarray, as a consequence of the slowly progressing national trauma of the War in Vietnam. Beyond King, stories of resistance are largely absent. Finally, while Grandin’s narrative is compelling, it never addresses the rise of Trumpism as part of a phenomenon that expands far wider than the US, namely the rise of the contemporary authoritarian right. Although the consensus on free trade is elaborated upon through a

deep-dive into the consequences of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the global rise of exclusionist triumphalism and xenophobia as pillars of political projects are certainly not unique to the US.

Despite the imbalances between the different narratives that the book attempts to unite, *The End of the Myth* succeeds in its prime objective, namely in sketching out the deeply entrenched pattern of intellectual thought on US history that leads up to the current moment. As with his previous works, Grandin places himself in the center of political conjunctures, with a book meant to bridge the gap between radical historical approaches and current debates on the US left.