

## Volkswagen in the Amazon

From 1973 to 1987, Volkswagen's 140,000-hectare "pioneer" cattle ranch on the Amazon frontier laid bare the limits of capitalist development. These limits were not only economic, with the core management of a multinational company engaged in the "integration" of an extreme world periphery, but they were also legal and ethical, with the involvement of indentured labor and massive forest burning. Capitalist development's physical limits were exposed by an unpredictable ecosystem refusing to submit to VW's technological arsenal. Antoine Acker reveals how the VW ranch, a major project supported by the Brazilian military dictatorship, was planned, negotiated, and eventually undone by the intervention of internationally connected actors and events.

Antoine Acker earned his PhD at the European University Institute and has extensively researched and taught in seven different countries on a broad range of topics, including environmental and Brazilian history and German culture and language, as well as political sciences. He was a lecturer at the Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris (2013–2014) and at the University of La Rochelle (2014–2015), and a guest scholar in the universities of Bielefeld, Maastricht, and Bern (2015–2016). He is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Turin in affiliation with the Marie Skłodowska-Curie excellence fellowships program co-funded by the European Commission.

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*The Tragedy of Global Development  
in Modern Brazil*

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## Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Acronyms</i>	xiii
Introduction	I
1 Setting the Stage: The Amazon as a Horizon	19
2 The Making of a Model Ranch (1973–1976)	51
3 Development in the Age of Scarcity (1976–1983)	113
4 Out-of-Date Modernity: Forced Labor at Cristalino (1983–1986)	191
5 Cristalino’s Unhappy Ending	262
<i>References</i>	291
<i>Index</i>	309

## Figures

2.1	Final territory and region of the Cristalino ranch	<i>page</i> 67
2.2	Geographic position in the Brazilian territory	68
2.3	Employees' house with garden at Cristalino	102
2.4	Ranch cowboys	107
2.5	Cowboys on horses	107
2.6	Employees showing the VW logo	108
2.7	The children of the ranch standing behind four flags representing, from left to right: the Cristalino Company, Volkswagen, the Brazilian nation, and the state of Pará	109
4.1	Illustrations of the steel trade union in a paper on the CVRC	223

## Preface and Acknowledgments

I do not exactly remember where I first saw it mentioned that VW had run a farm in the Amazon, but it was probably no more than a footnote. This case caught my attention because it appeared to me, at first sight, to be a paradigm of the exploitation of the South by the North. Yet, as I started to trace the connections involved in that story, I realized it was something else, more than just another example of unequal exchange. It was about the irony of modern capitalism, which was feeding a context of global political connections at the same time as an expansion of global trade, a context of circulation of imaginaries at the same time as an exchange of commodities, a context of growing risk awareness at the same time as an increasing impact of technological progress on humans and the environment.

The trope of the earth's lungs burning, which has emerged as an internationalized definition of the Amazon, is thus an outgrowth of capitalist globalization in both the material and imaginary sense. The tremendous influx of exogenous capital into the region from the late 1960s, combined with misguided beliefs in development as a global doctrine, did concretely give impulsion to uncontrollable forest burning, and revitalized old networks of social exploitation. But it is precisely the acceleration of global connections in and about the Amazon that constructed transforming rainforest ecologies into a mirror of the modern world's excesses, reflecting the latter's astonishing destructive capacities. Embedded in the postmodernist wave of the 1970s, which saw the rise of transnationally networked initiatives to question the ins and outs of our insatiable economic model, the history of VW in the Amazon incarnates that tragedy

of global development. It gives a picture of the extraordinary capacity of the modern, globalized capitalist system to permanently hit back at itself.

Kiran Klaus Patel is the one person who challenged me to think about my project in terms of its meaning for global history. He has accompanied this research from the beginning, and I cannot say enough how remarkable an advisor and a support he has been. Several other scholars have, very generously, read and extensively commented on my drafts, and I feel indebted to all of them: Sebastian Conrad, Dirk Moses, Claudia Damasceno Fonseca, Christof Mauch, João Klug, Kevin Niebauer, Corinna Unger, Leila Hadj-Abdou, Julia Tischler, and Stella Krepp. Among the many colleagues who kindly received me to discuss the design of my research or who attended presentations of my work in progress in Europe, Brazil, and the United States, José Augusto Pádua, Olivier Compagnon, François-Michel Le Tourneau, Georg Fischer, Jana Otto and Sidney Chalhoub gave particularly precious advice. In 2014, an article related to this research resulted in unexpected and extremely interesting feedback from inside and outside the academic sphere, and I owe this opportunity to Alexandre Fortes, who encouraged me submitting it to the *Revista Brasileira de História*. Two anonymous reviewers at Cambridge University Press, with their rich and knowledgeable reading and warm encouragement, gave the ultimate impulse to improve this book's content. James Naylor Green, who contacted me thereafter, was one of them: I cannot thank him enough for the fineness and precision of his feedback.

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*Preface and Acknowledgments*

xi

power and environment in history. Finally, I brought the last corrections to this book in Turin, boosted by the dynamism of Serenella Iovino, who welcomed me so warmly in the environmental humanities research group she created. In this final phase, I received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework program for research and innovation under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 609402 – 2020 researchers: Train to Move (T2M).

This work benefited from the engagement of many archivists and librarians. In Germany, I would like to address particular thanks to Joaquim Peito in Göttingen, and to the staff of the historical office of the VW company in Wolfsburg. Manfred Grieger, who was VW's chief historian at the time of my research, was particularly open to my project and always available for interesting discussions. In the Amazon, my greatest gratitude goes to Jane Silva at the CPT in Belém and Odila Tavares de Andrade at the FINAM archive. I had a very fruitful journey collecting archival material, factual knowledge, and stimulating ideas in Rio de Janeiro thanks to the members of GPTEC, especially Adônia Antunes Prado and Ricardo Rezende Figueira. The latter helped me not only with his enlightening analysis on forced labor, but also in the way he welcomed me in Rio and with the memories he shared about his time in the Araguaia. Several other close witnesses and actors of the history analyzed in this book deserve immense thanks for sharing their personal memories and/or documents with me: Thomas Hax, Lúcio Flávio Pinto, Frei Henri de Roziers, and Julio Rodriguez. Finally, in September 2016, I met the NDR journalist Stefanie Dodt, who has shot a documentary movie about the traces left by VW in the Amazon, and we had discussions about the credibility, value and interpretation of some historical sources, for which I would like to thank her. For the preparation of her film, she gathered new material which I did not have the chance to integrate to my research. I am certain that the final product of her work will bring interesting insights, to put in perspective with the findings exposed in this book.

There are so many names I would like to add to this list, persons who helped with useful advice, a text revision, or some friendly support, who accompanied me on parts of my research trips, offered me a place to stay on these occasions, shared pleasant breaks with me during writing times, or helped me find my way through academic life. Space limits make it impossible to mention them all here and I will make sure to thank them personally for it. There is no doubt that my parents and my brothers deserve warm thanks, because the attraction for the Portuguese-speaking

world that inspired this book surely has to do with the tasty Portuguese meals, funny car trips to Algarve and heady Cape Verdean music that accompanied my childhood. Last, but truly, not least, I am grateful to Antonio, for having helped me with almost everything, and at any time. I hope he enjoys this book.

## Acronyms

This list represents only the acronyms used in at least two sections of the text.

AEA	Associação dos Empresários da Amazônia
AK <sub>3</sub> W	Freiburger Aktion Dritte Welt AND Aktionskreis Dritte Welt Recklinghausen
ARENA	Aliança Renovadora Nacional
BASA	Banco da Amazônia
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union
CONDEL	Conselho Deliberativo da SUDAM
CONTAG	Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores da Agricultura
CPT	Comissão Pastoral da Terra
CVRC	Companhia Vale do Rio Cristalino
DIEESE	Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Sócioeconômicos
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FAZ	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
FBCN	Fundação Brasileira para a Conservação da Natureza
FETAGRI	Federação dos Trabalhadores Rurais
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GPTEC	Grupo de Pesquisa Trabalho Escravo Contemporâneo
IFC	International Finance Corporation
ILA	Informationsstelle Lateinamerika
INCRA	Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária
INPA	Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia
ISI	import-substituting industrialization
MDB	Movimento Democrático Brasileiro

MIRAD	Ministério da Reforma Agrária
MST	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
PMDB	Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro
PT	Partido dos Trabalhadores
SBPC	Sociedade Brasileira pelo Progresso da Ciência
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
STR	Sindicato de Trabalhadores Rurais
SUDAM	Superintendência do Desenvolvimento da Amazônia
VW(B)	Volkswagen (do Brasil)