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'Fulfillment' Review: Those One-Click Woes

Amazon's breakneck expansion has left much social wreckage in its wake. But it wasn't the first retailer to do so, and it won't be the last.



An Amazon fulfillment center in Phoenix.

PHOTO: ROSS D. FRANKLIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Marc Levinson

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Time was when the evil empire was ruled from Bentonville, Ark., where the brick-fronted fortress of Walmart seemed impregnable. By far the world's largest retailer, Walmart stood accused of driving down wages, imposing dire and erratic working schedules, fighting unions, squeezing subsidies out of stretched state and local governments, and destroying healthy communities by planting its soulless superstores on the highway out of town—or, alternatively, by not coming to town at all. As often portrayed in the media, Walmart's hard-nosed business practices enabled it to stretch its tentacles ever farther around the globe, strangling workers and stifling small businesses.

Fast forward a few years, and reprobation of Walmart's sharp tactics has faded. Replacing it in the dock of public opinion is a comparative newcomer, Amazon.

In "Fulfillment: Winning and Losing in One-Click America," Alec MacGillis ably catalogs the many ways in which Amazon's breakneck expansion has left social wreckage in its wake. We meet contingent workers injured in its distribution centers; state and local officials who signed off on sweetheart deals that lured the company to their jurisdictions but brought them little by way of increased tax revenue; and entrepreneurs who sold their wares through Amazon's website only to see Amazon, after capturing their sensitive cost and sales data, offer its own self-branded versions in competition with theirs. The company's vertiginous climb is not the simple tale of virtue suggested by the friendly smile on Amazon's ubiquitous corrugated boxes. Mr. MacGillis, a former staffer at the New Republic who now writes for ProPublica, tells the tale with empathy.

Yet the story of Amazon isn't really the story he wants to tell. Mr. MacGillis's lens is wide, capturing images of a country in which many people's living standards are falling and entire regions are left behind. Amazon, he explains, "was an ideal frame for understanding the country and what the country was becoming, given how many contemporary forces it represented and helped explain."

The trouble is, Amazon is not an ideal frame at all. By sharing with us the heart-rending stories of individuals struggling in the face of economic change, as well as examples of Amazon's alleged abuses, Mr. MacGillis indicts the company for trends that began well before Jeff Bezos's brainchild was born. The author's claim that Amazon has "segmented the country into different sorts of places, each with their assigned rank, income, and purpose," is a bit far-fetched. I'm no great fan of the Seattle-based giant, whose heavy-handed ways have enabled it to dominate important parts of the U.S. economy. But Mr. MacGillis's attack is almost enough to make one cry a tear of sympathy for it.

Let's stipulate: In recent years, U.S. workers with graduate degrees have enjoyed, on average, higher pay; those employed at the federal minimum wage haven't had a pay raise since 2009. Over that same period, homeowners in Syracuse, N.Y., have on average seen the value of their property rise by about 25%, while homes in Silicon Valley appreciated five times as much. Anyone with the wherewithal to purchase an S&P 500 index fund in 2009 and reinvest the dividends has enjoyed a

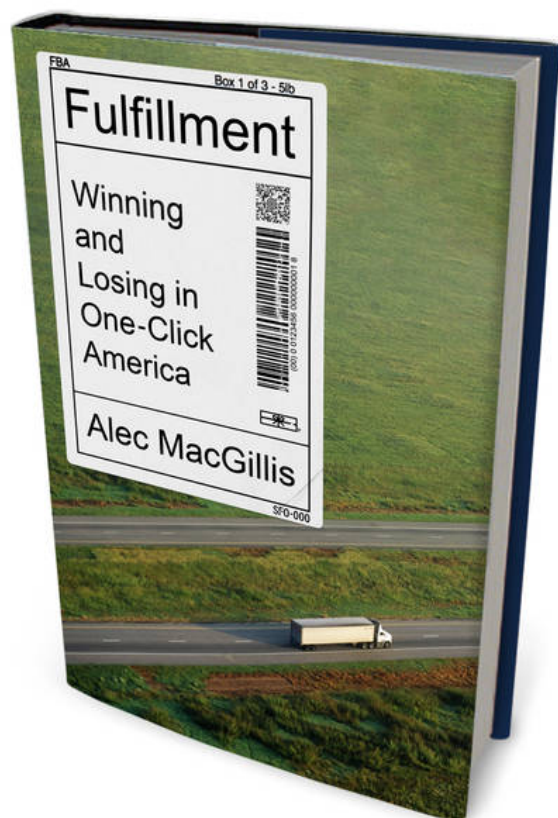


PHOTO: WSJ

FULFILLMENT

By Alec MacGillis

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 384 pages, \$28

gain of roughly 450%, a bonanza the less fortunate could not share.

These unhappy trends, though, predate Amazon. The number of factory production jobs, which allowed many working-class families to own homes and educate their children, peaked back when Jimmy Carter was president. The share of private-sector workers whose working conditions are protected by union contracts has been falling since Dwight Eisenhower's day.

So what are we to make of the story of Bill Bodani, a forklift driver at an Amazon warehouse located on the site of Bethlehem Steel's former Sparrows Point complex in Baltimore? Mr. Bodani, who retired from Bethlehem after an injury in 2002, later took a job at an Amazon fulfillment center that paid a fraction of his steelworker wage, then shifted to the Sparrows Point center when it opened in 2018. After he handed out a pro-union leaflet, according to Mr.

MacGillis, Amazon docked his pay for going to the bathroom, whereupon Mr. Bodani quit. This proves, I suppose, that Amazon warehouses can be unpleasant and poorly remunerated places to work, and that Amazon is as virulently antiunion as Bethlehem Steel was in its prime. But it doesn't explain why workers like Mr. Bodani aren't faring well in the digital economy.

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Or consider Pat Wright, a resident of Seattle's Central District, who turned her love of music into the Total Experience Gospel Choir. As young tech workers, including some who were employed at Amazon's headquarters, flocked to Ms. Wright's once largely black neighborhood, many of her neighbors sold their homes and moved away. After 45 years, Ms. Wright closed down the choir. "She still went to church," Mr. MacGillis reports, "but found fewer and fewer of her friends there." I'm sure the closure represents a loss, but should that be deducted from Amazon's balance sheet?

Walmart, whose online operations were once the object of derision, now seems to be eating away at Amazon's dominance of internet retailing, and several young e-commerce companies, such as Shopify, are helping third-party sellers avoid Amazon's clutches. The one-click world looks less like a monopoly today than it did a few years ago. If competition grows more intense, it may well be that shoppers' perceptions of corporate behavior will matter more as they decide which e-retailer to favor. Walmart, having discovered that low prices aren't the only thing that matters to prospective customers, has devoted considerable attention in recent years to getting on the right side of public opinion. If "Fulfillment" is any indication, Amazon may need to follow suit.

Mr. Levinson's most recent book is "Outside the Box: How Globalization Changed From Moving Stuff to Spreading Ideas."

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