

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Peter Gran. *Beyond Eurocentrism: A New View of Modern World History.* Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1996. xiii + 440 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8156-2693-0; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-2692-3.

Peter Gran. *Beyond Eurocentrism. A New View of Modern World History.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996. xii + 440 pp.

Reviewed by Boris Kagarlitsky (Center for Comparative Politics at the Russian Academy of Sciences)

Published on H-World (June, 2000)



Peter Gran's book, as evidenced by its title, promises to lead us beyond Eurocentric paradigms. Gran sees Western authors consciously or unconsciously universalizing their own experience to others. Contrary to authors insisting on a non-European approach, though, Gran insists there is no unified "Western" approach anyway. He finds the whole notion of Western vs. non-Western vague. Instead, he compares regions whose social and economic development is similar. Thus, Russia is compared with Iraq, Italy with India and Mexico, and Albania with the former Belgian Congo. Finally, he lays waste to the idea that democratic regimes are based on harmony and consensus with his comparison of England and the US.

Indeed, his rejection of hypergeneralizing models appears attractive. In fact, this is exactly the approach Soviet historians followed in their rejection of official dogma on history at the cusp of the USSR's collapse. Yet, comparisons often hobble, and a book built on comparisons hobbles on two square wheels instead of one.

I found Gran's first chapter on Russia puzzling. I suspect this is because he relies only on the scholarship of US "Sovietologists." He carries on polemics with these authors, but again, the range of debate is narrow, like the sources. Some nations are "luckier" than others, as Gran shows great expertise with Iraq in plumbing the depths of Arabic scholarship. Yet, again, other regions, such as Italy, contain no national scholarship of the state under study. Limited use is made of Spanish language

texts on Mexico. India fares well with heavier reliance on the work of Indian historians and sociologists. Granted, Albanian is a bit obscure, but much work on Albania has been done by Italian and Russian scholars, and Gran would have benefited from reading it.

To be fair, few of us can be expected to master this range of languages. Yet, the relevant question is whether it is possible to formulate reasonable comparative theories about Russia, Albania, or Italian history without knowing their literature? This strikes me as being quite Western, and to be more candid, even hinting at the very American self-assurance that Gran himself condemns.

A good rule to follow is the less one's knowledge of original sources, the more careful the historian should be in their judgments. Peter Gran does not heed this caution and it leads to problems. For example, he informs us that foreigners saw Russia as a paradoxical, half-European, half-Asian, etc. (p. 8). Yet, this is false. In fact, the idea that Russia was mysterious and difficult to understand came from Russia itself and not Europe. Eighteenth century French educators in Russia reported nothing odd about it. But, by the same token, it was Russians themselves who stated that Russian institutions, such as serfdom, were problematic. Russian philosophers as early as the time of prince Kurbski in the 16th century commented on this problem. Westernizers in Russia condemned this peculiar institution. Slavophiles, by contrast, held it to be a source of Russian strength. And, this is another problem with this chapter on Russia in a book

discussing Eurocentrism, why ignore this central theme to understanding Russian history, the ongoing conflict between Westernizers and Slavophiles?

Also, he has a weak understanding of Russian philosophers. One philosopher he does focus on, in detail, is M. Pkrovski. Yet, he mischaracterizes him as part of the liberal tradition of world history, instead of understanding that instead he was Russia's early world-systems theorist. I also found problematic his focus on Roy Medvedev's *Let History Be The Judge* to highlight historian dissidents in Russia. Medvedev is not a world historian, and his book is merely a collection of accounts about the Stalinist terror. Yet, it is readily available in English. Better works putting this topic in world historical context, such as Mihail Gefter's, are ignored. Again, rather than thorough knowledge of his subject, I sense that simple availability of sources seems to have guided his research, and thus conclusions, on Russia.

Use of terms also presents problems. For example, Gran uses caste in relation to Russia. In one sense, the term is used metaphorically in the Russian context, but then again more directly in reference to India. Certainly, the meaning of any term can be widened beyond its strict definition, but here we risk having words lose all meaning in their overly broad application. For example, to refer to the Soviet nomenklatura as a caste ignores that caste is based on closed groups. The basis of nomenclature, by contrast, is openness. Dostoevsky described Russia's gentry as democratic because it constantly replenished its numbers out from the masses. Indeed, it possessed a surprisingly significant vertical mobility for a still half-feudal society. In fact, this was one of the very causes of the 1905 and 1917 social explosions. A consequence of those revolutions was even greater social mobility. The nomenclature was first of all an open estate. If one accepted the rules, regardless of how odious, one could join their ranks. He then speaks of the Soviet nomenclature as a new class. But, even here, to borrow from Issac Deutscher, this "caste" was constantly being washed away from the bottom, lacking the stable class culture and ethics of caste. In other words we see the direct opposite of a caste structure.

Ironically, it was this very Soviet social mobility which led to the nomenklatura wanting to become a fixed class. As economic stagnation set in during the late Soviet period, Soviet elites looked less favorably on ever new numbers joining them from below. They aspired to become a genuine ruling class whose privileges would be defended by the right of property and law. This was

the most important element in the Soviet revolution from above in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

His reasoning about the USSR's collapse is further problematic in its focus on ethnicity. He sees it causing the Soviet fall when ethnic groups became grounded in their original ethnic domains, thus developing their own interests. Yet, the participation of non-Russians in the Soviet nomenklatura peaked early rather than late. Moreover, different ethnic groups were kept in rotation, e.g., the Georgian "mafia" in Moscow, Ukrainians in Moldova, etc. Yet, it was a striving to escape this situation and secure privileges which led to the "policy of cadre stabilization" by 1964, in which ethnic groups stopped moving and secured control over specific territories resulting in the rise of local elites. I have focused on Russia, and could reveal further problems with this case, but I believe he displays similar weaknesses in other areas too.

Gran replaces conventional units, such as Europe, the Muslim world, Latin America, etc., and instead focuses on "roads." Yet, no one explanation or consistent criteria are given for what a "road" is. Indeed, the criteria seem to change from example to example. When characterizing the Russian road he uses terms such as: hierarchic culture and political centralization, universal compulsory military service, non-tribal state, etc. Why not speak then about (with some qualifications) German or Prussian roads?

Trying to show the similarity between Russian and Iraqi history, he breaks with the conventional periodizations of 1905 and 1917. Moreover, he condemns historians for losing sight of the masses. Yet, it is precisely these conventional periodizations which reveal when the mass has helped move history. By focusing on the tragedy of collectivization from 1929-32, he instead shows more when the mass has been acted upon, rather than when it has acted itself. On Russia, I also would have liked to see a look at the Brezhnev conservative period. Without inspecting this era the Soviet crash in the 1980s can hardly be understood.

Comparing Iraq to Russia would seem attractive since the 1960s Iraqi elite consciously oriented itself toward Soviet development. Yet, this does not mean that the twentieth century saw Iraq following the Russian road throughout this whole period. What is more, why not compare the Congo to Russia and Iraq? Similar features are visible among all three (e.g., "the tribal way"), not to mention Albania, thus making a fourth.

Regarding India and Mexico, I do not think they have

followed the Italian road, at least not consciously. If any road has directly influenced these states, it would be England, the USSR; and with Mexico specifically, France and the US. And here too, Albania shows a similar path to Italy. In sum, I wonder how much these “connections” are consciously chosen between these are “roads,” or are merely coincidences. Methodologically, and in terms of explanatory power of this model, the answer will determine the value of this “road” approach. In sum, the comparisons strike me as too arbitrary.

Regarding the Italian road, there seems only one criterion offered to define it: the rich north/poor south divide. Just as compelling as comparing Mexico to Italy would be to compare Mexico to the USSR. Within Mexico City are located Mexico’s cultural, mono-political power structure, corporatism, and revolutionary traditions; similar to Moscow. In Latin America it might be more sensible to compare Brazil to Italy with its dualism of the rich white south, and the poor black north. It too has a tradition of corrupt democracy, penetrated by authoritarianism, but also strong independent trade unions on the left. Also, Gran states that the Italian case is typified by economic self-sufficiency and expansion for se-

curity reasons. Is this not too like the USSR?

This book borrows heavily from Antonio Gramsci. He is mistakenly referred to as the founder of the Italian Communist Party (in fact this was N. Bordiga). “Hegemony” has been fully employed in English language sources since the 1970s and 1980s. This is fine, but we are left wanting for a definition that concretely states how a ruling class supports its position. Left unanswered is the difference between dictatorship and democracy.

The book claims to take us beyond Eurocentrism, but it ends up being just that as analogies for every European phenomenon are sought outside of Europe. This strikes me as too mechanical an exercise to reveal commonality among all parts of the world. While this book’s subtitle is *A New View of Modern World History*, what this book needs more of is precisely world history grounded in hard evidence.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-world>

Citation: Boris Kagarlitsky. Review of Gran, Peter, *Beyond Eurocentrism: A New View of Modern World History* and Peter Gran, *Beyond Eurocentrism. A New View of Modern World History*. H-World, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4181>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.