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Peter Gran,

The Rise of the Rich: A New View of Modern World History, Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, 2008; 269 pp.: ISBN 9780815631712, US\$20.00 (hbk)

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Peter Gran (1941–), professor of history at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, begins his book by observing that, in today's world, we can no longer talk of a 'rising West'. Until that point, most readers would readily agree with him. All evidence and figures point to a relative decline of the West versus the other civilizations since the 1970s. Demographically, economically, militarily, scientifically, the West has slowed down its rhythm of growth. At the same time, the Rest, or better formulated, some parts of the Rest, have accelerated their catching up. As a consequence, the gap between the West and the Rest has narrowed. In some sectors, like computer and mobile phone LCD screen technology, tanker shipbuilding and high speed magnetic trains (to name a few), the West has even been overshot. Eastern Asia has undoubtedly been at the forefront of this catching up for decades.

Peter Gran then contends that 'the rise of the West', has been, so far, the leading paradigm of modern history. This expression, it should be remembered, stems from William McNeill's famous 1963 book title. With its most Eurocentric title, *The Rise of the West*, McNeill's book was in fact the first really non-Eurocentric world history book. It was arguably the founding work of the 'World History' school, that stream of historians pretending that development differences between civilizations have always been minor.

At this stage, some readers may disagree and put forth that the leading paradigms in historiography have been Marxist (the rise of the oppressed classes towards a classless paradise), or the rise of science and knowledge (leading humankind from barbarism towards a superior quality of life), or globalization (the rise of an ever more interconnected world and market).

Gran assumes 'the rise of the West' to have been the leading paradigm so far, and aims to replace it with another general pattern more suitable to today's world. Gran could have suggested 'The rise of the East'. Or, he could have put forward 'The decline of the West'

(even though this expression was already used as title of another famous book by Oswald Spengler). Instead, Gran comes up with *The Rise of the Rich*. Indeed, the defining feature of our time, according to him, should be seen to be the super-rich success story.

Gran conjures up the familiar picture of the relentlessly rising US and UK upper classes, gobbling up a growing share of national wealth, and enjoying ever giddier standards of living, in the process driving the middle class into misery and oblivion. In Gran's vision, the victorious upper class is led by the 'New Men', the greediest, most amoral and lawless capitalists. This new world is characterized by 'multilateralism', i.e. governments actively networking among themselves, instead of taking care of their citizens. These new governments set up a general multilateral network of treaties spanning the globe in order to consolidate their power. Due to this multilateralism, a growing share of the wealth produced in the West is channelled to other countries to sustain their own upper classes.

At this point, many readers may still follow Gran, as this is obviously the direction the United States and the UK have been headed for over the last four decades. The relative decline of the West since the 1970s has indisputably been accompanied by a growing chasm between the rich and the poor in most Western countries, foremost in the United States and UK. And this has been simultaneous with a rise of multilateral institutions and accords, like the UN and the GATT/WTO. Eastern Asia has really grown rich, although this is mostly due to real industrial development, rather than to a redistribution of US wealth, unlike what happens with aid-dependent Third World countries.

At this stage, it would be easy to argue that the impoverished underclass of the West is going to slowly align its standards of living with those of the underclass in Third World countries, so that the world would end up with a single globe-spanning and dominating upper class, and a single underclass worldwide, confirming Gran's global 'rise of the Rich' paradigm.

However, many readers may no longer follow Gran at the next stage of his thought process, when he tries to extend his new paradigm into the timeframe before 1970, into the history of the modern and early modern world. Gran would like us to believe that the world has always witnessed the rise of the Rich, and never the rise of the West. This might be viewed as 'presentism', i.e. an error of judgement consisting in seeing all past periods as resembling the present one.

To achieve his goal, Gran proceeds to torture the facts to force the whole of history to fit into his new paradigm. That fails miserably, like when he forgets that the Albanian ruler of Egypt, Mehmet Ali Pasha, was really vanquished by the British troops in 1841, and that this was the cause for the breakdown of his brilliant modernization and industrialization of his state – as opposed to his 'multilateralist' mindset. As it turned out, there really was a rise of the West for most of the second millennium, just as there was a decline of the West for most of the first millennium.

This failure apart, the book suffers several logical errors or self-contradictions. For example, Gran loudly and repeatedly advocates that Eurocentrism should be abandoned (because the West should no longer be seen as 'rising' centre of things) – but he only focuses on the UK and the United States in his book. He barely devotes more than a few pages to non-Western countries, and only to discuss their relations to the Western

powers. Although calling for an end of Eurocentrism, Gran has written a very Eurocentric book.

In the same vein, Gran calls the most adventurous, lawless and amoral plunderers and pirates 'the New Men', as if this type of persons was new at all.

More disturbing, Gran really seems to believe that all capitalists, particularly those behind the primitive accumulation of capital from early modern times until now, have been bandits and plunderers. In a really archeo-Marxist view of the wicked capitalists and all-property-is-theft fashion, Gran seems to ignore completely the intrinsic benefits of trade for extending markets and therefore for growth, and the central importance of product innovation and technological progress in economic growth. Whereas plundering is a zero-sum game for humankind as a whole, technical advances, innovations, trading network expansions do create value, i.e. they increase the world GDP, and Gran should know that. Furthermore, plundering has existed always and everywhere, therefore it cannot be the driving factor specifically explaining the long-term growth that took place in Western Europe during the second millennium.

Likewise, Gran does not see that the presence of Korean lobbyists in Washington in the 1960s and 1970s is not proof per se that these lobbyists were the main cause for the collapse of US trade barriers against South Korea. If it were so simple! We should much better invoke the desire of the US government to strengthen a politically important ally at the forefront of the battle against the Communist empire. The lobbyists certainly facilitated these evolutions, but they alone could not cause it.

On the whole, the book remains purely qualitative, focusing on ideologies, comparing them and their evolution, discussing political decisions, in a literary manner. The narrative is almost entirely devoid of numbers. It tells stories, people's stories, ideologies stories. The lack of numbers makes it easy reading, but is disappointing for a book of economic history with such an ambitious scope.

Nonetheless, or thanks to this, the book quotes interesting descriptions of the middle-class decay in the metallurgical industry areas around Pittsburgh in the 1980s, and other interesting case studies. It provides interesting, albeit not so convincing, attempts to consider the Israel/Palestine conflict along new perspectives, or to put the terrorist network Al-Qaeda on the same footing as a money-laundering corrupt bank with links to senior US politicians.

We may wish for Peter Gran, in his next book, if he wishes us to subscribe to his new paradigms, to focus entirely on the era after 1970. He should reinforce the quantitative side. He should add many more emotionally appealing stories like the ones from Pittsburgh. This way, his next book will more likely seduce the academics with substance, and the (global) masses with emotional appeal. Last, but not least, Gran should rebalance the narrative in favour of India, China, Japan, Korea, Brazil, Mexico, etc. in order to live up by his own call to waive Eurocentrism.

Author biography

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