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Book Review: Leonid Grinin. *Macrohistory and Globalization*

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**Leonid Grinin. *Macrohistory and Globalization.*
Russia: Uchitel Publishing House, 2012**

Reviewed by Stephen T. Satkiewicz

The Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin is once quoted as saying, “*There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen.*” There should be a parallel statement about how some books state extraordinarily little in multiple pages, but others speak volumes in mere sentences. A good example of the latter would be *Macrohistory and Globalization* by another Russian: Leonid Grinin.

Leonid Grinin is Senior Research Professor at the Institute for Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow as well as Deputy Director of the Eurasian Center for Big History & System Forecasting. He is also Editor-in-Chief of *Social Evolution & History* and *the Journal of Globalization Studies*. He is a principal representative of the Russian school of Big History alongside Andrey Korotayev, Dmitri Bondarenko, and the late Akop P. Nazaretyan.

Big History is an emerging field founded by David Christian and “*seeks to understand the integrated history of the Cosmos, Earth, Life, and Humanity, using the best available empirical evidence and scholarly methods.*”¹ The research of the Russian school of Big History tends to focus on long-term social evolutionary processes studied through advanced mathematical modelling. Its research tends to overlap more with the emerging field of Complex Systems Theory and Analysis. The influence of Anthropology is also heavily present in the field, more specifically the works of C.R. Hallpike and the late Robert L. Carneiro (1927-2020).²

Perhaps the most distinguishing mark of Grinin’s scholarship in the field is his greater focus on more deeply theoretical and philosophical issues. These disciplinary issues are necessary in order to properly understand Grinin’s arguments in the book.

The book is divided into two main parts. Part One seeks to examine the theoretical foundations for Macrohistory as well as to analyze particularly important themes of the field, namely the rise and evolution of the state and political societies. Grinin at the beginning defines *Macrohistory* as “*history on the large scale, sometimes telling the story of whole civilizations, sometimes of the entire world, but sometimes of particular dimensions of historical process.*” (p. 5)

¹ “What is Big History?” at <https://bighistory.org/whatisbighistory/> Accessed 12/6/2020.

² A more sufficient introduction to the field is “Biological and Social Phases of Big History: Similarities and Differences of Evolutionary Principles and Mechanisms” by Leonid Grinin, Andrey Korotayev, and Alexander V. Markov at https://www.sociostudies.org/almanac/articles/biological_and_social_phases_of_big_history_similarities_and_diversities_of_evolution_principles_an/ Accessed 11/22/2020.

It is in this section that Grinin makes his only explicit references to *civilizations* as a concept on page 19, in the context of distinguishing it from other related concepts such as “*World system*” or his preferred one of “*Humankind*.” Grinin states that he does not negate the concept of civilizations, but only notes its limited use in the context of this particular study. Nevertheless, the author does make some important theoretical points to consider about the vast array of various levels of analysis on how different paradigms are better suited for certain contexts than others. Grinin’s elaboration on the distinction between *historical processes* and *periodization* is one example of this being potentially helpful to civilization studies.

In the second chapter of the book, Grinin tackles the persistent issue of “*the Role of an Individual in History*” or in more technical terms the structure versus agency debate. In a mere twelve pages (pp. 47-59), Grinin provides the reader with a brief history of the philosophical debates on this all the way from Antiquity to the modern period. The next chapter deals with “*the Evolution of Statehood*,” which is where Grinin outlines his theory of “*politogenesis*” concerning the rise, evolution, and fall of states, empires, and civilizations. This is perhaps the more familiar territory for comparative civilizational scholars. Grinin, as is his great strength as a scholar, does not resort to any simplistic models but rather does well to engage and introduce the reader to a vast array of academic debates from the rise of complex chiefdoms (a field pioneered by Robert L. Carneiro mentioned earlier) to even outlining his own “*typology of early states*” that almost seems like an indirect homage to the kinds mentioned by Plato and Aristotle in their political treatises.

Part Two of the book delves into the various issues surrounding the social phenomenon of Globalization, namely its economic and political aspects. Grinin provides a working definition of Globalization as “*a process as a result of which the world becomes more connected and more dependent on all its subjects.*” (p. 214) The main principal aspect of this process is the reduction of sovereignty for individual nation-states, a point that Grinin expands upon to considerable lengths in the book (including yet another brief history of the concept of sovereignty). Of course, Grinin does not dismiss the state as completely irrelevant or obsolete, but rather its role will be transformed in light of the recent processes of global inter-connectedness. There is also the tricky issue of nationalism, which has seen a resurgence within the last decade or so, which Grinin argues is the other main result of Globalization besides growing inter-connectedness and reduced sovereignty of the state. This is not a paradox to Grinin, who insists “*nationalism is gaining strength because states are weakening as systems.*” (p. 224) In light of recent events following the publication of the book (from Brexit, the 2016 American Presidential election, and the current issue of vaccine nationalism dealing with the on-going pandemic), it is an argument that should be taken seriously.

So overall, Grinin’s book is very much a tour de force that seeks to cover many topics in one mere book that would normally occupy several volumes.

Thankfully, any intimidated reader can rest assured that Grinin does provide a sufficient summarization of these issues as well as proper references for further in-depth analysis of the scholarly fields involved, which stretches up to fifty-six pages at the end of the book (pp. 259-315). However, the paradox maybe that Grinin's achievement is also its greatest weakness: on the one hand it tackles so many complex topics at once, often to varying levels of depth that can be both overwhelming for those not familiar with the subjects at hand or underwhelming for those who are. Perhaps it is best used as an intermediate level text: best for those who are somewhat familiar with the issues and texts addressed.

Perhaps a few comments are needed concerning the wider issue of the field of Big History. As noted, this book is written within the context of the field and as such follows the methodologies based around more natural sciences and advanced mathematical modelling. This is quite a contrast to the more traditional humanities and social scientific-based methodologies used for historical as well as comparative civilizational analysis. This is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the whole field, and it is not an easy issue to resolve in a few comments.

While the merit of its methodologies can and should certainly be debated, the great merit of the Russian School of Big History is that it helps demonstrate that new areas of research related to comparative civilizational analysis are emerging outside the traditional fields. It should also be noted that the Russian School does distinguish itself from more crude forms of social evolutionary theories that literally seek to explain societies through biological evolution (famous examples like Richard Dawkins) by marking both significant similarities and differences between social and biological evolutionary processes. It may be wise to at least be cautiously open to engagement with these emerging fields, even if from a more critical standpoint.³ Perhaps a good place to start for those scholars interested is *Macrohistory and Globalization* by Leonid Grinin.

³ IS CSC member Vlad Alalykin-Izvekov makes his own comments on Big History in "Letter from Germany and Russia," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: No. 78 , Spring 2018, Pages 56-59.

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