On “moral equivalence” . . .

On left-leaning scholarship in journals.

The American Historical Review is widely considered the preeminent English-language journal for the discipline of history. The journal, a publication of the American Historical Association, is also conspicuously a captive of the left-wing bias that has permeated the teaching of history in Western universities. The American Historical Review is to the discipline of history what the Publications of the Modern Language Association is to literary studies: a repository of trendy, left-leaning, anti-American attitudes.

Of course there are exceptions: even the PMLA occasionally publishes something without obvious parti pris. But no reasonable observer can miss the bias. Thus it is business as usual that the lead article in the current number of the AHR (February 2001) is by the Marxist Eric Foner, this year’s president of the American Historical Association. Entitled “American Freedom in a Global Age,” the essay argues that really, when you come right down to it, American freedom is tantamount to a lack of freedom. “‘Freedom,’” Professor Foner argues—note the scare quotes—“continues to occupy as central a place as ever in our political vocabulary, but it has been largely appropriated by libertarians and conservatives of one kind or another, from advocates of unimpeded market economics to armed militia groups insisting that the right to bear arms is the centerpiece of American liberty.” Really? What about the freedom to publish presidential addresses for prominent academic organizations while safely perched in the comforting bower of academic tenure? Professor Foner omits dilating on that freedom, possibly because it would spoil his fantasy about America the Enemy.

Nor is Professor Foner’s contribution the only evidence of doctrinaire academic leftism in the AHR. Far from it. This number also includes, inter alia, an attack on the United Fruit Company’s operations in Central America and praise for a book that “contributes to the history of sexuality . . . by standing outside the normative status of heterosexuality and examining its construction as an ideal and a practice.” A teaspoon of Marx, half-a-cup of Foucault. It is, as we say, only business as usual in the contemporary academy.
ut with one article, the *AHR* really outdid itself. That is “Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana Are Nearly the Same Place.” The title says it all. Written by Kate Brown, an assistant professor at the University of Maryland, the essay argues that Karaganda, a labor camp in the former Soviet Union, and Billings, Montana, are morally similar because both were laid out on a grid, and “can serve as an apparatus for conquest, as a way to dominate space.” It sounds preposterous. It is preposterous. But it is also indicative of what passes for serious scholarship in the discipline of history today.

Professor Brown is canny about testing the credulity of her readers. She acclimatizes them gradually to absurdity. Thus she begins by frankly allowing that in one case we are dealing with a prison camp while in the other we are dealing with a pioneer city. “People were deported to Karaganda against their will. . . . [I]n the American Plains . . . they bought their own train tickets. Is that difference of free will essential?” Well, yes, you might say, if *that* is not essential, nothing is. But the burden of Professor Brown’s long essay is to dissolve that difference—the difference between servitude and freedom—in a solvent of abstraction about the enslavements perpetrated by certain forms of city planning. If only, she says, we can get beyond the parochial, Cold-War idea that there is some crucial difference between Communism and capitalism, between democracy and totalitarianism, we will see that “the history of cities in Montana and Kazakhstan . . . tell not two stories but one—the history of gridded space.” Actually, Professor Brown does believe that there are some important differences between the two. For although she equates “the American booster press and Soviet propaganda,” it turns out that “the grief for what has been paved over . . . is a sign that in the United States, more than in the former Soviet Union, the destruction that accompanies a successfully expanding modernity has been far more complete.” In other words, things might have been bad in a Soviet labor camp, but not nearly as bad as they were in the Wild West.

We suspect that Professor Brown’s article will garner a lot of sympathetic attention from her colleagues. It is exactly the sort of work that is thought “brilliant” by the powers that be in the contemporary academy. The thesis is ridiculous; the arguments are tendentious; but the political position is irresistible. “Gridded Space” belongs firmly to the hoary genre that argues for a moral equivalence between the United States and totalitarian powers. It works like this: yes, of course, people in the Soviet camps “starved, froze, and worked until they dropped from exhaustion.” But then we mustn’t forget that “on the Great Plains people also starved, froze, and worked until they dropped from exhaustion.” Besides, Professor Brown argues, if America and the former Soviet Union really “mirror” each other, then they represent “just the same form reflected backward.” Note the argument: because the societies are completely different, they are really very similar if not, at bottom, the same. “In short,” Professor Brown writes, “by straining away the mountains of verbiage encircling the Cold War, we may find the Soviet Union and the United States share a great deal in common.”
In fact, anyone not blinded by ideology would see immediately that what we are talking about here is not *verbiage* but moral and political realities of the first order. “Straining away” the fundamental distinction between liberal democracy in the United States and Communist tyranny in the former Soviet Union does not reveal any essential identity between the two societies; on the contrary, it reveals the intellectual and moral frivolousness of the comparison.

The question remains, how do such implausible arguments win converts? Part of the answer has to do with the moral magnetism of abstract virtue. This has been an aid to credulousness at least since Jean-Jacques Rousseau confused the emotion of virtue with its reality. Jeane Kirkpatrick touched on the essential mechanics of its operation in a 1986 lecture called “The Myth of Moral Equivalence.” “Marxism,” she wrote,

> incorporates . . . the values of liberal democracy in its assault on liberal democracy and this is precisely why it entraps so many Western intellectuals who are themselves serious liberal democrats. Thus the slightest restriction on, let’s say, the presumption of innocence of the accused is said to demonstrate the absence of the rule of law. The slightest failure of an electoral system demonstrates contempt for political equality. Any use of force in international affairs establishes the lawless character of the society. Now, it is a short step from having demonstrated that a country like the United States is not a law-abiding society to demonstrating that it is lost and that it is like any other lawless society. The Soviets can always claim “We are no worse than you. Even if we are a lawless society, you too are a lawless society, we are no worse than you.” This is the “logic” of the doctrine of moral equivalence. If practices are measured by abstract, absolute standards, practices are always found wanting. The communists who criticize liberal democratic societies measure our practices by our standards and deny the relevance of their practices to judgments concerning the moral worth of our own society.

Articles like “Gridded Space” illustrate an academic variation of this procedure. An invented abstraction—“gridded space”—is proposed as a golden explanatory key before which all other distinctions, no matter how pertinent, must give way. The result is the creation of a never-never land in which genuine moral and political achievements—real, and therefore limited and imperfect—are sacrificed for the sake of imagined equivalence and unities. It is a mug’s game, but one that has swept Western academic life virtually without resistance.

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