

Vera Tolz

Response to Alexander Etkind's review of Marina Mogilner's *Homo imperii: Istoriia fizicheskoi antropologii v Rossii*.

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Aleksander Etkind's review of Marina Mogilner's book raises a broader issue about how histories of ideas and particularly histories of scientific and scholarly theories are and should be written. Etkind depicts what he believes is the dominant and the only productive approach to writing a history of scholarly thought. He then critically assesses Mogilner's work against his own construct. In my comments I will first question Etkind's perception of the current state of the historiography of scientific thought and then will try to show how it leads to a misrepresentation of what Mogilner has tried to do.

Etkind criticises Mogilner for failing to put the discussion of the history of physical anthropology in late imperial Russia into a broader context of the impact racial theories had on politics, particularly in the twentieth century. Etkind admits that this impact was most striking during the times postdating Mogilner's study, which focuses on the period between the 1860s and 1914. He argues, however, that in the history of science and scholarship, in contrast to social history, the teleological approach is a standard feature and that a historian of scholarly ideas has no tools of assessing his/her subject other than by judging the views of scholars of the past from our contemporary standpoint. By extrapolating an approach practiced by social historians onto a study of the history of scientific thought, Mogilner, in Etkind's view, deprived herself of the main tool with which to evaluate her sources.

I find it difficult to agree with Etkind's assessment of the current state of the historiography of scholarly thought and his representation of its tasks. A trend towards assessing the works of scholars of the past from our contemporary, politicised and at times moralising standpoints has been a dominant feature of post-colonial studies in whose paradigm Etkind himself has been working. The features of this particular paradigm should not be presented as a model of how thinkers of the past should be studied. To a large extent the relentless teleology of post-colonial scholarship is due to the fact that many dominant figures in this broad and diverse field came from such disciplines as comparative literature or cultural theory and they began to evaluate historical sources and ask questions pertaining to history with methodological and analytical tools often very different from those used by trained historians. The reading of literary works from a contemporary standpoint has been for a long time a legitimate way of dealing with sources among literary scholars. Most historians would find this approach problematic.

'Outsiders' often can offer a fresh look at the material, and their perspective can be stimulating and thought provoking. Post-colonial scholarship, initially led by literary and cultural studies specialists, undoubtedly made an important contribution to questioning various prejudices and stereotypes in the existing scholarly traditions. Yet, at times post-colonial scholars' attempts to answer historical questions with the tools of literary and cultural studies have led to misunderstanding, simplification and even caricaturing of the material which they have critiqued.

Unsurprisingly, a counter-trend has emerged and is gathering strength, with current leading historians of science arguing for the need to redress the balance and to return to the evaluation of the works by past thinkers more strictly within the political, cultural and social contexts in which they were produced, deliberately avoiding teleological interpretations. As a recent example of this attempt to avoid teleology in the history of scholarship one can refer to Suzanne Marchand's book *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire* (2009), which has been quickly accepted as a seminal work and by far the best available analysis of the subject. Like Mogilner, Marchand refuses to interpret a quest for the 'Aryan heritage' among nineteenth-century German Orientologists through the perspective of its later appropriation by Nazi ideologists. So, Mogilner's approach is not some oversight or an inappropriate utilisation of a method which is not applicable to the field of her study. Instead, she has consciously chosen the standard method of a trained historian. The validity of her work could be best assessed by judging what she tried to do, rather than by criticising her for what she very consciously avoided doing.

It seems to me that Etkind's claim that Mogilner, to a large extent, fails to consider the relationship between 'history, politics and science' is unfair. She indeed does not consider the relationship of the ideas she discusses with the politics of future epochs, yet her book is, in fact, very interested in the political and cultural settings of the late imperial period in which Russian anthropologists developed their ideas. Numerous individual case studies in her book are aimed precisely at showing how the specificities of Russia's imperial and national contexts shaped the positions of Russian scientists. Her book makes an important contribution to broader debates about the role of modern science in the construction of imperial, national and transnational discourses and about the mechanisms of the production of modern scientific knowledge. Most importantly, it offers the most systematic challenge to date of a wide-spread perception that racial ideas were marginal to the Russian intellectual tradition. Her book also challenges some standard assumptions about the pre-modern nature of the Russian empire at the turn of the twentieth century and, by showing the originality of some of the ideas of Russian anthropologies, questions a wide-spread view that the intellectual interaction between Russia and 'the West' was largely unidirectional. It makes perfect sense to limit a single study of Russian physical anthropology to the period chosen by Mogilner. The time between the Great Reforms and the First World War was a period which witnessed unprecedented growth of knowledge about human diversity across Europe, as well as major political shifts in Russia.

Of course, in any work one can question specific interpretations of sources. My own, much more limited than Mogilner's, forthcoming study of the history of racial

theories in Russia makes me think that Mogilner's book somewhat downplays the overt political implications of some works of liberal Moscow anthropologists. Mogilner's book indeed does not say much about the direct relationship between the ideas of the scientists she studies and actual policy-making in imperial Russia. This is because, in Mogilner's view, scientific racial theories did not exercise such a direct impact on politics in Russia as was the case in the USA and Western Europe. Mogilner admits that the relationship between science and policy-making in Russia requires further study. New research in this much understudied area might challenge the existing dominant view on the issue, to which Mogilner subscribes. But so far we do not have such studies. Etkind's passing statement that racial ideas were at the core of Russian imperial policies and his argument that the context in which imperial Russian anthropologists worked was far more racist than was the case with their German counterparts do not find support in the existing scholarship, and he does not offer any evidence for his observations.

In sum, if we assess Mogilner's book on the basis of the tasks she set for herself, as, it seems to me, should be the case in the assessment of academic work, in many ways it is a model study of the history of ideas, based on a close reading and a careful, well contextualised interpretation of an exceptionally broad range of primary sources.

I would like to end my comments by highlighting one important point in Etkind's review, which deserves further consideration. He posits that certain ideas have had such horrific consequences that, even if those were unintended, any analysis of such ideas which is other than teleological is virtually impossible and cannot be useful. So, broadly speaking, in certain instances a historian simply has to become a politically engaged judge. If we accept Etkind's premise, the study of racial theories certainly is a prime instance where historians should put aside any attempt at detachment and impartiality. I think this argument by Etkind, which can be extended to the discussion of any historical issue relating to human losses on a very large scale, has to be taken seriously and deserves to be debated. My inclination to disagree with Etkind's position on this point is based on my view of the current state of the broader study of the history of Russia, which, of course, often has to deal with both ideas and actions directly leading to atrocities of various kinds. The best recent studies of the Stalin period tend to differ from their Cold War predecessors by their conscious avoidance of grand narratives and moralising critique. Instead, on the basis of painstaking work with primary sources, and by focusing on the motivations behind various positions and activities of Soviet actors, these studies have told us a great deal of what we had not known before about the functioning of the Soviet system. In these best works, their avoidance of teleological interpretations does not lead to the whitewashing of the Soviet regime, but, without being necessarily explicit on the issue, they help us learn important lessons from the tragic events of the past.

REFERENCES

Marchand, Susanne L. 2009. *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.