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Review/Reseña

Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

The Road to Baghdad Passed Through El Salvador

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The United States has a rather woeful record of leftist, public intellectuals. Perhaps, as Richard Hofstadter argued in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), our democratic culture reactively attacks intellectual discourse in the name of anti-elitism. Or perhaps, as others might argue, it is part of a larger corporate conspiracy to keep critical discourse out of the public realm. In any event, one needs only a few fingers to count the number of contemporary academic figures (or those with academic credentials, if we consider Thomas Frank) who have succeeded in making a mark

on public debate in recent years. Add to this list one of Latin Americanists' own, Greg Grandin, whose newspaper editorials have appeared of late in places such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. With his most recent book, *Empire's Workshop*, Grandin takes a more definitive foray into his new role as public intellectual. Arguing that "the road to Iraq passes through Latin America" (163), *Empire's Workshop* maps out a trajectory of U.S. policies in Latin America over the past century, establishing a direct link between U.S.-sponsored regime change and repression in the hemisphere with Bush's "global war on terror." Written in a fluid, interpretative style that quickly draws in the reader, Grandin presents an historical argument vast in scope, rich in illustration, and sobering in its assessment of what he calls "the inescapable violence of empire" (8).

The analytical core of *Empire's Workshop* rests on the notion that Latin America has served as a "workshop" for the development and projection of a global foreign policy of empire by the United States. This is different from the more familiar argument of sphere of influence dominance, whereby U.S.-Latin America relations have helped leverage U.S. power internationally via access to economic resources, military bases, and the canal. Grandin takes this traditional position a step further by underscoring the ways in which U.S. policies in Latin America, since the late nineteenth century, were molded by a learning curve of hegemony. A key element of this learning curve was the discovery, epitomized by the Good Neighbor Policy, that a proper mixture of "hard power" (military intervention) and "soft power" (cultural diplomacy) generated a more productive strategy of strategic dominance than hard power alone. Whereas other historians have examined the Good Neighbor Policy in strictly hemispheric terms, Grandin argues that it "generated the model for the post-war alliance system, a system that allowed Washington to delegate responsibility for extraterritorial administration to allies

while accruing for itself considerable economic, political, and military leverage” (50). In effect, Grandin argues, the experience with revolutionary nationalism in Latin America during the early part of the twentieth century “taught Washington policy makers that American power did, in fact, have limits” (51). Such experiences directly contributed to the formulation of a more nuanced multilateral approach to the projection of U.S. power globally after World War II.

Moreover, because of America’s strategic dominance in Latin America after 1945, the costs to the United States of using Latin America as a “workshop for empire” became very low. President Nixon succinctly summed up these costs in this way: “People don’t give one shit” (2) about what happens in the region. Thus when the Cuban revolution once more, as in the 1920s, presented the United States with the challenge of confronting a newly assertive nationalism, Latin America became a “counterinsurgent laboratory” (48) for the development of policy approaches subsequently applied elsewhere. “Throughout the 1960s,” Grandin writes, “Latin America and Southeast Asia functioned as the two primary campuses for counterinsurgents with men such as [General William] Yarborough [who advised the Colombian government on paramilitary approaches to containing insurgency] traveling back and forth between the two regions applying insights and fine-tuning tactics” (98). The relatively low costs (in military and economic terms) to the United States were, of course, indirectly proportionate to the extremely high costs paid by activists, intellectuals, peasants, workers and others throughout Latin America. Still, while the democratic, progressive left lost out nearly everywhere in Latin America, a counter-movement in solidarity took root in the United States. This movement became “a permanent antimilitarist opposition, never a majority but, until recently, heavy enough to provide a counterweight to the kind of soaring rhetoric that justified the early Cold War” (62).

The premise of low costs leads Grandin to develop a second assertion, that Central America in the 1980s became the “proving ground” (73) for the rejuvenation of a shattered sense of American virility and internationalist purpose in the aftermath of Vietnam. Paradoxically, the region’s “unimportance made it critically important” (152): Reagan’s decision to take the fight to the revolutionary movements in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala served as a rallying cry that marshaled an alliance of neoconservative intellectuals, Christian evangelicals, and a gung-ho “legion of mercenaries” (143), the latter remnants of the struggle in Vietnam. What ensued was a strategy propelled by a “punitive idealism” (78) that harkened back to earlier assertions of self-righteousness in the region. This “ethics of absolutism” (154), in which “faith in America’s mission justified atrocities in the name of liberty” (89), became the unifying trait of right-wing conservatives. In the aftermath of scorched earth policies backed by the United States that left tens of thousands of Central Americans dead, disappeared and displaced, the political influence of this rightwing had become established in the American foreign policy body politic. The Clinton years, Grandin writes, “served as a bridge between Reagan’s resurgent nationalism and George W. Bush’s revolutionary imperialism” (193), while furthering the expansion of U.S. global reach through implementation of neo-liberal economics masked as liberalism and multilateral cooperation. “After 9/11, evangelical internationalists once again joined with a now fully empowered cohort of neocons to convert George W. Bush’s realism into hard Wilsonianism and to ‘remoralize’ America’s role in the world” (156).

Grandin’s argument unfolds vividly and with a coherency that grabs the reader to the core. And therein lies a critical flaw: the argument at times is too seamless in the connections it draws, leaving little room for historical contingency and the possibility of other outcomes. To cite an obvious example, if George Bush had not

triumphed in the 2000 election, quite conceivably we would not be in Iraq; drawing a connection between 1980s conservative revivalism and the new state of permanent war might thus become more of a stretch. At times, this seamlessness becomes suspiciously oversimplified, as when Grandin makes the connection between U.S. militarism and neo-liberalism, arguing, “America’s imposition of free-trade absolutism produces throughout the world perpetual instability—thus justifying the need for an imperial power to impose order” (234). There is indeed a certain intuitive logic at work here, but one should be wary of systemic explanations for historical outcomes. Ironically, given Grandin’s own work on the subject, we lose a sense of historical agency in this argument. Latin America becomes a place acted *upon*, although this is partially offset by Grandin’s brief reference to the neo-populist movements that have risen to challenge the dominance of a neo-liberal paradigm.

Yet if Grandin downplays alternative explanations, it is because he has a different aim in mind. He wishes to provoke in the reader a sense of outrage, for from outrage may come activism. And he does so extremely successfully, establishing a public case for the condemnation of U.S. power and recognition of the very real high costs Latin Americans have paid in the process. In painting a portrait of America’s rise to power in the twentieth century, *Empire’s Workshop* makes a forceful argument for interpreting U.S. policy in the hemisphere as the central component of empire building—not a by-product of empire, but the staging ground for the formulation of new military, diplomatic, ideological, and economic policies and ideas that are later parlayed into the projection of U.S. power across the globe.