

Aronova, Elena. *Scientific History: Experiments in History and Politics from the Bolshevik Revolution to the End of the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. vii + 243 pp. \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-226-76138-1.

As someone who recently taught a historiography class, I would have loved to have this book available for discussion with students. It fills serious gaps in the standard education of future historians, significantly enriching our awareness about the precursors and earlier roots of such trendy approaches as big history, digital humanities, and new materiality. The transnational embrace allows the author to include a spectrum of important actors and conceptual developments that are often overlooked in Anglophone-centered historiography, or to see some of them, for example the connection between the *Annales* school and the Marxist economic approach, from a refreshingly new angle. The buzzwords back then were different, of course, but not entirely unrecognizable—materialist approach, quantitative methods, scientific history, and so on—and were typically infused with socialist or positivistic overtones. Highly influential during the modernist, early parts of the

twentieth century, they mostly fell out of fashion since 1970, but are staging very strong, if ideologically and stylistically mutated comebacks much more recently.

Since science then stood at the pinnacle of its popularity and social influence, the adjective “scientific” could be used and misused by historians profusely and often inconsistently. In Elena Aronova’s book, the umbrella term “scientific history” covers a broad range of attitudes and approaches, almost a hodgepodge or a Wittgensteinian extended family of only partially overlapping meanings. Individual chapters center primarily (but not exclusively) on several main characters and projects. Henri Berr’s *Revue de synthèse historique*, launched in 1900, envisioned a positivistic cooperation with scholars from psychology, sociology, and natural sciences, aimed at synthetic, internationalist history of humanity, in opposition to traditional disciplinarity and nationalism of the mainstream late-nineteenth-century historiography. During the 1920–30s, Nikolai Bukharin and Russian Marxists (also some non-Marxists) pushed for a historically based and materialistically reinterpreted analysis of science and society, whereas the biologist Nikolai Vavilov applied the methods of modern genetics and geography to uncover the history of domesticated plants and the origins of agriculture. Recovering from the wreckage of World War II, Julian Huxley formulated the chief mission of the postwar UNESCO as writing a new, evolutionary-informed “History of Mankind: Cultural and Scientific Development,” for which Lucien Febvre organized a “big science”-styled international committee of authors to move away from a Western-dominated, toward a truly multicultural, grand historical synthesis. J. D. Bernal’s vision of information socialism included the centralized “Project for Scientific Publication and Bibliography” with the goal to distribute free scientific knowledge worldwide, a forerunner, before the internet, of today’s Sci-Hub, while Eugene Garfield founded the Institute for Scientific Information in 1950s Philadelphia to mine citations for the history of what today is understood as big-data science.

A modernist combination of “scientific” with “history” could mean many things, then, but typically carried a positive spin. It was used as a synonym for “objective,” demand professionalism, or to categorize the historical discipline as one among other sciences (especially in non-English academic discourse). It could also designate a universalizing anti-imperialist worldview instead of nationally obsessed Eurocentric histories; or the use of non-traditional, non-textual sources and attention to material rather than verbal practices; or a preference for economic and technological explanations for, or analogies between biological evolution and historical development; or the use of scientific evidence and data in historical argument. It could also mean a special interest in history of science, but understood methodologically, as a way to reformulate the global history of humanity, rather than a narrowly specialized subfield within historical profession as today.

For most of the book’s selected main characters, their otherwise diverging paths actually intersected at the second International Congress of History of Science in July 1931. Rarely can an academic conference in humanities become by itself a historical event of major proportion. The London meeting unexpectedly turned so with the last-minute arrival of a representative delegation from the Soviet Union and their controversial presentations, which set the stage for a momentous encounter and interactions between Soviet Marxism and Western Civilization, between history experienced as a global crisis and as a modernist breakthrough, and between competing varieties of scientific history. Two more participants, I feel, deserved a much larger presence in the book—Boris Hessen and Joseph Needham—in light of their transformative influence on the subsequent historiography of science and of China, respectively. Aronova’s “Russia as Method” approach allows us to see these crucial intellectual encounters of the twentieth century in a stereoscopic light, with much deeper interconnections and transformations, helping to liberate the field from its typical Cold-War enforced dichotomies and one-eye blindness.

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