

# GREG GRANDIN

*Peter V. and C. Vann Woodward Professor of History*

Interview by **Henry Jacob**

NOV. 27, 2019

Transcribed by **Jisoo Choi**

**T**his morning I have the pleasure to speak with Greg Grandin, Peter V. and C. Vann Woodward Professor of History at Yale and 2020 winner of the Pulitzer Prize in General Nonfiction for *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. Greg will speak with me about the Americas in history and today. Welcome, Greg.

**Perhaps we should start with your time before coming to New Haven. Could you talk a bit about yourself before coming to Yale as a grad student and also as a professor?** I was the first person in my family to go to college and I went late—about eight or nine years after high school. In truth, I really didn't have a sense of what I was going to do; I wanted to avoid real work, a real job, and a real life.

Because of this, I went to CUNY Brooklyn College, which boasted a great history department. Many of the faculty came to Brooklyn College during the boom of the 1960s. In addition to teaching, these professors engaged in national debates at the moment: U.S. foreign policy (it was the first Gulf War), the Soviet Union, Gorbachev's attempt at reformed Socialism—there was a lot going on in the world!

Luckily for me, these historians opened my mind to the complexities of the past and present. Also, I cannot forget to mention that around the same time Ronald Reagan's wars on Central America intensified. Moreover, I became involved in activism with the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. In addition, I immersed myself in Russian history, and even took some Russian language classes. But I ultimately switched over to combine some of my interests in history and politics. At the end of the day, Central America emerged as the center of my research.

**Your transition from Russian to Central American history provides a good segue into some of these next questions. Before going deeper into Guatemala, we should stay in the U.S. After completing your undergraduate studies at CUNY Brooklyn College,**

you came to Yale as a PhD student. In New Haven you worked under Gil Joseph, who still teaches here. Since graduating from Yale, you have published multiple books with Gil, one of which is *A Century of Revolution*. How did your relationship with Gil turn from one of mentorship to one of collaboration? To tie this back into your earlier comments, how did these professorial relations—at CUNY and Yale—translate to your academic career? Well, Gil actually was not at Yale when I arrived; I came to work with Emília Viotti da Costa, who was Brazilian and a historian of Brazil. She was the only Latin Americanist. For this reason, she was isolated from the department. I was the lone Latin Americanist PhD student accepted my year so we fit together well!

Emília was wonderful—she just passed away, at 88—and she was a formidable force. Perhaps not by coincidence, she served as Gil’s mentor when he was at Yale. It is amazing that she trained a whole generation of Latin American historians—better, *generations* of Latin American historians. In retrospect, it was a pleasure to work with her, to get such open-ended time with her.

In my first year I won a pre-dissertation fellowship to spend a year in Guatemala. While I was away in Guatemala, Gil came to New Haven. Upon my return to Yale, I started working with Gil. He, as you know, is an amazing mentor, very giving and generous with his time. After grad school, it was natural to move from a student to a collaborator.

**How did your relationship with Guatemala develop as an activist and as a student? Did you seek to understand history through political engagement?** In the 1980s, Guatemala was one of the Central American countries roiled by a war largely provoked by the United States. The history of Guatemala, from the 1954 CIA coup through the civil war and then the genocide, fascinated me. My dissertation traced this story, starting in the colonial period and running through 1954. In essence, I sought to understand that coup within the longue durée, to describe its complexity and multivalent dimensions. I did not just blame everything on the United States. Instead, I sought to capture the nuances of these hierarchies. Guatemala proved to be a rich place to consider the relationship between political analysis and morality.

**“I sought to understand how Latin America figured into the formation and development of U.S. power.”**

#### ON THE NEXT PAGE

Greg Grandin won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize in General Nonfiction for *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*.

Photo courtesy of the Yale University Department of History

History is a normative discipline. No historian can escape this truism. We study the past as we imagine it was. We think about the world as we think it should be. We cannot get around that fact either. Perhaps we can call this a schizophrenic aspect of the discipline of history, that no question we ask of the past is not really about the present. We might quibble about this relationship; such a disagreement could even be a fruitful one. But ultimately, I think when it comes down to basics, we cannot deny our duty and debt to the present.

**You published two books on Guatemala early in your career: *The Blood of Guatemala* and *The Last Colonial Massacre*. In both works you propose that 1954 set off a triptych of counterrevolutions, or at least put in motion a style of U.S. interventionism in the Americas. You use Guatemala as a lens—historical and normative—to scrutinize the Cold War and America’s engagement in it. With this in mind, could you discuss your transition from your local interest in Guatemala to Latin America as a whole? How did Latin America function as a physical and imagined space of experimentation during the Cold War? Well, there are two**



parts to that question. One addresses how Guatemala serves as a microcosm of broader Latin American history. The second revolves around what Gil and I call the “long Cold War” in Latin America.

Historians, myself included, often seek to find a representative story. I found Guatemala. Guatemala—a country in the process of frustrated reform, political polarization, repression, and radicalization—reveals the contours of Latin American history.

The second point concerns method. I step back and think about Latin America not just in terms of the victim of U.S. foreign policy. Instead, I understand the ways in which Latin America has shaped the United States itself, how each ascendant governing coalition worked out its ideas of how the global order. In launching this engagement with Latin America, we can go back to the Jacksonians—or even the Jeffersonians—with Spanish or Latin America. Over the years, I have tried to move past a history critical of the United States from a normative perspective. I sought to understand how Latin America figured into the formation and development of U.S. power.

## **“The wall has replaced the frontier as America's symbol.”**

**We should dwell on the phrase “formation and development of U.S. power.” To me, the evolution of American imperialism has guided your research since your days at CUNY. Your reaction to Guatemala in the 1980s led you to engage with the country in a political and a historical way. But this research also brought you back to the U.S. and its complicity in the rise of organized violence across the Americas. In *Empire's Workshop* (2006), you used Latin America as an interpretive framework to understand the U.S. In your most recent book, *The End of the Myth*, you confront the U.S. head on, so to speak. But you have continued to place the U.S. and Latin America side**

**by side. How has your transnational approach shifted over the years?** I will answer that question in parts. You are right, the most recent book on the border extends questions that I have asked for a long time.

The ways in which social rights in Latin America and individual rights in the U.S. diverge fascinate me. In Latin America, the right to education, to healthcare, and to a decent life form a vital part of Latin American conceptions of citizenship. In contrast, individual rights in the United States are sacrosanct. This republican self-governance based on the restraint of the state allows citizens to possess, to speak, to believe, to bear, etc. We can call these individual rights negative.

I interrogate the tension between those two conceptions of rights and how they shaped each other. The latest book expands that argument. I noticed that the frontier cultivated a notion of freedom as freedom from restraint. Here I asked what happens when the frontier—when the possibility of growth—no longer offers a feasible outlet for organizing domestic politics. In some ways, *The End of the Myth* develops an ongoing comparative project.

**In chapter 6 of *The End of the Myth*, you discuss how the frontier served as a safety valve. Because the West proved to be such a fertile physical and imaginary space, Americans could repress internal disputes through expansion. As you mentioned, we now no longer can turn this safety valve.** The idea of the frontier as a safety valve is an old one, and historians have contested it for plenty of time. I use the concept to ask whether or not the expansion actually diluted class conflict. In some ways, the idea of the valve interests me more than its actual effects.

In fact, the very idea of growth, which goes beyond the safety valve, remains unique. No other nation has made the idea of expansion its foundational premise.

The promise of growth—whether it be over land, markets, militarism, or through just political culture—has been used over centuries to organize domestic politics. But that is no longer the case, and domestic politicians no longer have the ability to invoke limitless expansion to satisfy demands, to dilute factions, to build coalitions. The war on terror has foreclosed militarism but the U.S. still wages war. These wars may or may not be endless, but politicians can no longer hold War with a capital W itself up as a messianic mission.

On a slightly different note, the collapse of the growth model in 2008 has continued in different ways—which may signal the end of the neoliberal growth model. On second thought, the end of the post-war growth model marks another way expansion has been foreclosed. Of course, the climate crisis also represents the end of the idea of limitless growth, perhaps in the most emphatic manner.

The book also explains what some people call the race realism that Donald Trump revived, the explicit idea that the frontier has closed. As the logic goes, we have no more room so we have to take care of our own. These ideas have deep lineages within U.S. political culture. That being said, these sentiments remained, to a large degree, contained up until now. Today, however, they have burst onto the national scene. To me, the wall reflects this outpouring of repressed sentiments: the wall has replaced the frontier as America's symbol.

**Exactly. The rise of Trump embodies the end of one myth but the birth of a more nefarious one. This domestic transformation corresponds to the spread of conservative movements across the Americas. Earlier in our conversation, you distinguished between social and individual rights. In the light of this right wing resurgence, your distinction between Latin America and the U.S. seems more permeable. To give a single but telling example, Bolsonaro invoked the Second Amendment in a speech a few months ago.** You have touched on a complicated issue. Perhaps this all links up to the end of the economic model that the United States and its allies have been promoting since the end of World War II. Alternatively, this turbo-charged politics could relate to the rise of neoliberalism. The collapse of that model's premises about globalization, free movement of capital, free movement of goods, and the inherent benefit that free trade will bring has given rise to remarkably similar nativist, authoritarian movements in one country after another: it has spread to India, Turkey, Brazil, the Philippines, Hungary, and Poland.

On another level, certain problems specific to the culture wars of the United States have shifted to other countries. Brazil provides the case and point for this ideological migration from the U.S. outwards. For instance, the NRA in the last fifteen years have spent a lot of money promoting, and trying to build, a gun culture in Brazil.

You referenced Bolsonaro's invocation of the Second Amendment in a recent speech. His comment testifies to the fact that the Evangelical Right and Libertarians have built a base in Brazil. Cultural politics that have roiled the United States—around individualism, Christianity, gay rights, abortion, and gun control—only surfaced in Latin America in recent times. Today, these conservative currents run through Bolivia, Brazil, and others.

**At the same time, and throughout history as well, the Latin American left has persisted in memory and on the streets. In Chile, for example, mass mobilizations have unified various subgroups of society against Piñera's neoconservative leadership. How do you see the Latin American left as a bulwark in history and today?** Latin America carries a radical strain of the Enlightenment. Latin America has suffered constant repression against leftist humanist movements but the region remains irrepressible. Chile epitomizes this resilience. Chile, the launching pad for neoliberalism, still resists the authoritarian free market politics 40 years later. Students today conceive their struggle within their history. To me, this stands as remarkable testament to the importance and possibility of historical memory, of thinking about politics within a larger historical frame.

Yet Chile is not alone. Go to any meeting of a group involved in social struggle and listen. Before addressing the issue of the day, they provide a long contextual explanation that might go back to the independence—if not the conquest—and work their way to the present. Latin America, I think, stands alone as the last bastion of the radical enlightenment.

Who knows what will happen. Rightist currents have traveled from country to country while models of left developmentalism embodied by Chavez had died. We could talk for days about this defeat of the left.

Despite it all, despite all the setbacks and suffering, these movements still keep coming back. Political scientists like to talk about the fragility of democracy in Latin America, the fragility of democratic institutions. For me, the real question that accounts for the endurance of democracy in Latin America lies in their refusal to let go of a kind of social democratic ideal, a vision of a good society. ♦