

The book provides many insights into the intricacies of late Qing politics, but its main concerns are the different ways in which the famine was turned into stories that could be told so as to find meaning in this harrowing experience and draw some lessons from it: how to “never forget” (p. 74), but also how to create “a psychologically tolerable past” and how to cope with the “survivor’s guilt” (p. 54). But it is also about how to use folk stories and oral history materials in a historical study that deals with events that reach back nearly one and a half centuries. How far does living memory reach, and how should we read accounts that were put into writing at very different times under very specific historical circumstances. The tourist spectacle offered in the World Heritage city of Pingyao showing the magistrate performing a rain ritual at the City God Temple perhaps contributes little to the historical meaning of the famine, but it tells us a lot about the uses of history in contemporary Chinese society. The result of this fascinating inquiry is a highly readable but also shocking account of one of the most crucial historical events in late-nineteenth-century Chinese history.

**Andrea Janku,**

School of Oriental and African Studies,  
London

**Daniel Beer**, *Renovating Russia: the human sciences and the fate of liberal modernity, 1880–1930*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2008, pp. ix, 229, £22.95, \$45.00 (hardback 978-0-8014-4627-6).

*Renovating Russia* is addressed primarily to historians well-versed in the current heated debates regarding Russian modernity and liberalism, as well as the continuities and ruptures across the revolutionary divide of 1917. Without clearly articulating it, Beer seeks to answer the eternal Russian question: “Who is to be blamed?” by searching for the intellectual roots of the Bolshevik regime. Historians have pointed variously to a number of western social

theorists including Comte, Spenser, Nietzsche, and Freud (to say nothing of the Bolsheviks’ officially acknowledged debt to Marx and Engels) as the intellectual forbears of the Soviet regime. Beer adds to this list several new names: Benedict A Morel, the father of “degeneration” theory, Cesare Lombroso, the major proponent of the concept of the “born criminal”, and a host of European psychiatrists who developed the concept of “mental contagion” or “crowd psychology”. Beer argues that the ideas of “social deviance”, elaborated during the pre-revolutionary period by the Russian “liberal practitioners of human sciences” on the basis of these three concepts, furnished the Soviet regime with the “language of social excision and coercive rehabilitation” (p. 201) that informed, legitimized, and enabled the regime’s violent project of radical social transformation. The first two chapters of the book explore Russian scholars’ responses to Morel’s theory of “degeneration”. The third examines their attitudes to Lombroso’s concept of the “born criminal”. The fourth analyses their investigations into “crowd psychology” and “mental contagion”, and the last one deals with the “appropriation” of these responses, attitudes, and investigations by Soviet psychiatrists and criminologists.

Historians of science and medicine will find in Beer’s volume a treasure-trove of previously unexplored materials on the history of Russian human sciences, but, accustomed to the sophisticated armoury of social and cultural history, they will be disappointed by the book’s weak analytical framework. *Renovating Russia* belongs to a particular genre: the “history of thought”, which could be called a *textual* history of ideas, since it is based entirely upon the examination of published texts and nothing else. In this genre, scientific concepts—completely stripped of their institutional, disciplinary, clinical, and investigative *contexts*—are debated and elaborated not by live people pursuing concrete research, or economic, social, clinical, or political objectives, but by an assemblage of “pure minds” defined exclusively and vaguely by their “worldview”,

in this case, “Russian liberalism” (p. 2). Apparently following Humpty-Dumpty’s famous motto—“When I use a word, it means exactly what I want it to mean, no more, no less”—Beer’s major analytical categories are ambiguous and imprecise. The “renovation” of his title means simultaneously “modernization”, “social [and occasionally ‘societal’] transformation”, and “*ozdorovlenie*” (literally: “salubrifcation”). Members of “liberal elites” whose works Beer cites throughout his book include the militant nationalist Ivan Sikorskii, the zealous monarchist Vladimir Chizh, and the committed Bolsheviks Petr Tutyshkin and Khristian Rakovskii. “Human sciences” cover “the intersecting disciplines of psychiatry, psychology, criminology, anthropology, jurisprudence, and sociology” (p. 2), as well as unidentified “biomedical sciences” (p. 7), although the overwhelming majority of authors Beer cites worked in either psychiatry or criminology. By deliberately mixing together texts published in professional periodicals and literary magazines, Beer refuses to distinguish between the scientific/clinical and the metaphorical/rhetorical uses of concepts and ideas. For Beer, it does not matter whether certain ideas, such as “degeneration”, were explored by the psychiatrist Vladimir Bekhterev, the anthropologist Dmitrii Anuchin, or the jurist Pavel Liublinskii. He assumes that as long as they all used the same *word*, they all meant the same *thing*.

The deficiencies of such an approach are particularly evident in Beer’s treatment of the notion of heredity, which underpinned the concepts of degeneration and “born criminal” and which provided a foundation for what he calls the “biologization of the social” (pp. 182–4). Apparently unaware of the extensive and varied literature on the cultural history of heredity (for instance, the materials of the four eponymous workshops held at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science), Beer completely ignores the profound changes in the understanding of heredity that occurred precisely during the half century from 1880 to 1930 investigated in his

book. This period saw the elaboration of several competing theories of heredity by Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Francis Galton, August Weismann, Gregor Mendel, Hugo de Vries, and T H Morgan (to name but a few) and the rise of the most ambitious project of biosocial transformation—eugenics—in a variety of socio-cultural contexts. These developments attracted the close attention of, and generated wide debates within, the Russian scientific and medical communities. In Beer’s account, however, Russian “liberal representatives of the human sciences” universally subscribed to Morel’s Lamarckian notion of “acquired heredity”, while genetics “made occasional, if subordinate, appearance in discussions of hereditary transfer” only in the mid-1920s (p. 180). Yet, in 1912 the psychiatrist Aleksandr Sholomovich (mentioned in the book) produced a 300-page clinical study (not mentioned in the book) on “Heredity and physical signs of degeneration in mentally ill and healthy patients” and discussed his findings in the light of various theories of heredity, including those of Lamarck, Mendel, Weismann, and Galton. That same year, Vladimir Bekhterev (one of the most cited authors in the book) invited Iurii Filipchenko, a founder of Russian genetics, to teach Russia’s first course on the subject at Bekhterev’s psycho-neurological institute. Beer ignores the very important fact that a large portion of the texts on degeneration and the “born criminal” that he cites were written in the context of and in response to the rising eugenics movement. As a result of his selective reading, Beer misinterprets the role that the notion of heredity played in contemporary physicians’ thinking. Rather than “admitting the defeat of their diagnostic capacities” (p. 95), clinicians were actually giving a viable and instrumental diagnosis by labelling something, be it a psychosis or alcoholism, a “hereditary disease”.

**Nikolai Kremontsov,**  
University of Toronto