
Book Review

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Deep History.

David Laibman; New York: State University of New York Press,
2007, 210 pp., \$65.

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“My project is to reach behind the rich veins of human experience, in all its forms, through the entire time of our existence on Earth, and seek out explanatory principles that might help organise our understanding of that record—our basic sense of ourselves, where we have been and where we are going.”

Except for those still enjoying the wordplay of postmodernism, political theorists will appreciate opening a book with such a stated goal. And the main strength of the book is that it lives up to its promise, offering nothing less than a total conception of the pattern of history.

David Laibman is a Marxist and the explanatory principles that he offers are derived from Marx’s writings. But this book is not an exegesis of Marx’s model of history; it is an adoption of these conceptual tools to entirely new formulations and ways of looking at the evolution of human societies. Direct quotes from Marx are few because the author does not want to reheat past debates about orthodoxy, but rather knuckle down to the substantive issue: what concepts explain the deep structural evolution of human history?

Laibman’s answer is that there is a high level construct, the “abstract social totality” (AST), that explains the logic of historical development. To be clear, for Laibman the AST is not a metaphor or helpful illustration; it is an explanatory, scientific, testable theory.

Philosophically, the AST model is based on a particular notion of dialectics. The author believes in “transcending” contradictions. Most importantly for his project, Laibman believes he has found a way to transcend the apparent dichotomy between theories about history and the “tangle of formless empirical material”¹ that arises from the study of specific historical moments.

The notion of transcendence of contradiction is, of course, perfectly orthodox in Marxism’s Hegelian inheritance. But an insightful transcendence of the Hegelian kind is, in fact, relatively rare in human thought. We are talking of radical shifts of perspective that allow us to see that what had formerly appeared to be irreconcilable concepts are in fact one-sided features of a more dynamic, dialectical, totality. By contrast, for example, to say that the difference between apples and pears can be resolved by understanding them both as fruit is not very profound or dialectical in the above sense. Several times while reading this book I felt that the author was offering us apparently transcendent solutions to problems, but that his actual formula lacked the penetration necessary to really convince the reader that they were fundamental resolutions of contradictions rather than metaphysical constructions.

¹David Laibman, *Deep History* (New York: State of New York Press, 2007), p. 4.

With regard to the critical question of whether the dynamics of history can be explained at an abstract high level, without their having to be adapted to specific historical detail in such a way as they lose their explanatory power, Laibman writes as follows:

My suggestion is to overcome this dichotomy, by developing a theory that is simultaneously “hard” and “soft.” I posit level of abstraction, and arrange these into a hierarchy, so that at the “highest” level we find the abstract social totality (AST) and at a “lower” level the (more) concrete social formation reflecting geo-climatic and developmental variation. At still “lower” levels numerous contingent and accidental factors, including the personalities and capacities of individuals, come into play and infuse variety into the picture, which thus approaches the concreteness of the actual historical record.²

The idea then is that the two opposites (crudely: theory and data) affect each other, but not equally. The AST encompasses both the next level down, social formations, and below that, very particular events. This schema is consistent with Laibman’s notion of dialectics. “Dialectics refers not simply to mutual interaction, but to interaction between unequal poles. In a dialectical interaction, dominant determination runs from one pole to the other; without this, the dialectic characterizes the mutual conditioning of the poles, their relational consistency, but does not reveal a dynamic movement in the system that they constitute.”³ This formulation is different to the Hegelian–Marxist tradition and the worry here is that we are being offered a metaphysical construction that asserts the primacy of the AST rather than demonstrating how it arises from the concrete historical record.

The most important theoretical assertion by Laibman is that the abstract social totality (AST) explains the pattern of history. Given “perfect” conditions, human society would necessarily go through certain historical periods: primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, and capitalism. This periodization is derived not from historical observation, but from the logic of the structures of the AST.

What are those structures? They are the “productive forces” (PF) and the “production relations” (PR) that are derived from the works of Marx and Engels and the huge subsequent literature about them. The PFs and PRs form a consistent whole, the “mode of production” (MP). Laibman, probably wisely given that it would lead away from his main purpose, does not spend a great deal of time on the debates about these concepts. Rather he formulates two propositions that are important for developing his logical stages view of history: first, that PRs are progressively replaced over time with ever more sophisticated PRs, and second, there is a tendency to development in the PFs. Because any particular set of PRs tend to stasis, a tension develops within a mode of production, resolved if a revolution takes place leading to a new mode of production.

The first transition Laibman believes arises from AST considerations is that from primitive communism to the slave mode of production. Laibman asserts that slavery is logically and necessarily the first form of systematic surplus extraction. But no argument is provided to explain why the first form of class society has to be slavery rather than, say, one based on the extraction of tributes from peasants. Suppose agriculture to have reached the point that it is possible to generate significant surpluses and suppose coercion necessary to gather this surplus to a ruling elite, why would the person being exploited be, in the first instance, a slave, the chattel of another person? Is it not as likely, in fact, that initially the first elites would not be able to leap from primitive communism straight to owning other human beings, but rather, and perhaps over many centuries,

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*: 51.

their privileged position would have arisen through the gradual tightening of their control over the limited surplus available to society?

If we leave the terrain of logic and structure to follow E. Gordon Childe's account of the actual origins of class society on this planet, then as well as the appearance of slavery we find examples, such as that of ancient Egypt, where tomb paintings show "peasants coming in to pay their rent or dues, always in kind, while a scribe notes down on papyrus what each man brings and an overseer with a whip keeps the tributaries up to the mark."⁴ This latter source of wealth was almost certainly far more important initially than that created by slaves.⁵

It is possible for Laibman's schema to be adjusted to take into account the above point, but this shaky start undermines confidence in the whole model. Nevertheless, accepting then that a slave mode of production has come into being, is there a dynamic, at the AST level, that explains what will happen to it? Laibman follows earlier Marxist historians in saying that there is a fundamental problem for the stability of a slave mode of production in that it is continually obliged to seek outside its own territory for new sources of slaves and to devote an increasing share of the surplus to supporting this activity. The slave MP also, because of the lack of incentive for the slave to develop the productive forces intensively, has a tendency to expand them extensively: larger agricultural holdings, construction projects, etc. The PF-PR model therefore points towards a crisis of the mode of production, as more and more of the share of the surplus is devoted to the means of coercion and control in this expanding system. For Laibman, the explanation for the overrunning of Rome by Germanic and other peoples ultimately lies at the level of the AST.⁶

There are many accounts of the fall of Roman civilization as well as an increasing number of both Marxist and non-Marxist studies that argue the fall has been exaggerated.⁷ My own preference is for that of G. E. M. de Ste. Croix. This differs from Laibman's AST explanation in one very important aspect. The author of *Deep History* believes that the backdrop of small-scale peasant production against which the gangs of slaves are working is an "inert medium within which the slave dynamic occurs." For Ste. Croix, on the other hand, the decline of the importance of slave-generated surpluses (for, approximately, the reasons given above) caused a massive tightening of the screw by the Roman elite on the non-slave lower social classes. The ruination and demoralization of the once-free Roman peasantry is what contributed, above all, to the inability of the empire to save itself from invasion.⁸ The difference is important for the question of methodology. Laibman's book is an attempt to distil a few high level explanations for the pattern of history; it does not suit this project to have to constantly adjust "hard" theory with "soft" lower-level historical data. But without amendment, the explanation offered for the conquest of the Western Roman Empire in *Deep History* seems inadequate.

According to the AST model, the crisis of the slave mode of production gives way to the feudal mode. Laibman argues that this change is a necessary one because it is not possible for a slave mode of production to move directly to a capitalist mode. Now again, adhering strictly to the logic of the model and setting aside actual historical events for the moment, why must the end of slavery mean specifically feudalism? There are several theoretical ways in which surpluses could be extracted from a laboring class. Excluding the possibility of a capitalist form does not necessitate a feudal form; that needs to be demonstrated.

⁴E. Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself* (London: Fontana, 1966), p. 166.

⁵Chris Harman, *A People's History of the World* (London: Bookmarks, 1999).

⁶Laibman, *Deep History*, p. 30.

⁷Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁸G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Duckworth, 1980), pp. 453-503.

In Laibman's discussion of the economic dynamics of feudalism, he convincingly demonstrates that their most important feature is that, by contrast with slavery, there is an incentive for the producers to improve the techniques of production. As a consequence, the PFs advance to what Laibman terms "the second-most-difficult of the revolutionary transitions: to capitalism."⁹

Capitalism is the next mode of production for the AST treatment. The model suddenly becomes less compelling, however, when Laibman wants to distinguish the capitalist mode of production from the other modes of production on the grounds that it has within it a nest of evolutionary stages. The justification for this layering is that of complexity: there are long cycles at the level of AST, within which are shorter cycles of structures that still remain above the level of full historical contingency. But Laibman does not address why, intrinsically, capitalism deserves this treatment and not the other modes of production.

According to the author's system, we are in stage III of capitalism, one where there is a troubled and protracted move from the cold war towards a totalized global capitalist world, stage IV. "Stage IV would involve a global, passive, state, an end to diffusion."¹⁰ It "requires the global state that transnational capitalist class theorists observe as immanent in the emerging world institutions (World Bank, IMF, etc.)."¹¹

It is strange, having discussed history at a very philosophical level up until now, to suddenly find the book invoking specific historical institutions. Once again the reader is told that this model is genuinely theoretical in the sense that the move from one stage to another is chain linked. But then very distinct political beliefs are given to the reader as being derived from the model, such as the author's belief that Islam is fundamentally more reactionary than Judaism and Christianity;¹² that a very long time period must elapse before an end to the capitalist mode of production is possible;¹³ that the Gorbachev era represented a mature version of socialism in Soviet Russia;¹⁴ and that even now the post-Soviet Russian social formation is not capitalist.¹⁵

Surely these relatively "low level" statements (compared to the book's entire theme of deep history) have to be analyzed at a much more historically concrete level, or we end up having an AST theory that threatens to become crudely determinist. A theory intended to operate over ten thousand years is suddenly applicable to decades.

All in all, there is a fundamental difference in approach to making generalizations about history between that of Marx and that evident in *Deep History*. Marx's generalizations about history were derived by examining particular historical moments, their contradictions, and thus arriving at powerful insights that were sometimes at a very high level, such as his famous *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. By contrast *Deep History* takes the methodologically opposite approach of starting with an abstract schema and attempting to fit historical evidence into it.

To finish, however, on a positive note: *Deep History* is a very refreshing book. It is rare these days to encounter historiographical works of any sort that deal with an entire, totalizing, conception of history.

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⁹Laibman, *Deep History*, p. 36.

¹⁰*Ibid*: 136.

¹¹*Ibid*.

¹²*Ibid*: 139.

¹³*Ibid*: 137.

¹⁴*Ibid*: 181–2.

¹⁵*Ibid*: 183.