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Deep History: a rejoinder

David Laibman



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While I ordinarily would not seek to comment on a review article, I find that Altug Yalcintas' essay on my book, *Deep History* (JPE, V:1, 2011, 168-182) so thoroughly distorts and conceals the actual contents of the book that some sort of rejoinder seems in order. In what follows, I will pass quickly from characterization of the review to a new formulation of the book's main theme, in the hope that some readers may be moved to examine the argument in full detail [1].

Yalcintas begins by attributing to me a project which I never had in mind: some sort of "combination" of a Marx-based historical materialism with what he calls "evolutionary" social theory. The latter is never clearly defined, but it seems to encompass the Critical Realism of present-day writers Roy Bhaskar and Tony Lawson, along with the work of Thorstein Veblen and Joseph Schumpeter. Having been told my goal was to "bridge" these two worlds, I am criticized for not having addressed the work of Bhaskar and Lawson; clearly it would be strange for an author to seek a synthesis between two poles without citing one of these at all. My intention, however, as clearly stated in the book, was (and is) quite different: to outline a historical materialism that makes use of the full insights of a general-directed theory of history [2], while not only not short-changing the immense variety and contingency of the historical record, but actually enhancing our capacity to embrace that record. In developing my own project, I presented and addressed the work of numerous contemporary scholars (Dimitris Milonakis, Alan Carling, Paul Nolan, and Jared Diamond, among others) as well as classic works in the Marxist tradition. I did not, in this one book, examine the work of Bhaskar and Lawson; as indeed I did not discuss Althusser, Balibar, Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe, Mandel, Wallerstein, Frank, Cardoso, and countless others. The book is an argument, not a compendium. The first of Yalcintas' "two main shortcomings" of *Deep History*,

the “audience problem,” apparently refers to my failure to refer specifically to the unlikely quartet of Bhaskar-Lawson-Veblen-Schumpeter. But since Yalcintas never explains clearly what the work of this quartet entails, and why it is relevant to my argument, the criticism seems misplaced.

The second shortcoming, “the evolutionary problem,” emerges amidst a welter of quotations from various sections of my book, taken out of context, and criticized in such a cryptic manner that it is hard to discern a systematic case being made. Essentially, however, Yalcintas sees me as putting forward some sort of teleology, the “received view of human history,” according to which all societies pass through a rigid and predetermined succession of stages, toward some final preconceived endpoint. He then quotes me as saying more or less the opposite, preceded by the words: “Laibman *admits* that. . .” This is a bit like the following: a) “Laibman’s theory is that the moon is made of green cheese.” b) “Laibman says: ‘the moon is not made of green cheese; it consists of oxygen, silicon, magnesium, iron, and other trace elements.’” c) “Laibman thus *admits* that his theory (a) is false.” Something like this occurs throughout Yalcintas’ review.

“Evolutionary thinking,” which Yalcintas supports, is apparently equivalent to insistence upon variety of possible paths of development, diversity of circumstances, etc. By contrast, my “account of historical materialism is not free from the strict directionality which has no or limited place in evolutionary thinking.” “An emphasis of necessity over contingency and of commonality over specificity is not what the reader expects in the work of an author whose aim is to ‘soften’ the quasi-Marxist rhetoric of directionality.” I have no idea who this “reader” is or what he/she expects; nor do I know where in my book the word “soften” appears, but what I am able to derive from this discussion is that the issues regarding the relation between directionality and common characteristics in social evolution, vs. contingency and uniqueness of individual circumstances, looms large in Yalcintas’ version of evolutionary thinking; that he has not been able to sort all this out and therefore assumes that I have not been able to do so either.[3]

Rather than continue with the tedious task of trying to address Yalcintas’ rather confusing characterizations and claims, let me now attempt a restatement of the core argument of *Deep History*, Part I, on the general issues in historical materialist theory. (Parts II and III of the book, on capitalism and socialism, respectively, I will leave to the interested reader.)

***Deep History*. a brief reconstruction**

Marxist historical thinking emerged when socialists began to think about socialism not as merely a morally superior possible future, but as a stage in human development, one that rests upon earlier stages. This idea of structured ("stadial") social evolution necessarily appeared in "hard" and "soft" forms.

The "hard" theory presumed (at least implicitly) that *all* societies actually pass through the perceived stages; that the stages are *empirically* common to all, or at least most, human experience. Against this, a veritable mountain of anthropological and historical research has recorded the existence of huge variety in the historical record, including vast regions (viz., the multi-millennial Asiatic, or hydraulic, societies) in which progression through identifiable stages does not seem to exist at all, to instances of skipping or bypassing of stages, blockages of transitions between stages, appearance of certain features associated with a given stage (e.g., slavery) in both ancient and again in modern times, and, in general, such enormous differences in detail among societies that are presumably representative of a given stage of development as to render the stage characterization suspect. Thus, a "soft" historical materialism emerges. Dropping the classical commitment to a general and directed theory of social evolution, the soft position argues for a more nuanced commitment to partial explanations: history is seen to progress (if at all) through a variety of pathways; certain precursor and successor relations can be found only in particular social formations (what might be called "micro-stadiality"); and in general theoretical claims are mitigated in order to conform to the richness and complexity of the visible record.

Now, the core proposal of *Deep History* is that the very dichotomy, between "hard" and "soft," is unnecessary and misconceived. While my reviewer repeatedly asserts that I defend the "hard" position, I actually argue something quite different: the vast materials of history give rise to a distillation, which I call the Abstract Social Totality (AST). The AST is *not* a collection of observable traits common to all societies; rather, it is a set of essential relations that grasp certain fundamental principles governing social existence [4]. An incomplete list of these might include: the necessary and ever-present metabolism with nature, i.e., labor; the necessarily social dimension of this metabolism, Marx's "relations of production"; the immanent tendency of the human-nature relation (the "forces of production") to develop in the direction of ever-greater human knowledge and power over the external environment; the immanently conservative thrust of the relations of production that

periodically bring them into conflict with the corresponding forces; and periodic ordered transition from given systems of production to more advanced systems, "in an order revealing progressively more sophisticated and powerful means of coercion, incentive and control" (*Deep History*, p. 28; quoted passage cited by Yalcintas).

The AST thus reveals a "*determinate ladder of stages*" (*Deep History*, p. 5). This determinate, directed process, however – and this is the crucial point that Yalcintas and many other commentators have missed – "occurs *only* at the level of the AST" (*ibid.*, all italics in original). So, far from the theory being challenged by the existence of even a single empirical instance in which the given property does not appear, the theory does not require the appearance of the property in question in *any* actual part of the observable record! Complications are introduced by variation in geography, climate, flora and fauna; differential rates of migration; diffusion of traits among social formations at different levels of development through contact, trade and conquest; and accidents of history and individual personality. When societies that are at different internal stages of development come into contact, the result is social formations containing elements from several distinct AST stages, or "modes of production," all combined into a complex and often contradictory "social formation." We may imagine a world in which these complications are so intense that we find *no* empirical instances of societies *visually* embodying the core characteristics of the stages adduced at the level of the AST. In the world we know, we do in fact find such instances: Rome, in the last three centuries BCE and the first four centuries CE, rather clearly reveals central properties of the slave mode of production; Britain, in the 19th century CE, serves as a case study of capitalist industrialization, with minimal complication from pre-capitalist currents and external factors. Most of the time, however, the AST does *not* appear directly in the historical record; nor should it.

What it does do is provide a searchlight to find and understand key pressure points, moments whose significance would otherwise be lost in the welter of conflicting historical evidence. The central element is the existence of consistent systems of organization of labor – the interdefined human-nature and human-human relations that we call a mode of production – and the pressure for transformation of those systems under the impact of technological progress, *when that progress actually occurs*. Systematic exploration of the AST, the core project of historical materialist theory (in the version which I am proposing), brings to the surface a series of key necessities: links in the chain of human progress that must be traversed. The links in turn concern the relation between successive methods of surplus extraction in

class-antagonistic societies, and corresponding systems of control; these systems have decisive effects on actual or potential productive development. I must leave presentation of the complete logic of these relations (at least insofar as I have been able to grasp them!) to *Deep History* itself.

Once the relation between the AST and the vast and contingent raw material of history is understood, however, the matter of teleology, "inevitability," and "evolution of societies to a predefined endpoint" (Yalcintas; the term "predefined endpoint" is a characteristic and unfortunate imposition, for which no source, least of all Laibman, could be cited) becomes clear. Put simply: there is absolutely *no* sense in which historical materialist theory "predicts" *any* human outcome! If development of the productive forces undermines an existing social formation, there is still no reason why that development must occur; really existing ruling classes in particular times and places decide what forms of development are in their interests, and those interests may or may not include the dynamic process whose potential points toward social transformation. If those in control of production in a particular social formation block and prevent technical change, stasis will result. In some other combination of conditions on the ground, including accidental factors such as the vision and perspicacity of a single individual (viz., Peter the Great in 17th-18th century Russia), a breakthrough will occur. The AST model does not determine the timing, manner, or even the ultimate coming-into-existence of theoretically identified transformations. Determinacy at the level of theory, then, does not contradict the all-important role of human agency in the actual historical process: nothing "happens" in history without the consciousness, will and actions of real human individuals. And progress through the sequence of antagonistic social forms toward socialist or communist forms is not inevitable, "pre-ordained," or guaranteed. For that matter, human survival as such is not guaranteed; we must summon the will to avoid nuclear or ecological extinction, or indeed stasis at some low level dictated by the effects of destructive actions of humankind under the thrall of unprincipled and thoughtless social systems – and the outcome is uncertain.

It should be clear that my affirmations of contingency and variety at the level of concrete history are not apologies, retreats, afterthoughts, or "admissions." They are based on, and take real meaning from, the AST, where an underlying determinacy and directionality is established.

Methodological issues

Now, any number of rather pointed questions, of an epistemological nature, jump to the fore. These are all discussed in *Deep History*, in passages cited by Yalcintas as “admitting” the “shortcomings” of my work. These questions, however, are central to any theoretical project that tries to move beyond the most simple-minded empiricism.

Most important, perhaps, is the issue of verification. Since the concepts of the AST (modes of production, productive forces, production relations, classes, stages) are not, as explained above, present directly in observable history, what validity criteria can be applied? Is the AST model subject to tests for falsifiability? A simple (perhaps too simple) analogy may be applied: does the theoretical limiting concept of a perfect vacuum in physics have validity as a component of our understanding of physical reality, if, by definition, a perfect vacuum cannot ever actually be observed, in (what we choose to call) the “real world”?

A related issue is that of “essentialism.” In a nutshell: am I trying to have my cake and eat it too? Is my distinction between two levels of abstraction like keeping a double set of books? The critique would run as follows: When I want to face up to the rigorous demands of the historical and anthropological literature, I embrace the contingency and variety of concrete social formations, and the openness of outcomes connected with them. When I wish to assert fundamental Marxist understandings, such as the essential directedness of humanity’s long march through successive class-divided social formations toward socialism or communism, I then invoke the comforting verities of the AST.

These are serious questions, and I regard the inquiry surrounding them as open; in this brief communication I cannot hope to address them in any sort of comprehensive fashion. I can, and therefore will, set out a few guidelines.

First, I believe that we should acknowledge that the criteria by means of which the “truth” of the core propositions of historical materialist theory may be confirmed (or disconfirmed) must necessarily be complex; indeed, of an order of complexity whose very existence is summarily denied by classical positivist methodology. The claim, for example, that a theoretical ordering of stages in the existence of class-antagonistic modes of production is determined by increasing sophistication of systems of incentive/coercion/control, made necessary by development of productive forces toward ever-higher levels of productivity, is clearly not a simple empirical

matter, like that of establishing whether or not British financial interests actively supported the Confederacy in the U. S. Civil War, or whether or not private smallholding cultivation was a significant element in the economies of ancient Mediterranean civilizations. (These latter questions, in turn, are empirical in a much more complex sense than simple "matters of fact," such as the names of the Kings of England or the population of China in the 14th century.)

The validity of (what I will call) the AST claims must ultimately be established on the basis of their fruitfulness in application to historical research. The precise elements of the model will themselves evolve, as the process of distillation from the historical record, and from continuing social and political experience, continues. This distillation, clearly, is never complete. Then the question becomes: does the evolving AST model helps us actually to grasp the complexity, variety, irony and contingency of experience in ways that are not open to naive empiricism? This would clinch the matter: the very intricacy of the immediate can only be comprehended when it is reconstructed on the basis of theory. Needless to say, arguments of this sort will not convince those who are strongly attached to empiricist or positivist modes of thought.

The full model – not developed here, for reasons of space – points to strategic functions of specific modes of production. These functions generally secure certain vital transitions: e.g., to stable reproduction of surplus extraction and formation of a leisured social upper class as the foundation for later productive development; or to intensive development of productive forces as the required foundation for generalization of commodity production and markets. The question then might be: could these vital transitions have taken place in the absence of the specific modes of production (e.g., slave, feudal) that hosted them in the world historical theaters where they are actually observed (viz., the Mediterranean ancient world; Northern and Western Europe in the "Middle Ages"). The problem is that the later spread of capitalism around the world and its role in "overdetermining" the development paths of Asian, African and Latin American societies destroys the social laboratory in which this sort of question might eventually have received an empirical answer. But even the counterfactuals are interesting. If the foundations for spontaneous internal market development, for example, could have been laid in some social context other than that of the manorial systems of European feudalism, we are prompted to look for the precise features of, e.g., Chinese and Indian societies prior to the 19th century CE that might have performed in this role. In this way, again, we are able

to grasp the specificities of non-European experiences to a greater degree than would be allowed by a simplistic, unstructured “empirical” account.

I hope these brief comments at least give an indication of how the AST model might both guide and be guided by detailed historical investigation. Could *any* results of this investigation lead me to the conclusion that the entire approach should be rejected; that we must go back to the drawing boards? Perhaps, as regards particular claims for the importance of certain stadial orderings. But the most basic of the AST claims – the list of essential relations, enumerated above – approach the status of *synthetic a priori* propositions: truths that are not merely logical inferences from definitions, but that also are not falsifiable in a sense that applies to empirical statements of fact.

Perhaps the final answer to the “have cake/eat it too” charge is to reiterate the point about the *indeterminacy* of the actual path forward. A conceptually rigorous historical materialism can bolster confidence in our *understanding* of the general direction – toward transcending class division, toward overcoming the subsumption of labor and of working people under the heel of capital and surplus extraction, toward democratic planning and principled social processes – that must be followed if change is to be accomplished in ways that support and release the fullest human potentials. But even if true, this *understanding* does *not* entail that the transition will actually be accomplished. It can only help inform the political will to achieve it, thereby contributing to the conscious process whereby the transition can acquire political reality, in time to avert several interconnected looming disasters that if unchecked could derail human progress for the foreseeable future, or even absolutely.

What, then, remains of the “evolutionary” critique?

My critic sees all this as “unbalanced research methodology”; attributes to me all manner of ideas that no one defends, least of all myself; and credits unnamed evolutionists for grasping a welter of truisms about the existence of alternative pathways in historical change, the centrality of agency in historical explanation, the importance of unintended consequences of intentional action, and so on, all of which I clearly share, as amply demonstrated by a careful reading of *Deep History*. One must wonder: what is actually going on here?

I can only conclude that Yalcintas, like many other historians, is prisoner of an unexamined commitment, to a view of history that resists any concept of a *deep structure* underlying human affairs, because that structure is precisely where the *solution* to the conundrum of necessity and accident, directedness and variety, determinacy and consciousness, etc. is to be found. He finds solace in a pastiche of "evolutionary" theorists, in whose works it is indeed hard to find a common core; this amalgam reduces, in effect, to repeated assertions that anything can happen in history, against a fatuous strawperson, the presumed belief that "there is an established trajectory, in which change must follow." Does all of this amount to a *de facto* rejection of the historical materialist proposition concerning the *need for* (not the "inevitability of") socialist transformation? One can't be sure.

In any case, Yalcintas believes that the important questions "remain to be answered." I will let readers decide whether his "evolutionist lens" or my structured approach to social evolution, as presented in *Deep History*, is the more appropriate vehicle for study of these important questions.

Endnotes

[1] Full publishing information for my book is not provided in Yalcintas' review. It is: David Laibman, *Deep History: A Study in Social Evolution and Human Potential*, Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007, pp. xiii, 224.

[2] For a presentation of the concepts "general" and "directed," as applied to versions of historical materialism, see Carling (1991, 2006). See also Wright, Levine and Sober (1992).

[3] A symposium on *Deep History*, with contributions by Paul Blackledge, Paul Nolan, Alan Carling, Julio Huato, and Diane Flaherty, plus a response by this author, appeared in *Science & Society* (2009).

[4] For an excellent recent presentation of this distillation process as identification of "natural and social kinds," based on the "kind-constitutive" properties of varied phenomena, which will not in general be directly observable, see Engelskirchen (2011).

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