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Review essay on David Laibman, *Deep History: A Study in Social Evolution and Human Potential*

Altug Yalcintas

Abstract: While historical materialism and evolutionism provide similar explanations and ideas regarding the cause of long-term social change, the two theories are rarely used in conjunction with one another. In *Deep History*, the author David Laibman addresses some of the standard questions of evolutionary social theory and attempts to bridge the two concepts, by showing that historical and materialist explanations are present in both Marxian and evolutionary interpretations of history. His goal: develop a Marxist theory of history from an evolutionist perspective, and surmount the traditional confines of historical materialism, so as to embrace evolutionary conceptions in explaining social change. However, the unbalanced research methodology limits the reach and depth of Laibman's contribution. The two main shortcomings of his work are discussed in the following sections: *The Audience Problem* and *The Evolutionary Problem*.

Keywords: Directionality, (un-)intentionality, contingency, path dependency, evolutionary political economy, evolutionary historical materialism, critical realism

Historical materialism is the idea that modes of production are a result of class antagonisms and the tension between production forces and production relations. As it stands, contemporary evolutionary theorists have typically refrained from utilizing this as a theoretical tool, despite harboring an affinity for historical explanations that suggest that material conditions—such as states and corporations—shape the social world in which individuals “struggle for survival.”

With this contradiction in mind, David Laibman, Professor of Economics at the City University of New York and editor of *Science and Society*, takes up the issue in his book, *Deep History: A Study in Social Evolution and Human Potential* (State University of New York Press, 2007), by “seek[ing] out explanatory principles that might help organize our understanding of ... our basic sense of ourselves, where we have been and where we are going to” (p. viii). Laibman, who has written numerous articles on Marxian concepts in the past [1], identifies some of the standard questions of evolutionary social theory—such as “Does history have a direction?” and “Are there principles that unify our experience and show connections among diverse places, times, and cultures?”—in an attempt to advance the conception of historical materialism, and generate a Marxist theory of history, from an evolutionist perspective. Essentially, Laibman’s work argues that historical and materialist explanations are present in both Marxian and evolutionary interpretations of history. In addition, he suggests that the traditional borders of historical materialism can be stretched so as to embrace evolutionary methodology in explaining long term social change. *Deep History*, however, fails to equally draw upon evolutionary political economy and the received view of human history, leaning more heavily on the latter, weakening the strength of Laibman’s argument and the depth of his contribution.

My purpose in this essay is to question the unwarranted prestige of the received view of history, which states that human society is evolving finitely towards a pre-defined endpoint, by assessing Laibman’s understanding of historical materialism from an evolutionary political economy perspective. I contend that concepts relevant to historical processes of social change, such as directionality, (un-)intentionality, and contingency, can be understood in terms of evolutionary historical materialism.

Insofar as I am concerned, there are two main shortcomings of Laibman’s work, details of which are discussed in the following sections: *The Audience Problem* and *The Evolutionary Problem*. *The Audience Problem* refers to the fact that the literature is limited in scope, neglecting key ideas, such as critical realism and radical evolutionary political economy, which causes unanswered questions to consistently arise. In addition, *The Evolutionary Problem*, which is more substantial than the former, has to do with Laibman’s epistemology of evolutionary political economy. He is less willing to expand the historical materialist viewpoint towards a more genuine evolutionary science, particularly

in regards to debates on directionality of social change, the role that (un-) intentionality plays in the processes of social change, and contingencies that might cause undesired lock-ins in history.

The Audience Problem in *Deep History*

At the onset, Laibman limits the reach of his argument by setting up an audience in the *Preface of Deep History*. An audience determines the context (i.e. conceptions, methodologies, evidence etc.) in which specific questions are picked up and answers are addressed and associated with other ideas that are present in the literature. Laibman argues that current Marxists need to free themselves from “quotology”—break from past Marxist works and stop validating themselves with the results already found by Marx and other contemporary writers (Laibman x). This can indeed promote creativity in Marxian scholarship, enhancing the quality of ideas shared. However, the lack of references to relevant existing literature can cause the underdeveloped theoretical discussions.

Laibman mainly addresses the historical materialists and heavily relies on the works of certain authors, as Paul Blackledge, Graeme Kirkpatrick, and Paul Nolan [2], and neglects many heterodox writers — among whom are critical realists— such as Roy Bhaskar and Tony Lawson, who have contributed to evolutionary social theory from a realism perspective [3].

Deep History uses concepts like “deep structures” and “surface appearances,” aiming to provide the reader with explanatory principles that “reach behind the veins of human experience,” and yet it overlooks the ways in which these concepts have already been used in evolutionary political economy. Critical realism, one such manifestation, is a philosophical movement that accounts for the internal social mechanisms that give rise to particular social outcomes. Critical realism argues that social reality is structured. Deeper structures of society are not always observable and can differ from the empirical surface phenomena. However, critical realists believe that these underlying structures of social phenomena, as well as their powers and mechanisms, determine the world as we experience it [4]. If Laibman had incorporated the ideas of critical realists, he would have allowed the reader to at least compare the different ways of understanding and analyzing social reality from both evolutionary and realist standpoints. Certain sections would have benefited from this, such as Chapter 5,

"A Stadiad Model of the Capitalist Era" (117 – 42). By including a greater variety of opinions on evolutionary political economy, Laibman could have softened this issue.

Classical evolutionary critics of Karl Marx, especially Thorstein Veblen and Joseph A. Schumpeter, as well as recent contributors to (radical) evolutionary political economy, such as Geoffrey Hodgson and Phillip Anthony O'Hara, have already provided insights into the institutional development of global capitalism. Veblen's critique, for instance, is that Marxian theory encourages "metaphysical preconceptions" in social theory [5]. Although Veblen does not argue that the value theory itself is metaphysical, he emphasizes that the naturalist philosophy in Marx's writings — such as the "natural right of workers to the full product of their labour" and the "nature of progress" (read: teleology) in the evolution of human societies — transforms Marx's theories of surplus value and exploitation into a discussion of metaphysics.

On the other side, institutional political economists have found that Marxian epistemology does not allow the theories of social evolution to be tested in empirical terms. Theorists have also argued that the "historical specificity" in Marx's analysis— chiefly in regards to his main objective in *Capital*, which was to examine the capitalist mode of production and not economies in general— is one of the major achievements of his historical materialist thinking. Marx's own line of reasoning, "has related itself so closely and directly to the general features of the capitalist socio-economic formation" [6]. As a result, the similarities between Veblen and Marx's works are more frequent than the contradictions. Evolutionary political economy complements (and even updates) Marx's historical materialism. Veblen's contribution is that he pushes Marx's materialist view of history towards more evolutionary lines. Essentially, evolutionary theory might contribute to historical materialist thinking, and *vice versa* [7].

There is a lot to be gained by fusing various aspects of evolutionism and historical materialism. In Laibman's case, his theory of social change is very similar to evolutionary theories of social conflict and social change, but he does not address the likeness between them. For example, his "lottery effect," which accounts for why property ownership is concentrated in the hands of a few *lucky* men, comes very close to Veblen's general theory of collective wealth in a capitalistic society, but there is no mention of Veblen. Nonetheless, it would be

inappropriate to judge the Laibman on the limited scope of his literature [8]. The purpose of this section has been to show that if Laibman had mentioned some of the controversies in the present literature on evolutionary political economy, he would have dramatically enriched his "study in social evolution." Ultimately, the audience problem diminishes the explanatory power of Laibman's view, especially on "human potential," and gives rise to a number of further theoretical tensions, which are to be discussed below.

The Evolutionary Problem in *Deep History*

The evolutionary problem in *Deep History* is that the author does not suggest a new mechanism for explaining social change from an evolutionary historical materialist viewpoint. Instead, Laibman uses "Darwinian" metaphors to replace some "official" or "utopian" perspectives of historical materialism with "evolutionary" ones (118). For instance, Laibman argues that in capitalist modes of production, culture replaces nature, and humans no longer evolve biologically (20). I do not think the argument can be made that because cultural evolution takes place at a more rapid pace, biological evolution has ended. Species in nature, including "species beings," have been transforming for millions of years while (capitalist) cultural evolution has only taken place over the few centuries. In fact, Laibman correctly states that world capitalism is still young. He claims that different variations of the Marxian idea of revolution, such as Lenin's formulation of the last and highest stage of capitalism, or the Frankfurt School's attempt to explain the absence of a working class in Europe, are mistaken in their predictions of the time it will take for capitalism to evolve. "There is simply no reason to assume *any* preordained time frame for social Change", Laibman claims (119). Indeed, capitalism has "failed" on several occasions to overcome ancient or feudal social institutions. However, such historical moments should not be considered "failures" but instead episodes in which social institutions transform and ascend to another stage. It can also not be argued that social revolution is postponed each and every time an organized attack on capitalist institutions fails. As a matter of fact, as Laibman states, "we are in a crisis of *capitalist* expansion, not a crisis associated with the challenge of socialism" (140, *italics* belong to the original). However, Laibman is incorrect in saying that species beings no longer evolve biologically and that cultural evolution, instead of biological evolution, is the only plausible theory that can explain social transformation. The issue of replacement presented here is highly

problematic because evolutionary political economy suggests that cultural and biological evolution theories should complement or agree, instead of replacing one other. An application of evolutionary theories into social life should not indicate that humans have ceased to evolve biologically.

As Laibman admits, his “conceptual geometry” methodology, which is rooted in the principles of economic modeling and aims to account for the ways concepts work in relation to one another, has many shortcomings. Weaknesses of this methodology include its over-simplification of variables and its isolation of externalities. Despite these shortcomings, figures presented in chapters 1 to 5 illuminate a number of important features of Laibman’s historical materialist theory. Most importantly, by emphasizing the fact that (i) the sequencing of capitalist stages was not present in any continent other than Europe (ii) particular phases of development are not unique to Western Europe, Laibman acknowledges the importance of “unparalleled facts concerning geography and climate” (23). Each stage in Laibman’s taxonomy, such as primitive communism or feudalism, is linked to the significance of different local conditions. Laibman’s system of theoretical stages therefore should *not* be seen as a set of development pathways applicable to all societies. In fact, Laibman emphasizes that the “causation” he intends to show is only indicative of potential: “historical materialism does not predict that the transitions identified in the Production Forces – Production Relations model ... will actually occur” (42).

Laibman’s Production Forces – Production Relations model is a theoretical tool used to account for the historical transitions from “primitive communism” to “slavery”, and from “feudalism” to “capitalism.” In this model, production forces and production relations are two aspects that together form a mode of production. The two interact with each other; neither plays the primary role. The central shortcoming of Laibman’s geometric methodology is that the dry nature of economic models used in some instances takes away from the flow and theatricality of the overall narrative. For instance, figure 5.1 serves as a visual tool to summarize Laibman’s account of social transformations (128). The overly schematic figure is not entirely applicable to the evolution of social institutions outside of Western Europe and completely ignores the cultural structures that lie beneath social formations. An alternative evolutionary view could be, for instance, that China and the Middle East (which play a peripheral role in Laibman’s model) are different “species” that belong to different levels in a linked system of cultures and nations. This is comparable to the natural

environmental system: species survive at different levels of the food chain. Like with species in the natural world, it is not in the best interest of cultures to force others to extinction. Instead, cultures interact and depend on each other. A break in the "chain" might impede the chance of survival for all.

Although Laibman clearly states the importance of "chance location in time and space," his account of historical materialism is not free from the strict directionality which has no or limited place in evolutionary thinking. Laibman writes that "the development of production forces through the entire period of class-antagonistic modes of production requires periodic replacement of production relations, in an order revealing *progressively more sophisticated and powerful means of coercion, incentive, and control*" (28, *italics added*) as well as that "each stage in a theoretical stadial model must be validated, by demonstration of its *necessity*" (30). Laibman not only contradicts himself but is also non-evolutionary in his account. 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-Marxian rhetoric of directionality. An evolutionary perspective is better practiced when one accounts for both necessary and contingent conditions in the process of social evolution. Because Laibman is content with an analysis that only explains commonalities among several unique occurrences, his account fails to highlight the specificities of different stages of societies across the globe.

Laibman argues that in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997), Jared Diamond overemphasizes the significance of geographical factors such as climate or varying land masses, but neglects the internal structures of societies. According to Laibman, Diamond does not address class formations, production relations, and property rights (45). Laibman suggests that thinking in more qualitative dimensions would allow Diamond to move away a strictly linear view of human progression. Not all civilizations, Laibman argues, go through the same stages from simplicity to complexity. Laibman critiques Diamond for not taking into account the fact that all civilizations, European and non-European alike, are complex social bodies situated in their own time and place. "Geography is necessary, but not sufficient, to fully explain historical outcomes" (47), "some attention to internal social relations adds explanatory power to a model based simply on food surpluses, complexity, and conquest", Laibman says (46).

While Laibman correctly points out this shortcoming of Diamond's account, he fails to articulate an alternative direction. Laibman says, for instance, "large-scale states in East Asia, Africa, and the Middle East failed ... in the geographically determined capacity to transform the primary tribal, or communal, social units into subaltern classes – something civilizations elsewhere than in western Europe and Britain, for different reasons, were not able to accomplish" (48). The question that Laibman should have asked here is: should societies transform from tribal structures into classes? What is the "real" answer to Diamond's original question of "Why Europe, not China?" There is no single evolutionary pathway which would lead a society to a wealthier state, just as different evolutionary pathways disallow species to converge. Divergence among nations can stem from structural and historical reasons. In Western Europe, social evolution has resulted in class-based societies. If the initial conditions in Europe were different, class society perhaps would have never stepped into capitalist modes of production. Though class-antagonistic societies in Europe have performed better than their counterparts in changing world conditions, we cannot draw a general rule from this observation. Having internal class relations is one factor that is necessary and sufficient for a society to outstrip others in the global arena. Laibman claims that "in a sense, the slogan 'class struggles is the motor of history' is inexact; it should be replaced with: 'class struggle must become the motor of history' if the transition to communism is to be realized" (51, *italics* belong to the original). Laibman views class struggle as political struggle, claiming that societies need to be organized into classes in order to evolve towards a communist stage. Class struggle, as Laibman admits, is not the only motor of history. Other social formations exist in parallel, these formations sometimes diffuse social pressures towards communism – if communism is a focal point at all.

Laibman's unbalanced research methodology reveals itself in many other statements, such as: "feudal Production Relations are significantly (qualitatively) more complex than slave Production Relations. Similarly, Laibman also states: "capitalism achieves (because it requires) a still higher level of complexity, in relation to feudalism" (69). Capitalism might require, in some occasions, more complex class structures than "primitive" stages of human societies. Capitalism might also require different spheres of the economy and society to be interrelated with each other. This is a prerequisite for social evolution to take place under capitalism. But social evolution does not require

more complex organisms to survive. This is an empirical question about historical specificity.

A major problem with Laibman's evolutionary account of social change is the different ways in which social phenomena works at different levels of sociality. Laibman aims at overcoming the dichotomy between "hard" and "soft" theory. In hard theory, explanations seek and account for commonalities in human experience. Because hard theories pay attention to only law-governed phenomena, they may suffer from a lacking in empirical foundation. Soft theories, on the other hand, include explanations which insist "upon variety and the irreducible uniqueness of each historical situation" (4). In deciding between pursuing hard or soft theory, the theorist must make a choice between different levels of "Abstract Social Totality" (AST). Higher levels of abstraction, Laibman claims, provide the researcher with tools to select among contingent and accidental factors, including the consequences of human agents at personal levels. Lower levels of abstraction provide the researcher with a sum of experience and evidence needed for confirming, reconfirming or disconfirming theories at higher levels. Laibman's description of the various levels of abstraction and reality resembles the hierarchy of levels of selection that evolutionary biologists often speak of. Levels of biological selection refer to natural selection that takes place at different units: genes, cells, individuals, species etc. Even though genes and individuals are part of one process, natural selection may increase the frequency of some genes at lower levels while decreasing the frequency of some individuals at higher levels. Laibman writes: "I still accept the responsibility to support the theory from the evidence and experience of history" (4). By writing so, Laibman indicates a tension between different levels of social abstraction and different levels of selection in nature. This leads the reader to conclude that he is in favor of natural selection at "higher" levels of abstraction.

In reality, explanations at different levels do not necessarily conflict with each other; they might even be complementary. For instance, if the frequency of genes decrease (or increase) at the same rate as that of species, we can conclude that the properties of genes and species are *co*-selected for. Moreover, there is a score of evidence in evolutionary sciences that selection takes place at different levels in different occasions and no particular type of selection is paramount to others. Why then reduce the use of higher level theories of social evolution to lower level theories of social evolution? Why support the evidence and experience of

history ("lower" AST) as opposed to theory ("higher" AST)? If the frequency of individual events (such as accidents and chance events) is higher than the frequency of law-governed development, there is no reason to insist upon "high" theory. If the process which the theorist attempts at explaining is a process of "macro-evolution", such as mass extinctions, the phenomenon may be explained in terms of "high" levels. If the process is a "micro-evolutionary", such as the domestication of animals, individual events shape social life at a "lower" level. In conclusion, there is no need for Laibman to position himself in favor of one level over the other. Explanations at different levels of abstraction provide different insights into the same phenomenon.

Laibman's "system of theoretical stages" is a simplified model of social evolution. Through this model, Laibman demonstrates the "primary colors" of capitalist modes of production at each socio-economic stage. As Laibman acknowledges, AST can only take place in a world in which there are no obstacles that would render it impossible for the evolution of humanity to move towards a utopian stage. This world would be "one continent, with no mountains" (5). There is no world which is sufficiently liberated from the consequences of contingencies and random events [10]. "The model does seem to provide for a combination of variety and contingency in actual accumulation experiences with the systematicity and determinacy of the general process of accumulation," Laibman says. "Capitalism is both one and many," he also states (115). Contingencies and random events are important because they are the *raison d'être* of the evolutionary pathways in which human societies evolve at different paces and in isolation from one another. There are "blockages," in Laibman's terms, which come about as a result of several "lock-ins". Some of these blockages cannot be easily overcome because the transformation requires enormous social and political costs. If human agents are unable to lock out of such pathways, if "the consciousness-based movement that can eventually resolve a contradiction and initiate a new stage in socio-historical evolution" does not take place, then there is no guarantee that inequality, injustice, or class antagonisms can completely or partially disappear (6). Societies are often stuck in several pathways where the social and political costs of social transformation are too. No evolutionary process is a process of "ongoing perfection". "The conditional inevitability of progress towards a society of equality, solidarity and fulfilment" has never been the objective of any social evolutionary process in history (22). When societies liberate themselves from these pathways, there is no guarantee that institutions would progress either. There is no directionality in the historical evolution of human societies.

Progress, advancement, and ongoing perfection, in other words, have never been the purpose of social evolution.

The question here is the following: does the tension between production forces and production relations, two components of the mode of production, lead the evolution of societies to a predefined endpoint? To quote Laibman, "does the mode of production have an immanent or necessary tendency to change and develop, and, if so, where in the [mode of production] does this tendency reside?" (8-9).

An evolutionary historical materialist response to this question should seek an answer in the negotiations between the different levels of abstraction, in which on the one hand, history moves in the absence of a "designer," and on the other, humans, who have the capacity to change their environment, intentionally transform (or design) the "core institutions" (i.e. production relations) of the society according to a preset goal. Laibman insists that "crises *must* occur," as class-antagonistic societies "unavoidably" or "systematically" produce a cyclical movement (93). However, apart from the fact that the cyclical movement of (macro)economic variables, such as the rates of unemployment or the rates of surplus value, is statistical and not only a property of the capitalist mode of production, but all historical modes of production, there is no evolutionary causation that necessitates a particular variable to fluctuate "unavoidably" or "systematically."

So why does (evolutionary) historical materialism require an understanding of tendency and inevitability? The answer lies in the fact that re-disciplining the working class or increasing the rate of the working class's dependency on the politics of upper classes is not sufficient enough to establish an endpoint that gives rise to the replacement of capitalism with socialism or communism. There must be some genuine evolutionary mechanisms (such as conspicuous consumption, genetic drift or punctuated equilibrium) that make antagonistic class processes inevitable. Throughout *Deep History* though, Laibman fails to touch upon this key issue.

Despite the fact that humans are capable of conscious activity, the interactions between people and their relationship with the material world does not always bring about ("progressive") social change. For instance, the unintended consequences of human action tend to have the cumulative effect of orienting society down a specific course, in which production relations push society

towards a state of equilibrium. Evolutionary thinking offers several examples in which this sense of stasis dominates the entire process of social change for long periods. Essentially, social evolution can be stuck on this forceful path, and substantial change might not take place within a reasonable time span. Thus the question arises: can this "tendency" really be overcome?

Laibman doubts its persistence. He argues that this "tendency" (and "correspondence") will eventually arrest. His skepticism about the long-lasting unintended consequences of human action lies in the fact that "there is no such thing as non-intentional labour" (54). Certainly, an act of labour is often intentional, but the results of these actions can be "non-intentional."

Intentionality, a quality of human consciousness, can produce a plethora of consequences, which can only be accounted for after an empirical investigation. We cannot justify the argument *ex ante* that there is no such thing as *non-intentional* consequences of labour. The significance of empirically investigating the consequences of human action is that some of the unexpected repercussions of certain decisions and actions, can generate an effect so far reaching and influential, that their causal importance can rise exponentially.

However, one can never predict just how many outcomes will be intended or unintended. Therefore the question is not whether "intentionality is still at the heart of what separates us from other species," but the question neither is whether unintentional human action is reducible to intentional human action, and whether human actions generate unintended consequences in class antagonistic societies (55). Class struggles *do* lead to unintended consequences, so are the consequences of unintentional human action significant? This is a matter of empirical investigation on the frequency of unpredicted effects. Essentially, the key question remains, how should we explain unintended human action in evolutionary historical materialist terms when they give rise to significant consequences?

Mainstream economic sciences are completely ignorant of the problem of agency. One of Laibman's contributions to (evolutionary) political economy is that he shows that an agent that is the cause of everything that happens in human history. However, *Deep History* does not answer one final question: Who has the agency to transform society? A class? Specific Individuals? There is no mention or analysis of revolutionary organizations, social and psychological motivations, or instincts regarding a revolutionary practice. Will a socialist revolution take

place spontaneously? Perhaps. But there is no reason to argue that there is an established trajectory, in which change must follow. For example, socialist societies can still transform themselves “back” into capitalist societies. If *Deep History* had utilized an evolutionist lens in its treatment of directionality, (un-)intentionality and contingency, it would have provided a more compelling account of “inevitability” and “necessity.” Such questions regarding evolutionary historical materialism remain to be answered.

Endnotes

[1] See, for instance, Laibman (1992) and (2006).

[2] Blackledge and Kirkpatrick (eds.) (2002) and Nolan (1993).

[3] Lawson (1997) and (2003).

[4] See Bhaskar (1975), Archer *et al.* (1998), and Fleetwood (1999).

[5] Veblen (1906) and (1907).

[6] Hodgson (2001: 49). See also Hodgson (2006: 11 – 80).

[7] O’Hara (2000: 19 – 97).

[8] Other missing references include Gould and Eldredge (1977), Levins and Lewontin (1985), and Smith (2001).

[9] On evolutionary pathways, “lock-in”s and the general theory of path dependency see Yalcintas (2009: 61 – 98).

[10] This brings to mind the notion of transaction costs – a notion that plays a significant theoretical role in evolutionary political economy.

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