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Review of "On Deep History and the Brain"

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Review

Smail, Daniel Lord. *On Deep History and the Brain*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008.

It may be worthwhile for teachers to set aside what will likely be their poor first impressions of Daniel Lord Smail's *On Deep History and the Brain* – that and his first three chapters. Smail recognized and admitted many of the unsatisfying flaws inherent to his book. It falls far short of an actual 'deep history', and he acknowledged, "how frustrating it can be to read about how and why we should contemplate a deep history without seeing the history itself." (p. x) Smail failed to practice much of the deep history he defined as, "Any history that straddles this buffer zone, bundling the Paleolithic and Neolithic together with the Postlithic. The result is a seamless narrative that acknowledges the full chronology of the human past." (p. 2) Even more regrettable than pages of argument for deep history without deliverance, he lingered for three chapters on an examination of historical religious and ideological barriers that prevented scholars from writing deep history in the fashion he advocated. In pivotal chapter 4, Smail synthesized observations about biology, the brain, and behavior that contain important implications that ought to shape our thinking about, and teaching of, history and culture.

Before skipping directly to chapter 4 readers would do well to explore Smail's useful challenge to a traditional world history in the grip of what he called sacred history. In the sacred history civilization originated, as the Judeo-Christian bible placed it, in Sumer. Interested readers looking to avoid his book can find this Smail argument published previously as "In the Grip of Sacred History" in the *American Historical Review* 110 (2005): 1337-61.

Secondary textbook authors apparently do not read *AHR*, or have yet to respond to Smail's call for an end to sacred history. This reviewer, as a high school teacher engaged in book adoptions for two world history courses, can unfortunately confirm that secondary textbooks still hold to the narrative influenced by sacred history placing Sumer and Mesopotamia first and foremost in the discussion of early civilizations. They typically start with unsatisfying short chapters on what they call 'prehistory,' and very much in the vein disparaged by Smail in which the Neolithic serves as a foil and contrast for the history that moves beyond 'pre' once civilization commenced. The sense of a break with the past remains sharply delineated. When it comes to discussing 'civilization' these texts then

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proceed chapter by chapter from Sumer to Egypt and then on to either China or India, perhaps getting around to Africa and the Americas around chapters 5-8. The American secondary school textbook version of world history remains mired in the paradigm of sacred history.¹

The notable and exciting exception escaping the grip of sacred history is the recently published *Ways of the World: A Global History* by Robert W. Strayer from Bedford/St Martin's in 2009. Strayer's comparative and thematic approach to global history embraces deep history and the African origins of humanity. His Prologue titled "From Cosmic History to Human History" includes 13.7 billion years of "The History of the Universe" and later "The History of the Planet." Strayer, in proper deep history fashion, focused chapter 1 on Paleolithic Africa and the globalization of humanity. In chapter 2 he surveyed the world's first farmers bridging the Paleolithic to the Neolithic including Southwest Asia, China, Saharan Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Highland New Guinea, the Andes, Mesoamerica, and the Eastern woodlands of North America. Further, in chapter 3 on first civilizations Strayer incorporated Olmec, Norte Chico, Nile Valley, Shang Chinese, Mesopotamian, and Indus Valley civilizations unified thematically. Strayer's text ought to find its biggest market in Advanced Placement world history classrooms, but would also be a strong choice for college-preparatory advanced, honors, or upper-class world history classes. Early secondary and less capable high school world history students will continue to suffer the lesser alternatives – at least until the text authors and publishers catch up on the recent historiography. We can also hope that when they do catch up on deep history they also notice the morphological evidence that contradicts their tired old racialized portrayal of Aryans in India during the Vedic age as 'light-skinned and blue eyed.'² We can do better in texts copyrighted during the 21st century.

Smail finally hit his stride in chapter 4. He persuasively synthesized recent scholarship in biology and neurophysiology that, "cultural practices can have profound neurophysiological consequences...Humans have relatively plastic or manipulable neural states and brain-body chemistries." (p. 117) He noted that cultural devices such as religious rituals and ceremonies, sports, public spectacles such as executions, gossip, and military

¹ Merger mania in publishing seems to be heading toward fewer and fewer titles; that seemingly bodes ill for the future with regard to quality. Even with a modicum of competition the grip of sacred history seems too strong to break. The following titles begin history in Sumer: *World History: Patterns of Interaction*, Holt McDougal, 2008; *Holt World History: Human Legacy*, 2008; *World History: The Human Experience*, Glencoe, 2008; *Prentice Hall World History*, 2009.

² The texts cited previously as in the grip of sacred history also include out of date racialized presentations of Aryans as 'light-skinned and blue eyed'. Ten years ago Padma Manian synthesized late 20th century research on ancient India and effectively exposed the flaws in the texts published in that period. Ten years later H.S. texts have not fully responded to the research on this topic despite the fact that they have all introduced new copyright dates. Padma Manian, "Harappans and Aryans: Old and New Perspectives of Ancient Indian History," *History Teacher*, v32 n1 p17-32 Nov 1998.



training stimulate the production or reuptake of neurochemicals and create and remove synapses and receptors. Recent research shows that genes create what are best considered potentials and predispositions, but as Smail pointed out in a key passage, "Genes alone are not enough to build deep grammar in the absence of specific developmental experiences. These developmental exercises are not only environmental; they are also cultural. In this way, culture can actually be wired in the human body." (p. 131) In addition to genes and environment, culture intervenes in shaping brain structures, human feelings, and ultimately human behavior. The significant implication well worth forgiving the flaws of *On Deep History and the Brain* relate to Smail's use of recent neurophysiological research to expose the cultural constructions of gender norms. Humans respond to stimuli in various fashions, and "the wiring that typically associates a stimulus with a typical response was put there by culture and upbringing. This is how gender norms, as cultural constructs, embed themselves in physiology. The existence of such hardwiring has fooled many observers into thinking that gender traits are genetic rather than cultural." (p. 153)

In the last chapter Smail engaged in 'speculative observations' regarding the psychotropic mechanisms. He admitted that psychotropic mechanisms, "are manifestly untestable when developed as hypotheses in historical contexts." (p. 159) His speculations, while interesting, at this point hold little in the way of usable history from the perspective of this high school history teacher.

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