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David Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*

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This is an imperialist book for historians to read and enjoy. Many will want to argue with its claims. But such is the fate of empires: to stimulate opposition as well as to exert influence. The most fundamental of David Lord Smail's claims is that 'everything in time is part of history'. To me, this proposition seems absolutely axiomatic. Yet it carries with it the radical idea that History should constitute a new framing for the configuration of knowledge. And that argument undoubtedly throws down the gauntlet to many established disciplines.

Smail's first three chapters analyse the bedrock of the historical profession and its conventional temporal divisions. He challenges the basis for the traditional differentiation between the long millennia of so-called Prehistory (pre-literacy) and the advent of 'real' History (with literacy). Smail rightly notes that non-literate communities in literate eras are not precluded from historical enquiry. Why then should pre-literate

humans be omitted from the story?

Furthermore, the terminology of 'Prehistory' seems to imply that early people lived in a static and somewhat boring temporal antechamber, being governed by brute 'biology' before human 'culture' had really begun. Yet there is ample evidence, such as organised burials and cave art, which throws serious doubt upon such a chronological schism.

Hence Smail calls instead for an inclusive 'deep history' that welds the Paleolithic with the Neolithic and the Postlithic. He accepts that such a development will meet with opposition. In fact, the eventual disappearance of the term 'prehistoric' was predicted as long ago as 1912. Yet the countervailing power of continuity has so far impeded such a change. Smail attributes that state of affairs to inertia, enhanced by the institutionalisation of the disciplines and by the historians' alleged fetishism of written documents over all other sources.

Moreover, he identifies numerous experts who have claimed to find a qualitative division between the eras of Prehistory and History, with people in the earlier Time-zone lacking and the second having a historical consciousness. Smail might have added, too, that the historians are not alone in sticking to traditional boundaries. Numerous prehistorians defend their separate academic terrain and its name as 'Prehistory', albeit depicting it not as brutish and boring but as challenging and distinctive.

Yet, notwithstanding these professional demarcations for practical purposes, Smail surely must be right to argue that the study of the human past logically entails the study of the whole human past. So far, so good.

Then Smail goes further in offering his own interpretation. His tale properly starts in Africa, with an essential reminder of the cousinhood of wandering humanity. His big theme focuses upon the 1.7-million-year evolution of the large and intricate human brain. Tired old debates, such as nature versus nurture, are to be sidestepped, since the two features are

intimately interlinked ‘as every right-thinking observer has long suspected anyway’ (p. 119).

Rigid theories that detect a pre-determined model of ‘natural’ socio-biology for all humans are rejected outright. The specific school of thought known as Evolutionary Psychology is also discarded. Historical sociology does not substantiate its universalist ‘Stone-Age’ derived model, in which all men act as promiscuous seed-scatterers, seeking to perpetuate their genes, and all women act as nurturing mothers, seeking to pair-bond with high-ranking, powerful men with ‘good’ genes.

Instead, for Smail, as for many biologists, natural selection operates through interactive frameworks and potentials. He rejects an easy identification of individual genes all carefully coded ‘for’ the production of some special trait or behaviour. Biology and culture are bonded together and co-evolve. As that occurs, humans display sundry common characteristics but a degree of polymorphism too, both individually and across different societies – as, for example, in the case of human skin colouration.

The secret of change, for Smail, lies in the dynamics of neuro-history. He lightly sketches the ‘mood-altering practices, behaviours, and institutions generated by human culture’ (p. 161) and their changing impact over time. So he posits an unfolding development from the Palaeolithic wanderers to the relatively settled peoples of the Neolithic (with the advent of agriculture and class distinctions) to the restless ‘Moderns’ within the capitalistic marketplace, which endlessly produces new stimulants to tempt jaded consumers. The historical evidence for these ‘neuro-mood’ stages is, however, disappointingly impressionistic and the scientific evidence nugatory. In this part of his argument, therefore Smail cannot be said to have proved his case.

Will the specialist demarcations between biologists, neuro-scientists,

palaeontologists, archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists, prehistorians, and historians come to an end? It seems doubtful. On the other hand, will the cross-disciplinary interactions continue to grow, with integrated studies of human culture and socio-biology. That outcome seems very likely. The case for studying all history ‘viewed long’ is hard to resist. And period boundaries are welcome matters for fresh debate by historians, while they cudgel the complex brains which the human species has collectively evolved through deep time.