Response

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Michael Sugrue's paper is replete with incisive criticism of the fundamental problematic posed by consciousness for the Marxiam theory of history. The meta-theoretical assumptions of Marxism are subjected to careful and thorough scrutiny.

The question is asked: What is the relation of the material conditions to individual and social experience? Is this simply a relation between economic base and socio-political superstructure?

Unpacking this question further we can ask: What is the nature (structure) of this relation itself? Two Marxist understandings address this question, each in its own manner. (1) The Linear conception of dialectical materialism assumes that the material conditions strictly determine class consciousness--consciousness is a reflection of the structure of the economic base. The posited relation is one of univocal uni-directionality. (2) The circular view of history ascribed to historical materialism acknowledges the reciprocal conditioning dynamic of material substrate and the effective activity of consciousness. Thus consciousness is conceived of as an effective mirroring process as well as a passive reflection. The relation is characterized by equivocality and reciprocity.

Michael strikes a raw nerve when he speaks in his notes (Note 11) of Marxian historicism and its implicit epistemological nihilism. This nihilism stems from the consideration of consciousness as one element amongst others within the realm of history. We proceed via this predicament to the question of the genesis of meaning. How can meaning emerge from "mute" material conditions? How can the "blind forces of history" be expected to proceed in a pre-determined direction, known in advance and having a specific telos. "Progress" as telos manifests a tacit pre-understanding within which it is secured and through which it is operative as the "taken for granted." We can call this pre-understanding of the spatio-temporal lineaments of the life-world perspectivism.

Marxism, conceived as the elucidation of the "March of History," articulates one perspective amongst others

within the world perspectivally understood. I will employ the following example to help clarify this point.

A mountain, is literally a "material condition" which can be studied by the natural sciences in order to provide a strict account of its objective features. This self-same subject of objective investigations also offers a variety of significations for human praxis:

1) for the pioneer family on their Western trek, the mountain presents itself as an obstacle blocking their path
2) for an industrial magnate driving down the highway, the mountain may be a potential source of appropriation
3) for an earth-bound awareness attuned to the cyclical rhythms of nature, the mountain may be a sacred abode
4) to the mountain climber--a challenge to be scaled
5) to a yogi--a site for meditation

Each of these significations is operative in accord with a distinct spatio-temporal context. Have we then come full circle from a historical to a hermeneutical (cultural) relativism,--from one relativism to another, each with its attendant nihilism?

The problematic of the collapse of meaning at the meta-theoretical level can be met by the recognition that although the "material condition" mountain is latent with a wealth of possible significations, all these lived-experiences share a common substrate. The question of meaning-constitution shows up in lieu of transcendental subjectivity, the conditions of possibility of any awareness per se.

The meaning-constitution of this geological site for varied pre-understandings, each correlative to its spatio-temporal horizon, stands in a relation of substrate to determinations. Consciousness, in the mode sense-bestowal, opens an access to "immanence" which cannot be found within history as one of its dependent moments. Consciousness emerges as the very medium through which sedimentations in the mode "history" and creativity in the mode "culture" show up.

To start things rolling with the discussion I would like to ask Michael: we can mention examples of nearly identical material conditions yielding widely divergent hist orical proceedings. Do you think this circumstance warrants the complete meta-theoretical invalidation of Marx's historical materialism?