

Human Nature in Psychohistory Revisited

Beyond Hierarchy: A Response to Allcorn and Stein

Brian D'Agostino

ABSTRACT: The prevailing paradigm in organizational research neglects the role of unconscious dynamics in organizations. Allcorn's and Stein's critique of this literature, appearing in the Winter 2020 issue of this journal, corrects this omission. The authors then attribute hierarchical organizational structures to "human nature," which adds no explanatory power to their analysis and entails two fallacies. This review essay builds upon the authors' description of organizational dysfunction while offering an alternative analysis of fundamental causes. Topics include family origins of authoritarianism, the evolution of capitalism, workplace democracy, parenting education, and collaborative schooling.

KEYWORDS: authoritarianism, bureaucracy, capitalism, hierarchy, human nature, parenting education, worker cooperatives, workplace democracy, school reform.

"**I**deology, Bureaucracy, Hierarchy, and Human Nature in Psychohistory" by Seth Allcorn and Howard F. Stein appeared in the Winter 2020 issue of *The Journal of Psychohistory* (vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 168-187). I present here a review essay intended to stimulate a wider discussion of the important issues the article raises.

HIERARCHY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The authors discuss the topics listed in their title on the basis of their own long experience as organizational consultants, as well as various academic literatures, including organizational research and psychoanalytic

anthropology. They discuss interactions among factors. Most notably, organizational structures on the one hand serve to contain and manage unconscious anxieties and other complexes. On the other hand, however, these same structures—especially in the form of vast, multi-leveled hierarchies—concentrate decision-making power in the top office, infantilizing the vast majority of managers and workers. Such structures, which subject employees to performance expectations without giving them the control over their work necessary to meet these expectations, create new anxieties and exacerbate pre-existing ones.

Hierarchical workplaces by their very structure perpetuate psychologically toxic cultures even if CEOs and other top executives are not especially narcissistic or authoritarian as individuals. But organizational structures and personalities interact in such a way that top positions of power in fact tend to attract narcissistic and authoritarian individuals, setting up further dysfunctional dynamics that engulf the whole workforce to varying degrees. As a result, organizations typically become arenas for projective identification and the acting out of unconscious complexes—including domination-submission dynamics, personal insecurity and security seeking, and victimization and scapegoating.

Allcorn's and Stein's analysis offers a far-reaching critique of prevailing organizational theory. The latter incorrectly assumes that private and public sector organizations maximize (or at least satisfice) rationally chosen values, such as shareholder value or the policy preferences of democratic electorates. Although the authors do not say so explicitly, their analysis calls into question one of the pillars of neoliberal ideology, namely that free markets impose discipline on capitalist firms, making them more rational and functional than public sector bureaucracies. In contrast to this picture, the authors show that the dysfunctional features of bureaucracies arise from their hierarchical structure combined with human psychology, and thus operate in private corporations no less than in government agencies.

RETHINKING "HUMAN NATURE"

I agree entirely with Allcorn's and Stein's description of organizational dysfunction. My problem with this article is where the authors attempt to explain organizational structure as an expression of "human nature." Here we encounter an ahistorical viewpoint that is common among many psychoanalytic and other thinkers, including those who avoid the term "human nature" in favor of a discourse of "being human" or "human universals." As Allcorn and Stein put it, "This approach illuminates what it means to be human in all historical periods and in all historical and cultur-

al manifestations of human nature" (p. 168). They refer to "the light and dark sides of human nature" that explain everything from altruism and ecological stewardship to genocide and ecocide (p. 177).

There are two profound fallacies operating here. First, it is incoherent to define human nature as constant and universal and then invoke it to explain organizational structures, which vary greatly across historical periods and across different societies during the same periods. To explain anything, a cause must co-vary with the effects it is intended to explain. An unchanging "human nature" cannot explain, for example, why hunter-gatherers were relatively egalitarian while pre-capitalist agricultural societies were relatively stratified (Lee, 1990; Sanderson, 2007). Nor can it explain why the French embraced absolute monarchy during the Seventeenth Century while the English embraced revolution, or why the Confederacy fought the U.S. Civil War to maintain slavery while the Union abolished it after the war. A constant factor—"human nature"—cannot have such variable effects.

The second fallacy is the circular reasoning of attributing an effect to a cause that is essentially the same as what one is trying to explain. Hippocrates, for example, claimed that some people are depressed because they have too much of a substance having "melancholic" properties. This is equivalent to saying that they are depressed because there is something in them that makes them depressed, which explains nothing at all. This same kind of circular fallacy has vitiated explanations of human destructiveness ranging from original sin through Freud's death instinct theory. Similarly, Allcorn and Stein argue that humans enact life-affirming and destructive behaviors because of life-affirming and destructive ("light" and "dark") tendencies in "human nature," which is a completely circular and empty argument.

What then, can in fact explain the variation in organizational structure found in different periods and cultures, as well as the variation in personality across individuals? One such grand theory, Lloyd deMause's psychogenic theory of history, attributed variation in large scale structures across historical periods and cultures, as well as in the personalities of individuals, to changes in the microcosm of parenting (deMause, 1982). To be sure, his specific typology of child rearing modes and their correlates in the historical macrocosm were highly speculative and have not been tested by a program of empirical research. But the psychogenic theory did have the virtue of explaining observed variation in terms of a factor that co-varies with and is conceptually independent of the phenomena to be explained, thus avoiding the two abovementioned fallacies.

I do not agree with deMause's project of reducing history to psychology, and argue instead, with Adorno and the Frankfurt School, that there is a

dialectic between historical macrocosm and psychological microcosm. But by contrast with Allcorn and Stein, deMause provides a conceptual framework for thinking about cultural and individual variation in a genuinely historical way. Nor was the macrohistorical importance of child rearing unique to deMause's thinking, as the writings of Alice Miller (1980/2002), Philip Greven (1990), Milburn and Conrad (2016), Denis O'Keefe (2018) and this author (D'Agostino, 2018; 2019) attest.

THE HISTORICAL MACROCOSM

Attending to the evolution of parenting historicizes what Allcorn and Stein call "human nature." At the same time, organizational structures have changed throughout history due to large-scale processes that have their own internal logics, such as population growth, technological change, and the relations of production (Lee, 1990; Sanderson, 2007). In agricultural societies from the ancient world through the 19th century, elites controlling land accumulated wealth produced by slaves or serfs. These relations of production largely determined organizational structures in agricultural societies, and new organizational structures arose under capitalism when merchants and manufacturers accumulated wealth produced by craftsmen and later by wage workers.

Indeed, it was early modern capitalism in its progressive phase from the Dutch Revolt to the American Civil War that swept away serfdom and slavery. Beginning in the 19th century, however, the rise of the modern corporation ushered in a new and authoritarian phase of capitalism that continues to this day (D'Agostino, 2019; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2005). These corporations, and modern nation states based on similar methods of organization, are the historical arenas in which Allcorn's and Stein's workplace stories unfold. Far from being manifestations of a timeless hierarchical principle inherent in human nature, these institutions came into existence under specific historical circumstances, currently appear to be in a period of crisis, and may well give way to less dysfunctional and more egalitarian forms of organization in the Twenty-First Century. In the remainder of this essay, I want to supplement the authors' framework with some research along these lines, drawn from the literature on workplace democracy.

DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION

Working in the tradition of Thorstein Veblen, Seymour Melman examined modern bureaucratic dysfunction in the context of capitalism as a system of production (Melman 1983; 2001; D'Agostino, 2005). Near the end of the 19th Century, Frederick Winslow Taylor's "scientific management"

gave birth to a bureaucratic method of organizing production. Also known as Fordism, this new organizational structure removed decision-making about the production process from workers and vested it in top managers (Melman, 2001; Clawson, 1980). Lenin, who turned Marxism into a state religion, also embraced scientific management (Lenin, 1918), negating in practice the worker empowerment that the Bolsheviks professed in theory.

While corporate capitalism and Soviet communism both embraced organizational hierarchy, Melman argues, the labor movement (especially in Europe) learned to constrain the arbitrary decision power of capitalist managers through collective bargaining agreements that not only improved wages and benefits but also expanded to some extent workers' control over their own work (Melman, 2001; D'Agostino, 2005). In addition, the ethic of equality and relatively equal pay promoted by unions contrasts with the cult of CEOs and astronomical CEO compensation. Meanwhile, on the periphery of the corporate economy, producer cooperatives experimented with full worker ownership and control of enterprises. To be sure, most unions themselves ossified into bureaucracies and many cooperatives, like the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation, struggled to maintain their founding principles, such as not hiring wage labor. All this was understandable in a larger context of corporate capitalism, but the persistence and partial success of such worker control initiatives may point to a new and more egalitarian mode of production emerging in the Twenty-First Century (Melman, 2001; D'Agostino, 2005, 2012, 2017; Schweikart, 2011; Wolff, 2012).

Canadian economist Gregory K. Dow, in a seminal review of voluminous empirical evidence and a groundbreaking theoretical analysis, concluded that enterprises owned and controlled by their workers are generally more efficient than enterprises owned by outside investors and controlled bureaucratically under prevailing systems of corporate governance (Dow, 2003). Worker controlled firms typically have flatter administrative structures than traditional capitalist firms and greater participation of all members in production decision making (Dow, 2003). Workers are prevented from instituting such arrangements on a larger scale not by any inherent limitations of "human nature" but by the limited access of workers to capital under a distribution of wealth and legal and political arrangements that favor enterprises controlled by capitalists (Dow, 2003; D'Agostino, 2017).

To be sure, psychological and cultural transformations are needed along with transformation of the larger system of political economy and its property arrangements. Here, reforming punitive parenting and authoritarian schooling are essential. Since children play at parenting with dolls, humane parenting curricula can and should be introduced into school systems. One

organization, *Prepare Tomorrow's Parents* (2020), is in fact promoting precisely that agenda.

In addition, schools need to empower young people to take control of their own studies, individually and in learning teams, which in fact is already occurring in many innovative schools even in spite of a larger education system that is hostile to such pedagogy. The Coalition of Essential Schools (2020) is one network that promotes collaborative pedagogy and school governance. Young people who learn in such schools are well equipped with the psychological and social skills needed to succeed in collaborative workplaces.

In summary, the dysfunctional organizational dynamics and ideologies described by Allcorn and Stein are typical of workplaces under our current system of political economy but are the product of historical processes, both large scale and in the family microcosm, not timeless features of "human nature." Psychohistorians can accelerate the emergence of more egalitarian and less dysfunctional structures by promoting parenting education and related reforms.

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Hierarchy, History, Culture, and Being Human: A Response to D'Agostino

Howard F. Stein & Seth Allcorn

We wish to thank Dr. D'Agostino for taking much time and effort to pen a thoughtful review essay to our paper. Our response here will focus on what we see as the central arguments in his critique. He argues that our essay rests on two logical fallacies:

1. a form of reductionism (a term which he does not use, but implies) in which a constant is invoked to explain variation, in particular, variation in organizational structures over time and culture, thus the necessity of co-variance of causes and different effects; and

2. an indulgence in circular reasoning which attributes an effect to a cause, as a result of which the explanation and what it is to be explained are identical (i.e., that human nature accounts for human nature). He then utilizes the evolution of child-rearing model of Lloyd deMause and others to account for the variations in societal and organizational forms.

Dr. D'Agostino concludes that our arguments are ultimately less than adequate as theory, and that what we mistake as explanations are perspectives that remain to be explained—by approaches and a model he offers in their stead.

We begin by acknowledging the enormous contribution of deMause to understanding cultural and historical variation, but as a partial theory, and not an overarching theory that explains everything. Specifically, one of deMause's signal contributions to understanding the role of unconscious forces in parent-baby relationships, history, and culture, is his recognition and emphasis on *early parental/caretakers' projection of destructive, unacceptable, and repudiated parts of parents/caretakers' unconscious onto and into the mind of the baby*, so that a large part of the baby's "own" unconscious mind is the introjected "bad object" that is and was murderous, abandoning, and controlling.

This approach complements the well-known work of Melanie Klein in studying the *baby's* projection of the unconscious split into good/bad breast into the adult maternal caretaking figure. From this viewpoint, "the" unconscious is not entirely unitary and constant, but is intersubjective, thereby leaving room for reduced parental projection, increased compassion, and improving parent-baby relationships.

Having recognized this, we believe that the concept of human nature, together with history of childhood, and with it, the idea of human improvement over history, complement rather than mutually exclude one another. Specifically, we suggest that the darker side of human nature (our focus in the paper) serves as a "governor," driven by anxiety, that triggers personal and societal regression to early defenses and violence. At least for a time, these protective efforts undo and reverse the psychogenic and intersubjective process of improvement. DeMause characterizes these improvements as experiencing and treating other people—from babies to adults—as whole, separate, people deserving of compassion (the lighter side of human nature). However, during times of psychosocial stress, trauma, regression, and panic, people tend to revert to fundamental psychological defenses, as a result of which "different," alien, and enemy Others (including ideologies and organizations) become objects, things, to exclude, degrade, and hurt if not destroy.

Let us ask: Is it fallacious to suggest that what humanity is, who we are, and our human nature, are rife with change and variation across time, since at a *surface* level, our social forms of organization and production, appear to be so different by culture, nation, geography, and historical period? Perhaps we need to look at a different level of analysis of the phenomenon we seek to account for, to determine whether there are *any* constants of human nature. Of course, at the most conspicuous level, as cultural and historical relativists argue, all societies and time periods differ from each other and are *distinct*, and, *at that level*, involve *distinct* explanations.

In our paper, however, we suggest there are underlying similarities if not an identity between disparate forms of social organizational and production, even though on the *surface* they appear to be different. The underlying organizing dynamics of bands of hunter-gatherers, agricultural villages filled with craftspeople (cottage industry), and vast corporate and state operated modern-day industries are, from a depth perspective, much more alike than they are different.

For instance, there are observable systems of thought (ideologies), combined with established and many times rigidly adhered to, relational and commercial systems that are bureaucratic in nature and are managed via hierarchical relationships that provide for the authorization of a few to act on behalf of everyone (chiefs, elders, shamans, kings, and paid administrators that operate the corporations that form the basis of capitalism).

What, then, might account for these *recurring* patterns of organizational attributes across thousands of years? We perhaps point out the obvious. Human beings are involved in every case. They "are" the organization and social groupings. Answering questions like "Why are we here?" and "How should we relate to each other?" are underlying principles that create the constant repetition of systems of belief (capitalism, communism, socialism, egalitarianism) that to improve efficiency and effectiveness evolved bureaucratic structures with missions, goals and objectives, as well as policies and procedures that are passed word of mouth (e.g., "We don't do *that* here.") or in thick manuals. Further, critical thinking evolves over time to respond to changes in the task environment. What works is kept, and that which does not work is discarded (sometimes referred to as "progress").

However, we underscore that this dynamic process that may evolve systems of belief (ideologies), family, tribe, organizational structures, and rewrite manuals does not, at least so far in human history, change the underlying need for people to agree on why we are here, what should we do to survive, and how can we work together to accomplish this.

Thus far, we have focused on largely rational, reality-oriented, conscious, human processes in organizational decision-making and structure. Of course, there is an immense and entirely deeper unconscious, irrational, anxiety-driven, often dark and destructive dimension to being human. It undermines, sabotages, even destroys the work of rational, reality testing in the life of all culture and history.

This occupies most of the attention and work of psychohistorians. Far from permitting, let alone nurturing, progress in child rearing, human relationships and thought, it drives individual and group defensiveness, rigid thinking, eruptions of violence, endless unsuccessful repetition of efforts to master trauma, and the inability to learn from experience. As we have written in numerous papers in this *Journal*—on the Age of Donald Trump, and earlier, on deregulation—American culture—and all culture—is driven by desperate efforts to reduce if not eliminate anxiety, and with it, the replacement of reality testing by shared fantasy (called by deMause, “group fantasy”), rigid ideology, and authoritarian leadership and group process.

To draw upon another well-known and rich example from psychoanalytic, psychopolitical, and psychohistorical research from Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in the 1970's through Vamik Volkan in recent decades, the *inability of groups to mourn losses* (leaders, battles, wars, territory, pride, etc.) leads to intergenerational transmission of trauma, and the obligation of future generations to “complete” the mourning by righting old wrongs, undoing humiliation, reversing history in the present, and exacting revenge from current generations. A vicious downward spiral of repetition leads to re-enactment rather than grieving, working through, acceptance, reparation, and resolution. Here, unconscious forces unmistakably drive history and shape culture.

Dr. D'Agostino argues that the bureaucratic workplaces we describe are manifestations of our current system of political economy, which in turn are the product of historical processes, and not “manifestations of a timeless hierarchical principle inherent in human nature,” “not timeless features of ‘human nature’.” We suggest that he is setting up a “straw man” in asserting that this is what we argue. Rather, to use the word “principle” seems to overstate what is rather an amorphous, omnipresent set of behaviors driven by stressors/trauma (that may change), anxiety responses, regression, and then intentional and unintentional responses to reduce the anxiety.

We commend to Dr. D'Agostino the vast literature from a century of ethnographic research and psychodynamically-informed scholarship by psychoanalytic anthropologists from Géza Róheim through George Devereux, Weston La Barre, Melford Spiro, George DeVos, L. Bryce Boyer, Robert Endleman, and Robert A. Paul, to name but a handful who have explored

unconscious underpinnings of culture from hunter gatherers through contemporary mass capitalistic societies.

To summarize our response: All human cultures and historical epochs, all shapes and sizes of social hierarchies from hunter-gatherer bands to complex urbanization, and all types of bureaucracies, are as much or more driven by dark, irrational, self-destructive, unconscious forces, than they are by rational, techno-scientific, reality-driven, conscious, historical, and political-economic forces. These are, ultimately, the invisible guiding hand of organizational life, culture, and history.

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A Further Reply to Allcorn And Stein

Brian D'Agostino

I agree with most of what Seth Allcorn and Howard Stein say in their response to my critical review essay, but don't see how it really addresses the two fallacies that I attributed to their analysis. Regarding the first fallacy—invoking a constant factor to explain variable effects—they say that they are not fundamentally concerned about variation, but rather about recurring and invariant patterns. Regarding the second fallacy—circular reasoning—they cite psychodynamically informed research on the origins of the will to dominate, as I will call it for lack of a better term. To see why neither of these responses adequately engage the fallacies I indicated, let us begin with an excerpt that summarizes the authors' position:

In our paper, however, we suggest there are underlying similarities if not an identity between disparate forms of social organizational and production, even though on the surface they appear to be different. The underlying organizing dynamics of bands of hunter-gathers, agricultural villages filled with craftspeople (cottage industry), and vast corporate- and state-operated modern-day industries are, from a depth perspective, much more alike than they are different.

For instance, there are observable systems of thought (ideologies), combined with established and many times rigidly adhered to, relational and commercial systems that are bureaucratic in nature and are managed via hierarchical relationships that provide for the authorization of a few to act on behalf of everyone (chiefs, elders, shamans, kings, and paid administrators that operate the corporations that form the basis of capitalism).

Let me state clearly at the outset that I fully support the project of identifying recurring features of reality and underlying invariants that might explain them. Indeed, that is the essence of science and much of Western philosophy from Aristotle and Spinoza to Hegel and Marx. The first step in building this kind of explanation, however, is to classify the diverse phenomena at issue in a way that captures the essential features that we are trying to understand. A useful concept in this regard is what Max Weber called "ideal types." Applied to the present topic—hierarchy—we would classify human societies or forms of organization along a continuum between two ideal types that we can call "egalitarian" and "hierarchical." We might then ask why the phenomena of history unfold between these two poles.

In the paragraphs quoted above, however, Allcorn and Stein lump unlike things together and omit other things that belong in the typology. They talk in one breath about "bands of hunter-gathers, agricultural villages filled with craftspeople (cottage industry), and vast corporate- and state-operated modern-day industries," even while omitting slavery and serfdom, which were the central institutions of most agricultural societies for centuries, and worker-controlled enterprises, an emerging organizational form. Following a classification according to ideal types, we instead need to put hunter-gatherers, free townspeople, and worker-controlled enterprises near the egalitarian end of the continuum, and slave plantations, feudal manors worked by serfs, and today's authoritarian corporations and governments near the hierarchical end.

We also need to avoid the second fallacy that I outlined—the circular reasoning of invoking as an explanation something that is essentially the same as what one is trying to explain. If we say that humans repeatedly enact the competing ideal types of "freedom and equality" vs. "domination and hierarchy," we cannot invoke "light" and "dark" forces within human nature as explanations. This would amount to saying that humans institute regimes of domination because of an unconscious will to dominate, which explains nothing at all.

To be sure, Allcorn and Stein do invoke a psychodynamically informed explanation of the will to dominate *for individuals*. But the circular fallacy continues to apply to this explanation on two levels. First, the authors appear to hold a Kleinian version of Freud's ahistorical and discredited death instinct, which plays the role of a circular explanation. From a biological point of view, a "death instinct" is complete nonsense, as Wilhelm Reich, Eric Fromm and others have pointed out; organisms that sabotage or otherwise harm themselves, or that gratuitously harm other organisms on which they depend for their own survival, tend to die out faster and reproduce less. Many humans appear to have such tendencies, but natural selection cannot be the reason and the word "instinct" is therefore highly misleading. While Melanie Klein's version of the death instinct differs from Freud's, it still entails a circular fallacy when invoked as a cause.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with saying that humans have conflicting tendencies, which can aptly be called Eros and Thanatos; that is entirely acceptable in the realm of description and metaphor. The circular reasoning comes in when we leave the realm of description and posit Thanatos as an explanatory principle. Then we are saying that domination, violence, war and any other behaviors that we consider death-like are *caused* by a death-like tendency innate to humans.

Note that deMause's psychogenic theory avoids this circular reasoning by identifying the cause of human destructiveness as relational trauma resulting from inadequate infant care and child care, which then gets passed down and reproduced from generation to generation, though with room for evolution and progress. While the authors acknowledge this psychogenic theory, they then proceed to disregard it by interpreting deMause ahistorically through the lens of the death instinct.

The most striking and uncontroversial fact that this ahistorical picture omits is the relatively flat social hierarchies that apparently prevailed during humanity's long prehistory, compared with the highly stratified agricultural societies of recent millennia, characterized by slavery and serfdom (Lee, 1990; Sanderson, 2007). Nor is there any reason to assume that humanity's future will resemble the highly stratified pattern of our recent past rather than our much longer, relatively egalitarian prehistory.

To be sure, Allcorn and Stein can easily avoid this problem at the level of individuals and the family microcosm by adopting a psychodynamic analysis of the will to dominate, such as deMause's theory, that does not rely on the death instinct or some similar explanatory construct. But this raises a second consideration involving the circular fallacy, namely that a will to dominate residing in individuals cannot account for larger social structures of domination. To say that these structures occur because individuals have an unconscious will to dominate sounds plausible but amounts to circular reasoning at the sociological level, and explains nothing. Also, apropos the first fallacy, the fact that these structures vary greatly across historical periods and cultures means that an unchanging human nature can tell us little or nothing about their etiology.

This leads us to one final point. Even if domination is a valid ideal type for describing the past, historical evolution may render it defunct in the future. Slavery existed as an institution for many centuries until it didn't. Similarly, there is no reason to believe that capitalist corporations, which came into existence in the 19th century, will last forever. If they are replaced with worker-controlled enterprises, then hierarchy in the workplace could be virtually abolished. In today's Mondragon enterprises, for example, worker-owners routinely hire and fire professional managers (Dow, 2003). It appears that the managers gradually accumulate power, and as soon as the worker-owners feel they are no longer serving their interests, the managers are replaced.

Moreover, the plutocracies that dominate the world's political landscape today are predicated on capitalist property arrangements that concentrate society's wealth into fewer and fewer hands. In a world of worker-owned

enterprises, extremes of wealth and poverty would be abolished—as slavery and serfdom were abolished with the help of capitalism in its progressive phase—in favor of a world in which every person owned a stake in his or her society's productive assets and the income generated by them. (Workers would own capital directly, and citizens unable to work would have a claim on income redistributed by the state, as occurs even in today's plutocratic regimes; see Schweickart, 2011 and D'Agostino, 2012).

Once the problem of hierarchy has been clearly conceptualized according to ideal types, and the limitations of the typology recognized, we have a solid basis for exploring such issues and identifying the conditions under which today's hierarchical organizations can be replaced by more egalitarian arrangements. On the basis of an adequate classification of egalitarian and hierarchical societies, we can also explore such historical questions as why slavery and serfdom replaced more egalitarian band and tribal forms of organization and why these hierarchical institutions were abolished in the 19th Century in favor of capitalist corporations. Allcorn and Stein may not be concerned about these issues, but any grand theory of history that purports to illuminate deep causes must engage them.

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