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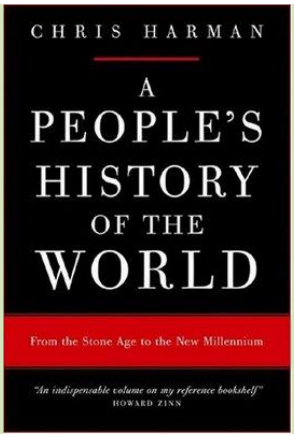

Chris Harman
A People's History of the World
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In this review I'd like to say a few things regarding the structure and pedagogical use that Chris Harman's magisterial *A People's History of the World*[1] (henceforth *A People's History*) may be put to. First, one can glean the structural and philosophical parameters of this text from a look at the book's table of contents and from certain key passages. Second, upon closer examination of these indices, one may construct a theory not only of class divisions and the potentials within history for overcoming class divisions—as was Harman's wont—but a systemic view, per se, of historical change. Third, and finally, this review uses the lens of structure, only implicit in Harman's work, to provide an explicitly systemic view of historical change, drawing upon a Marxist-systemic frame and making use of Marx's notion of social metabolic reproduction. While there is much in the literature on the concept of metabolic reproduction or rift, this review will not address nitty-gritty issues pertaining to the criticism. Rather, it will offer an introductory glimpse into the ways in which this notion (henceforth SMR) can be combined with concepts of structure, system, thermodynamics, and entropy in order to cash out a general view of historical change for pedagogical purposes.

I. Where Harman's Narrative Betrays a Structural Take on Historical Change

It is essential to notice that the organization of Harman's table of contents indicates historical distinctions which are crucial to the philosophical underpinnings of *A People History*. The book begins with a section entitled, "The Rise of Class Societies."Note, for

[1] Chris Harman. *A People's History of the World*. Bookmarks. London, Chicago, Sydney: 2002.

Harman, societies are not there in advance, but must come into being; they are subject to a genesis. Thus, societies exist, but in a dynamic fashion. But for Harman, societies are not only the outcomes or products of precise historical processes; they are structured bundles of social relationships. Here, Harman remains of course thoroughly Marxist, especially with his emphasis on class structure. The point to digest, though, is that societies are dynamic not only because they *emerge* in historical time—understood as a succession of moments from time 1 to time 2—but because they sustain a dynamic component within any given section of historical time. In other words, even in a discrete, isolated moment of succession, societies are, in every instant, undergoing precise processes of structural reproduction. Over time, this structural reproduction accumulates and forces certain pathways of development. Still, any present moment itself contains a historical dynamism within it. Thus, Harman accepts that societies are objects that continuously undergo a dynamic genesis, but one engendered along with a structural force. Societies emerge into being within the order of succession, they dynamically reproduce their structure for a while, and then, once this structural reproduction ceases, they fade away or collapse. Harman could not distinguish history in the way that he does, between class and non-class societies, between feudal and capital social systems, if he did not presuppose philosophically a difference in the very structure of these dynamic, historical societies. If non-class societies were not in essence, that is, structurally different from class based societies, it would be senseless to refer to the "rise" of class societies.

Such basic philosophical commitments make possible the distinctions Harman offers readers in his table of contents between a great variety of historical moments: "Prologue: Before Class;" "The Great Transformation;" The Birth Pangs of a New Order;" "The Spread of the New Order." Harman decidedly does not believe, for instance, that class societies are natural or that capitalism was there in advance, buried within the primeval potentials of hunter-gatherers, waiting to enter upon the historical stage. No—for Harman, such views are in fact *a*-historical and ideologically harmful. Besides, he could not use the vocabulary of transformation and birth that he does if he presupposed some a-historically universal structure destined to one day find its way into historical light. Harman appreciates the contingency of structure.

Moreover, Harman's basic philosophical commitments regarding structure, genesis, and contingency enable him to read history critically. Given his commitments to the Marxist tradition, Harman says something basic and unsurprising when he rejects the 'Great Man' approach to history and places emphasis on the role very ordinary people bring to even monumental historical change. But he goes further. He is critical of this too simplistic view because it merely reproduces the division between hero and average person, between master and slave, thus reinstating the division under a different rhetorical guise or political preference. In the 'Introduction' to his text we can see how structure is what is key for Harman in undermining this simplistic approach to history, "but such 'history from below' can miss out on something of great importance, the interconnection of events" (iii). What else provides the interconnection of events but the structure that binds elements together such that they can be connected? A glimpse into the concepts of system and structure in

the history of metaphysics confirms that structure just is the organization of relations that bind elements of a particular type together. Yet Harman integrates concepts of structure and system into his basic historical narrative.

Here, again from the 'Introduction' to *A People's History*, is an essential passage that betrays Harman's view on structure, and even suggests that his methodology is structural and systemic:

> Simply empathising with the people involved in one event cannot, by itself, bring you to understand the wider forces that shaped their lives, and still shape ours. You cannot, for instance, understand the rise of Christianity without understanding the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. You cannot understand the flowering of art during the Renaissance without understanding the great crises of European feudalism… You cannot understand the workers' movements of the 19th century without understanding the industrial revolution. And you cannot begin to grasp how humanity arrived at its present condition without understanding the interrelation of these and many other events.
>
> The aim of this book is to try to provide such an overview. (iii)

First, Harman speaks of wider forces, forces that go beyond the actions of individuals and thus become forces that are systemic. Not only this, such wider forces actively shape the actions and ideas of individuals. Thus, we can posit an element of social structure, a systemic force, which impinges upon individuals, left alone. Even more crucially, Harman states specifically that we cannot understand any set of interconnected events (structure-system) without an understanding of the inter-relations between these and the events which preceded them.

> Such changes do not, however, occur in a mechanical way. At each point human beings make choices whether to proceed along one path or another, and fight out these choices in great social conflicts. Beyond a certain point in history, how people make their choices is connected to their class position. The slave is likely to make a different choice to the slave-owner, the feudal artisan to the feudal lord…. This approach does not deny the role of individuals or the ideas they propagate. What it does do is insist that the individual or idea can only play a certain role because of the preceding material development of society, of the way people make their livelihoods, and of the *structure*
> of classes and states.[2] (iv)

Harman's is clearly a systemic understanding of historical change, but I would like to enrich this argument by providing a basic view of the Marxist-systems theoretical framework on historical change.

II. Social Metabolic Reproduction, In Brief

It is Marx who coins the term social metabolic reproduction (SMR) in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*; the term is also related to his notion of metabolic rift, developed

[2] Emphasis mine.

in conjunction with empirical studies in *Das Capital*, Vol. 3.[3] There is a good bit of scholarship on this concept today. John Bellamy Foster of Monthly Review is here representative,[4] though much of the pioneering work on this concept can be traced to Istvan Mészáros.[5] There is also criticism of Foster's view.[6] Basically, SMR refers to the ways in which societies take certain material inputs—Harman likes the example of the iron plow developed in feudal agriculture—and transform these into socially useful outputs, ultimately, the reproduction of the society itself. Though this language is not Marx's, the concept of inputs/outputs help grasp the metabolism associated with the term. Input-output refers to structure, but also to metabolic process, for instance in the way in which one might eat an apple (taken as input) in order to derive caloric nutrition (as an output). It is clear that Harman's structural view of history owes a great intellectual debt to Marx's development of SMR. I shall explain it briefly below, without reference to Harman.

Stated more formally, SMR refers to the processes through which society's direct inputs and outputs of energy, matter, and information toward the maintenance of the structurally necessary components required for their continual reproduction. The concept helps to grasp structural cycles of growth, collapse, and social regeneration. Applications of the concept identify the structural crises of that affect social systems. Social systems must continuously reproduce core, structural components, over time, in order to maintain their integrity, as systems, against perturbations from their environment. If the core structures of any system are not reproduced, then the system will undergo determinate crises. For example, the feudal/seigniorial system depended on certain inputs—e.g., an agricultural surplus product, distributed in a certain proportion between lord and vassal, precise obligations, services, and bonds of fidelity between the social networks—ultimately, when these structural components could no longer be reproduced, the feudal system collapsed (the feudal system underwent a bifurcating phase change, opening the space for the system of capital to emerge). Thus, the driving idea behind SMR is that the dynamic historical structure of a society can be understood by looking at the way it directs inputs and outputs in the service of reproducing its structurally necessary components.
With respect to the SMR of capital, for instance, the capital system must constantly convert the bulk of its energy, materials, and information into the continual reproduction of the following structurally necessary components (brief list):

--A structurally enforced inequality between capital and labor.
--Constant accumulation of capital with an expanding profit motive.
--Property system with private ownership of means of production.
--An, in principle, uncontrollable global market with fetishistic production objectives.

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[3] Marx, Karl. 1981. *Capital, vol. III*. New York: Vintage, 949.
[4] Foster, John Bellamy (1999). Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology. *The American Journal of Sociology* 105 (2): 381.
[5] See his magisterial *Beyond Capital*.
[6] Moore, Jason W. (2011), "Transcending the Metabolic Rift: Towards a Theory of Crises in the Capitalist World-Ecology," Journal of Peasant Studies 38(1), 1-46.

--Nation-state system as framework of international relations where each state confronts each other, sometimes violently, over the control of inputs and outputs.
--Nuclear family which socializes individuals to ensure the legitimization of the minimal, status-quo objectives of the state.
--Regulation of biological reproduction.

If a significant portion of these structurally necessary components of the system of capital are removed, the system demonstrates signs of crisis and the integrity of the system is threatened by collapse. This framework allows one to grasp crisis phenomena in terms of the system's reproductive strategies. Indeed, one of the main focuses research in SMR is to identify the systemic bases of what appear to be a diverse set of structural crises and to try to examine the causal links between these crises and the system that generates them. For instance, one might use the concept of SMR to systematically examine the following crises, common to the system of capital:

--Cyclical problems with over-accumulation and underproduction (boom and bust cycles), examining these cycles on systems terms.
--The appropriation of labor by capital (including the separation of the majority of the population from access to the inputs defining the means of subsistence) and so,
--The structure of the ownership of means of production and the productive resources and technologies used to extract surplus labor.
--Dependency on material resources (e.g., hydrocarbon inputs) for surplus production (both industrial and financial).
--Monetary system and reserve banking, fiat money, the financialization of the economy as a process brought about by the social metabolic reproduction of capital.
--The politics of nation-states and national identities within the various international relations frameworks as problems of (political) representation, again, in relation to the capital system's social metabolic reproduction.
--The problem of poverty vis-à-vis global governance institutions like the IMF and World Bank as control structures within the capital system's economy (in its transition from control of agricultural surplus through tariffs and trade organizations to a more general financialization of the economy, e.g., securitization of mortgages and loans).
--The philosophical and ontological presuppositions underlying the various ideologies of capitalism and its value system, understood systematically.

Again, each of these crises must be understood not as isolated problems, but systemically, in terms of the system's overarching, social metabolic, reproductive strategies. Research oriented around examination of SMR is thus trans-disciplinary, taking insights from economics, philosophy, political economy, and historical analysis of civilizations. Because the reproductive strategies of any social system must be viewed in relation to the historically-entrenched systems that precede them, this kind of research is also macro-historical. Just as with Harman's example from the 'Introduction' to *A People's History*, an understanding of the capital system based on its SMR grows out of an understanding of the crises of the feudal system, which in turn must be analyzed in relation to the collapse

of the Roman Empire, etc.. Without such historical and comparative analysis of societies, which employ an interdisciplinary methodological orientation, the historicity of the social systems cannot be shown; nor can one establish critical insights into a society's reproductive dynamics.

III. A Systems Pedagogy

Harman's text advances a SMR-based pedagogy that is both structural and conceptual. What is ingenious about such an approach is that it allows teachers to defeat problems inherent to narrative and causal explanations. Take my World Civilizations class, for example. There I point out that we can tell hundreds of stories about the collapse of Rome, for instance, but it is difficult to determine which story is most valid, which set of causes had the most impact. In my view, we can be much clearer about the *structural* make-up of Rome. Which basic structures, economically, politically, judicially, etc., had to be in place for the Roman Empire to reproduce itself systemically? To be brief, Rome depended on a system of slave labor and on pillage at its periphery, their maintenance and reproduction. Rome reproduced these labor and wealth-appropriating structures again and again over time, systemically. When it could no longer sustain these structures throughout the system, it suffered collapse. Naturally, we can learn a lesson from Rome. What structures must we reproduce systemically today? Which ones can we afford to reproduce and which ones can we no longer afford to reproduce? What new structures must we develop in order to thrive in a world defined by a system that is clearly experiencing revolutionary upheavals and highly complex environmental challenges, not just in ecology, but in politics and the economy? What structures can we sustain today, not just in the wealthiest enclaves of society, but considering the global system as a whole? If the entire, global system is not taken into account, then surely we will go the way of Rome, we will collapse.

Harman helps readers to understand that we must first grapple with the naïve lesson of systems: everything, ultimately, is related to everything else. What happens in one corner of the globe, eventually, ripples throughout. If we face global problems, do we not then require global solutions, solutions that, in principle, must be geared toward a vision of universal social justice? We can leave this question unanswered, but it is useful to appreciate that such a universal politics follows directly from viewing our current social metabolism as one that is itself global and interconnected. For, mere reform solutions to global problems cannot affect the structure of a system the very structure of which produces inequalities and inequities, as Harman believed of the global capital system. Indeed, this is one of the reasons Harman advocated so vociferously for revolution as opposed to reform in *A People's History*. Throughout history, the key problems societies faced were for Harman structural, buried in the core of societal reproductive practices so deeply embedded in everyday practices. In this way, they became hidden from plain view and did not revolve around or depend upon the actions of great men, left alone. For Harman, we can only get at what is hidden through reflection, and this reflection must itself be systemic. For us, the pedagogical moment consists in recognizing that certainly we need new concepts if we are to help students grasp historical change, ones which are

oriented toward grasping the deep structural problems that plague us today which, by definition, cannot be treated in isolation, but must be reflected upon and tied together systematically before they can be taken on in an adequate fashion.

Harman's belief was that possessing a structural and systemic view of history offered readers insight into a general theoretical strategy for recognizing the conditions making future historical transformation possible—a strategy synonymous with the act of historical thinking itself, understood systemically. Recognition of these conditions helps students to effectively isolate the contexts in which they live and act as well as those of those they study. Furthermore, recognition of these conditions is essential because students bring to instances of historical understanding their own perceptions, as well as interpretations of historical contexts that are bound up with them. When students imagine that their perceptions do not belong to their own particular historical contexts, history loses its structural integrity. What is here glossed over is recognition of historical difference *at the level of structure*. Hundreds of years of disciplinary researches in the humanities have, albeit indirectly, reinforced this habit; it is based on the assumption that the liberal subject lies at the base of communication and action. Harman's understanding of history gives students the tools to undermine this belief. Here, the system concept replaces the concept of the liberal subject. Getting a feel for the systemic complexity of historical epochs, students are far less likely to assume that their interpretations of the world characterize the interpretations of historical others.

In my many years of teaching I have built my pedagogy around a vision of getting students to think critically rather than via any insupportable contemporary ideology (such as might be attached to a particular political regime with unscrupulous economic interests). Basically, I encourage students to distinguish between different forms of SMR, between different historical systems (with their structural elements and relations, the ideologies, economies, politics, and ways of doing things, that define each uniquely) in order to get students to understand that historical thinking is based on genetic dynamisms which must be studied in their own right. The point, for me, is to get students to think critically about what historical thought entails and requires so that they can become more effective thinkers and more strategic doers. Harman's *A People's History* is one of the essential texts that aid me in doing this.