

Reviews

Chris Harman *People's History of the World* – John Molyneux / Breandán Mac Suibhne, *The End of Outrage*, Tiarnán Ó Muilleoir / Iain Ferguson *Politics of the Mind: Marxism and Mental Distress* & Johann Hari, *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and the Unexpected Solutions*, – Eoghan Ó Ceannabháin.

A classic work republished

Chris Harman,
A People's History of the World
– from the stone age to the new millennium'
Verso, 2018.

Review by John Molyneux

■ Verso have just reissued Chris Harman's classic *A People's History of the World*, first published in 1999, and they have done so at a very cheap price – it is currently available online for just £9.99. This is a great service to both historiography and to the socialist movement. The publisher's blurb states, 'In this monumental book, Chris Harman achieves the impossible – a gripping history of the planet from the perspective of struggling peoples throughout the ages' and, for once, the product lives up to the advert. What follows is an extract of the review I wrote of this magnificent book at the time.* I would just add that the extreme escalation of the environmental crisis and recent rise of the far right internationally make the conclusion drawn at the end of the book and of

my review regarding the challenge facing humanity more relevant than ever.

Speaking at Marx's funeral, Engels proclaimed that 'just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history'. This theory, known as historical materialism, begins from 'the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing before he can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.' and it has proved the essential foundation for any serious revolutionary practice. It has also given rise to many works of concrete history, including a number of indisputable masterpieces – Marx's own studies of contemporary French history, Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, CLR James's *The Black Jacobins* or EP Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.

But one thing the tradition has not produced – until now – is a totalising account of the whole history of humanity. There are obvious reasons for this omission – the immense knowledge required and the intense demands on the time and energy of the movement's best minds. There has also been a crucial political factor,

however: the baleful influence of Stalinism. Quantitatively speaking, the greatest concentration of intellectual resources under the banner of Marxism was assembled in the ranks and orbit of the Communist Parties in the middle decades of the century. But at precisely that time, large and crucially important chunks of world history were politically off limits for serious and honest research. Nevertheless there is a real need for such a work. The bourgeoisie, of course, has its own account, or rather accounts, of world history. These range from attempts by individuals (Toynbee, HG Wells) to the teams of specialists at universities round the world working on every subject under the sun. Our rulers are keenly aware of the need for intellectual hegemony. They know that the more revolutions can be written out of past history, the easier it is to rubbish the case for revolution today. The further nationalist sentiments can be projected back into history, the more Nelson at Trafalgar can be made heir to Drake on Plymouth Hoe, Henry V at Agincourt and Alfred burning his cakes, the more natural it will seem to support 'our' boys in the Gulf or Kosovo. Even the earliest history is made to serve ideological purposes. The more pseudo-scientific literature

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and popular images suggest that 'cavemen' behaved like 'Neanderthals' or vice versa (ie as stupid, violent and brutish), the more this is made to seem like basic human nature. The bourgeois version of history is strongest when it is the only version on offer. This is what makes Harman's book so necessary and so welcome. Now for the first time we have an accessible and serious Marxist account of the whole damn story which can be counterposed at every point to the bourgeois view. Of course, as Harman recognises in the introduction, it cannot literally be a total history of the whole world dealing with every important event and process—that would require many, many volumes. But it is a totalising account which tells the story of humanity from our emergence as a distinct species to the present day. As such, it is an awesome achievement.

Methodical analysis

However, it is not primarily an achievement of scholarship and industry, impressive as they are, but of method. From start to finish Harman maintains the firmest of grasps on the central insight of historical materialism: that in the final analysis all history depends on the production of the necessities of life; that every advance in the effectiveness of this production alters the social relations between people and the ideological and political temper of the age; that classes whose rise is linked with the emergence of new ways of producing develop, once in power, a vested interest in the existing forms of property, relations of production

and state superstructures, and so become a fetter on further development unless and until they are themselves overthrown by a new and more progressive class. Armed with this method Harman is able to make sense of the rise and fall of a multitude of societies (civilisations) in the course of history. He shows they are neither an arbitrary chain of accidents nor the fulfilment of some mystical design, but the outcome of material contradictions and the dash of real social forces. Yet at no point does this become an exercise in mechanical economic determinism, as the caricaturists of Marxism always claim. This is no tale of the inexorable march of progress or the inevitable triumph of socialism. Harman never loses sight of the fact that in the struggle of the classes different outcomes are possible. He shows how the first great civilisations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Crete and the Indus Valley all succumbed to deep crisis which led in some cases to the desertion of cities and regression to less developed stages of production. He then demonstrates how ancient Rome went into decline due to its need for an endless supply of slaves and its failure to develop its productive forces—contradictions which no social force within the empire was able to resolve—with the result that Europe entered into 'centuries of chaos', in which culture withered and the population halved. And in a brief but fascinating analysis he shows how the same absence of a revolutionary class in the eastern half of the Roman Empire led to a thousand years of sterility in

the Balkans and Asia Minor under the aegis of 'the living fossil' of Byzantium.

A People's History of the World is full of such fascinating passages—on ancient India and China, the rise of Islam, the Thirty Years War, and so on—which cannot fail to inform the reader. Politically, there are certain features which stand out as especially important.

A question of class

There is the account in the opening chapters of the origin of class divisions. This is an area where for most people the norm is more or less complete ignorance or, worse, the prevalence of fanciful just-so stories. The absence of historical knowledge on this question is not accidental. It derives from the fact that bourgeois ideology in this area is not just at odds with the facts but also self contradictory. On the one hand it claims that now, and at any given point in the past, class and class struggle either don't exist or are not very significant. On the other hand it maintains that class divisions have always existed and are an eternal and ineradicable feature of the human condition. The result is that the real story is shrouded in mystery and buried under silly images of people in loincloths fighting dinosaurs. In contrast Harman demonstrates, on the basis of serious history and anthropology, that class did not exist for 95 percent of the history of the modern human species (*homo sapiens*), when all humans on earth lived as hunter-gatherers and foragers on the basis of cooperation and sharing rather than competition and oppression. The

historical process leading to class divisions began with the emergence of crop cultivation and herding in the Middle East about 10,000 years ago as a result of climatic change which made it difficult to survive through foraging. This consolidation of class divisions, which went hand in hand with the birth of civilisation (living in cities), the development of state machines (to protect the privileges and positions of the ruling class), and the oppression of women, took another 5,000 years. For Harman, 'class divisions were the other side of the coin of the introduction of production methods which created a surplus', but there was nothing automatic about this process, and in much of the world it never took place, hence the survival of forager societies until recent times. The development of class society was not unmitigated progress. It was both a necessary step forward and a profound loss. It was the precondition for the further development of the forces of production, and therefore of literature, the arts, medicine, science and all subsequent history, but it was also the loss of a harmonious society in which the basic standard of living was low, but better than that experienced by many millions in the world to this day, and in which there was neither exploitation, nor alienation, nor war, nor oppression. The ideological significance of this argument is hard to exaggerate and Harman's statement of it is the clearest, most coherent that I have seen. Equally outstanding is the account of the birth of capitalism. Once again the bourgeoisie has a

huge vested interest in obscuring the matter; if capitalism has no discernible beginning then maybe it will have no end. Our rulers are especially keen to cover up the revolutionary origins of their own power. Consequently mainstream history takes the principal episode of the rise of capitalism—the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Dutch Revolt, the English Revolution, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the industrial revolution—and treats them as separate, limited events with no necessary connection to what went before or came after. Harman's approach is the opposite of this. Synthesising vast quantities of research on a multitude of societies, he presents a single, though differentiated, process in which the rising class fights to establish a new mode of production and new forms of state power in the teeth of bitter opposition from the old order. Driving the whole process is the development of the forces of production which takes place under feudalism, particularly in the towns, but economic development is not enough on its own. In addition there has to be a prolonged social, ideological and political struggle lasting centuries, in which advance is followed by retreat or deadlock, and victory alternates with defeat—victory in Holland and England became defeat in Belgium, Italy and Germany, then victory in America and France, and so on—until eventually the whole world is transformed. Especially good is the way Harman disposes of the idea that the emergence of capitalism in Europe is testimony to some peculiar

European 'genius' or superiority. He shows that a number of other societies came to the brink of capitalist development but were held back by their state superstructures whereas, paradoxically, it was the relative backwardness of Europe in the Middle Ages that provided the incentive for the introduction of new methods of production which enabled parts of Europe to leapfrog over the rest of the world.

Global perspective

The final outstanding feature of this work is its consistent internationalism and global standpoint in stark opposition to the Eurocentrism and British nationalism that dominates conventional history and all other aspects of our education system. This does not mean it pays equal attention to all parts of the world at all times. What happened in Germany in 1517 (Luther) and 1933 (Hitler) was of world historical significance in a way that what happened in 1717 and 1833 was not, and the same applies to everywhere else. But it does insist from the beginning on the unity of the human species and comprehensively refutes the notion that any 'race' or 'nation' has a leading role in the development of civilisation. Harman stresses that numerous non-European societies, have been at various times in the forefront of development and have made immense contributions to human history. This generates a wealth of facts, such as that 12th century Constantinople was larger than London, Paris and Rome combined, and that China

developed printing in the 11th century, years before Europe, and its iron production in the 11th century was double that of England's in 1788.

Socialism or barbarism

However, it is the final section dealing with the 20th century, the 'century of hope and horror', which is the climax of the book. In ten chapters Harman takes us through the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the failure of revolution in Europe, the revolt of the colonies, the great slump, Stalinism, fascism, the Second World War, the Cold War, the collapse of Communism, and much else besides, right up to the crisis facing humanity today. In the conclusion he looks forward to the possible outcomes of that crisis. At this point, fittingly, the writing reaches its greatest intensity and fluency. Harman looks back at the rise and fall of civilisation over the whole 5,000 years of class society, and especially the mounting devastation of the terrible dashes of this century, and draws on this experience to inform his analysis of the present and the future. Recording the ever-increasing polarisation between the world's rich and the world's poor, the development of the underlying economic crisis of capitalism, the growing threat to the survival of the planet as a habitable environment, and the escalating scale and power of the weapons of destruction, he argues that humanity really does face the choice of overthrowing capitalism and advancing to socialism or falling back into barbarism in the full scientific sense of the word, ie

the destruction of civilisation. These passages make chilling reading, but Harman does not leave matters there. He shows that there exists a social force with both a vital interest in and the capacity to resolve the crisis in a positive direction. He shows that this class is now larger and stronger than ever before in history. Whether or not it is able to realise its full potential depends on its ability to develop within its own ranks the consciousness, organisation and leadership to secure victory in the great struggles between capitalist and labour which can only intensify in the coming century. The book thus ends by consciously positioning itself as a small factor in the overall battle whose history it records and analyses: the battle for the self emancipation of the working class and the liberation of humanity. With a book of this scale and range it was inevitable that I, like any reader, sometimes wished for a shift of emphasis, for more on this and that, especially sometimes on cultural or philosophical matters, and occasionally I cavilled at the odd comment or formulation, but frankly these points pale into insignificance in the face of the extraordinary total achievement. A People's History of the World will win people to socialism, strengthen the convictions of the already converted and enhance the ideological armoury of everyone who reads it. It will serve as an indispensable reference point for years to come."

Struggle in the countryside

Breandán Mac Suibhne
The End of Outrage Post-Famine Adjustment in Rural Ireland

Review by Tiarnán Ó Muilleoir

Most of my teenage summers at some point included a three-week stint at a Gaeltacht college in the Gweedore parish of northwest Donegal. At the time – especially being a city-slicker from the 'big smoke' of Belfast – its landscape of sheep and steep hills, bogs and desolate beaches, seemed like the ultimate picture-postcard vision of uneventful Irish rural life, or 'rural idiocy' as Marx characterised it less charitably.

In reading Breandán Mac Suibhne's *End of Outrage: Post-Famine Adjustment in Rural Ireland* I came to realise that in fact this idyllic landscape was shaped by some of the most intractable class struggles of the post-famine era, particularly when local landlords sought to clear their smaller tenants from the land in order to replace them on the hillsides with the more profitable sheep flocks of Scottish and English graziers. The Gweedore smallholders retaliated with ferocious resistance, stealing and destroying the sheep and violently rejecting any attempts to clear them from the land. At one point in the conflict, in the