

# Chris Harman, *A People's History of the World*

Lucien van der Walt

2001

HARMAN, CHRIS. *A people's history of the world*. Bookmarks, London [etc.] 1999, vii, 729 pp. £15.99.

Chris Harman's *A People's History of the World* is an ambitious attempt to provide an accessible single-volume overview of human history from a historical materialist perspective. Harman, a prominent British socialist, explicitly aims to provide a general history that uses class analysis and, for once, brings the subordinate classes and their struggles with the ruling classes to the centre of the historical drama in a real "history from below". van der Walt – Review of Harman 'People's History of the World'

Harman quotes Bertolt Brecht's "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" on the first page:

[...] In what houses  
Of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?  
Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished  
Did the masons go? Great Rome  
Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? Over whom  
Did the Caesars triumph? [...]

So many reports.  
So many questions.

He succeeds admirably in giving some of the answers in an eminently readable, frankly fascinating survey of humankind's history from preclass primitive communalist societies to the emergence of class societies in the mists of antiquity 5,000 or 6,000 years ago, through the empires of the ancient world, to the birth of capitalism five centuries ago. In each instance, Harman is at pains to show how technologies and class structure and struggles shaped historical outcomes.

The agricultural revolution of ten millennia ago allowed permanent settlements to develop, a slow expansion of the human population from around ten million people to 200 million by 1500 AD, and ongoing technological advance. The early horticultural societies remained relatively internally egalitarian, although warlike towards their neighbours. But agriculture, by allowing the production of a reliable surplus, made possible the emergence of nonproducing exploiting

classes, a core feature of early urban-centred, Bronze-Age civilizations in Asia, Egypt, Central America, and Mesopotamia. Although there were advances in agriculture, metallurgy and writing in these societies, there was also massive class and gender inequality (Harman arguing that gender inequality first appeared in this period).

Harman maintains that many early civilizations closely approximated Marx's "Asiatic mode of production", dominated by a ruling class of priests and kings exploiting artisans, peasants, and slaves through an emergent state machinery in the absence of private property. It was here that the first recorded strike took place, when Egyptian pyramid builders downed tools in 1170 BC over late rations. But these societies were stagnant and tended to collapse or simply reproduce themselves largely unchanged for millennia.

The next phase belongs to the great Iron-Age empires of the Mediterranean basin, Central America, India, and East Asia such as the Greek city states, Rome, and the Ch'in Empire. Like H.G. Wells, who undertook a similar exercise in socialist history eighty years earlier in *The Outline of History*, Harman is careful not to minimize the "share of the central uplands of Asia and of the Persian, the Indian and Chinese cultures, in the drama of mankind" (Wells). Harman notes that the Ch'in Empire, founded in China in 221 BC, ruled a larger population (and built more roads) than Rome, and was able to put 300, 000 people to work on the first Great Wall. The new empire forged by the Sui and Tang rulers in the sixth century AD was even more impressive, with cities of five million people, bank notes, gunpowder, mechanical clocks, advanced naval techniques, printing presses, and large-scale steel production.

For Harman, the actors in these civilizations were not kings, priests and philosophers, but classes. In ancient Greece, history is partly the history of rebellious Helot serfs in Sparta, and peasant and artisan struggles against rich Athenian landlords (leading to a limited, but real democracy). In Rome, the class wars – between plebeians and patricians in the first republic, the Gracchi brothers' struggle for land reform in the second century BC, and, above all, the awesome revolt of Spartacus, who led 70,000 slaves in 73 BC in "the biggest slave revolt in the whole of the ancient world" – are central parts of the narrative, not extras. In China, peasant rebellions precipitated the collapse of the Ch'in dynasty, and, in other revolts, peasants seized whole provinces again and again, only to relinquish power to class enemies, new emperors and dynasties.

These civilizations broke down through class war and their own limitations. Slave labour, so central to Rome, could only be secured through continual conquest; when the wars ended, the empire faced a labour shortage and leaned increasingly on peasants who revolted and deserted; it collapsed in the West in the fifth century AD through a cycle of war and agricultural decline. In China, peasant rebellions overthrew dynasties but failed to reconstruct society on new lines, whilst the powerful merchant bourgeoisie lacked the capacity to challenge landlords and state officials for power. The breakdown of Rome, India and early China led to forms resembling feudalism in the fifth century AD (earlier in China), centred on autonomous warrior landlords ruling fiefdoms of unfree peasant labour. The focus of "civilization" in the next millennium shifted to the Islamic world and the revived Chinese empire.

Yet it was from Western Europe, (an agrarian backwater after Rome's fall, but reborn by the thirteenth century), that an entirely new social system was to emerge in the sixteenth century: capitalism. The bulk of the *People's History* is focused on the world historic transformation wrought by this system through conquest, class restructuring, and above all, the industrial revolution that transformed human productive capacity in a way unseen since agriculture's ad-

vent. Harman focuses on the role of class and technology in capitalist development, and on how capitalism swept before it the remnants of primitive communalism and the ancient world to create a single world system dominated by competitive commodity production.

His discussion ranges from the nature of plantation slavery and its relationship to emergent racist ideology, to the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, the “Scramble for Africa”, May 1968, and the post-Cold-War “New World Order”. In the process, Harman makes a convincing case that the former world of “actually existing socialism” was simply a chapter in this process, an extreme form of capitalist revolution from above, not dissimilar to Germany and Japan’s hothouse transition to capitalism at the hands of feudal elites.

Accompanying the capitalist revolution was the creation of a “universal class”, the modern proletariat whose birth and struggles and achievements – particularly the revolutions, successful and otherwise of the 1910s – Harman documents in detail. Harman estimates the modern working class at about two billion people, surrounded by a further two billion peasants and petty commodity producers, making it the largest single class in human history. There are more industrial workers in South Korea today, Harman notes, than in the entire world when Marx and Engels wrote the Communist Manifesto in 1848. It is this class, including in its ranks the descendants of the most diverse and impressive of past civilizations – from the Aztecs to the Chinese, Egyptians, Italians, Germans, Indians, to the Zimbabweans and Zulu – which Harman contends holds the key to the creation of a better, democratic, socialist, future.

Any work as sweeping as Harman’s is inevitably open to interpretive and substantive criticisms. It is a pity that Harman did not dwell more on the important task of developing a theoretical analysis of the modes of production and laws of motion of premodern societies, revisiting debates on the utility of models like the “ancient”, “Asiatic”, “lineage” and “tributary” modes of production. Material on Africa (outside Egypt), whilst not absent, is somewhat thin for ancient and modern periods. There is a substantial historical materialist literature on Africa, adeptly synthesized in Bill Freund’s *The Making of Contemporary Africa: The Development of African Society since 1800* (London, 1984, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Boulder, CO, 1998), which should be read as a companion volume to Harman’s work.

Harman is not altogether convincing in his orthodox Marxist contention that no premodern class war could have succeeded in reorganizing society because artisans, peasants, slaves and merchants lacked cohesion and programmes of social reconstruction. As Harman’s own material indicates, peasant movements, such as the Taborites in fifteenth-century Bohemia, the German Peasant War of 1524, and the Zapatistas in Mexico in the 1910s – were able to at least conceive of a new social order. Is it therefore reasonable to contend that their struggles were doomed?

For a history of class struggle, the *People’s History* is selective in its account of nineteenth- and twentieth-century labour and peasant movements. Harman mentions that he relied on Trotsky for the early twentieth century, and it shows. Recent research underlines the enormous influence of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism between the 1860s and the 1940s in labour revolts, peasant wars, and anticolonial struggles, often overshadowing Marxism as a revolutionary current. But these are absent from Harman’s account of European popular movements (besides, predictably, France and Spain), let alone those of Latin America and Asia. The effect is to reduce post-1840 radical labour history to a history of social democracy and Leninism.

For all that, Harman’s work remains a monumental synthesis of the first order, of use to everyone interested in the human past and future, whether activist, student or general reader.

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