Work, Sex and Power

Work, Sex and Power

The Forces that Shaped Our History

Willie Thompson

PlutoPress
www.plutobooks.com

First published 2015 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3341 0 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3340 3 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7837 1272 4 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7837 1274 8 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7837 1273 1 EPUB eBook

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data applied for

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England
Text design by Melanie Patrick
Simultaneously printed digitally by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, UK
and Edwards Bros in the United States of America

Contents

Introduction: The Fabric of History

The Purpose of this Volume

The 'fabric of history' referred to here is a metaphor for the changing range of activities which constitute the human reality along with the world of material artefacts and social institutions which these activities produce. Within a blink of evolutionary time, the species *Homo sapiens* has transformed the world of inorganic materials, the organic world of plants, animals and other life forms – and especially the world of its own activities and the being of its own existence. It was a development through time within a framework of the three universal, tightly interlocking realities – work, sex and power – with their radiating implications – which constitute the reality of human experience as a social species and provide this volume's title.

It is a perfectly normal and understandable presumption to take for granted that the evolutionary emergence of modern humans and the historical transformations they have brought about were in some sense embedded in the nature of things. As we shall see, that was only very partially the case. *H. sapiens* spread over most of the earth's surface as a foraging hunter-gatherer. It will be argued that in the context of planet-wide climate change around ten millennia ago there was indeed a certain inevitability about the first of the great economic revolutions, the shift towards agricultural production or pastoralism as a dominant lifestyle and also the general form of the resulting social structures which emerged. The second and recent great innovation, to a world of artificially-powered mechanisms, it will be argued however, was a contingency which became a reality only against the odds and was not implicit in the nature of the human species and the world it inhabited. Nor is there reason to presume that this current state of affairs will persist indefinitely; natural or social calamity could knock away its material underpinnings and stop it dead.

The human story is certainly not just one damned thing after another (let alone one damned narrative after another). The argument of this book shares the presumption that although the future is unpredictable (as is true of biological evolution) history in the most general sense, combining economic, social political and cultural activity, has a logic which can be deciphered after the event – but the role of contingency and the potential of paths not taken have to be kept under consideration. History could very often have gone in a quite different direction from the one that was actually realised – the species in its early days for example could easily have been wiped out by natural forces when it was still

small in numbers and according to some accounts that was actually the most likely outcome – even bare survival was at that point against the odds.

What is being attempted here therefore is to discuss how and why, within the overall framework of the great transformations, history took the general direction it did and other potential ones proved abortive. Humans are the only species which have a history in that sense; others are the province of natural history or biology. The difference arises from the unique form of consciousness that humans possess, the ability through representation to reflect on the past and evaluate the future, to consciously choose one option or course of action over another, to create and attach importance to symbols. These issues are discussed in subsequent chapters.

The emphasis here is to examine the organic, material, social and cultural forces which underlie these developments throughout the course of human experience, with chronological narrative as a secondary concern – although certainly that has to be taken into account. In 2010 the British Museum produced a well-deserved best seller entitled *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. It is a magnificent piece of work and I thought of supplementing it with *A History of the World in 100 Atrocities*, but decided that would be too horrific to cope with. Walter Benjamin's aphorism, quoted at the beginning of this volume, comes forcefully to mind.

What motivated me to write this book was an intense appreciation of his remark combined with an acute consciousness of the improvements in social relations that have been achieved in certain parts of the world and the fragility of these advances in the face both of malign social forces and environmental deterioration. In this context I continue to regard Marx's perspective, loosely defined as historical materialism, as being the most appropriate for human history and human affairs, though also conscious of its insufficiencies.

Regrettably the conclusion seems inescapable: that the human story up to the present, despite all the remarkable material, intellectual and artistic cultural accomplishments over the millennia, has been overall a pretty bleak and grisly one and that the great majority of human beings who have lived and died over its course have been victims, rather than beneficiaries, of the historical process. The fabric of this volume, if not the fabric of history itself, is somewhat grim and dark – though, as will be evident from the record, there is also a contrary weave of resistance, achievement and hope; history need not in the future continue predominantly as a catalogue of calamity, or in Voltaire's phrase, '. . . nothing more than a tableau of crimes and misfortunes'.

I am concerned to examine and to explain so far as possible both the similarities and the differences between social practices widely separated in time and space. The author of *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, the Director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, writes that: 'The similarities between the cultures of the old and the new worlds [Eurasia and the Americas] are . . . strong. Both produced pyramids and mummification, temples and priestly rituals, social structures and buildings that function in similar ways . . .'[1] or as Daniel Lord Smail expresses a

similar sentiment: 'We celebrate the diversity of human civilizations, but it is the similarities that are the most startling, the thing that continually reminds us of our common humanity.'[2]

Aspects of these processes have been investigated with great depth and sophistication in recent decades by archaeologists, anthropologists, historical sociologists and historians. Just a few names to mention in this context include Perry Anderson, Christopher Boehm, Fernand Braudel, Jared Diamond, Kent Flannery, Ernest Gellner, Jacquetta Hawkes, Michael Mann, Joyce Marcus, Joseph Needham, Chris Stringer and Ellen Wood.

The objective of this volume is to outline and assess in a concise and easily presented form the conclusions which emerge from their and others' work, and to do so within the context and interpretation of historical materialism. This perspective emphasises that human societies are part of an organic world upon which they are ultimately dependent and which they work collectively to transform to their purposes. The notion that nature exists to suit human convenience is not merely fallacious, it is also very dangerous, and yet the human species is the only one to have *also* separated itself from nature. *That separation*, and the manner in which it has developed, is what constitutes history, and is this volume's central concern.

Work

The many terms used in English in relation to work with positive or negative connotations are a reflection of its multiple forms – ranging from 'achievement' at one end of the scale to 'penal servitude' at the other. Work is human activity intended to achieve satisfaction in one form or another for oneself or other persons, but not all activities of that sort count as work. 'Work' implies the expenditure of effort, more often than not against intrinsic difficulty. The boundary however between work and other sorts of activity such as play or entertainment is a very fuzzy one – and even entertainers work at entertaining. Depending on its quality work can be fulfilling and joyful or it can amount to torture. What is indisputable is that socially organised and directed work, both manual and mental, upon natural substances, has been intrinsic to the transformations of the material and social universe that have occurred throughout history, and the changing character of work is the principal element in social development.

As Engels remarked at Marx's graveside, humans first of all have to secure a food supply, tools and facilities for shelter before they can embark on religious speculation, cultural endeavour, law-making or war-making. This is not to say that the latter activities are of lesser importance in the great scheme of things, or that they do not impact upon and give shape to the former ones. Or, as a school textbook of economic history I recall put it in unconscious tribute to the Marxist 'base/superstructure' metaphor; economic activity, of which work is the principal

component, is the foundation of everything else, but not necessarily of greater importance, for foundations exist to carry better things.

Following roughly 190,000 years of life working as hunter-gatherers and foragers, humans have in the last 10,000 years carried through the two radical transformations indicated above. The first of these was certainly profound, but the second, with even greater and constantly accelerating consequences, is just over two centuries old and produced the world we are familiar with – which could be designated as the technological era. Its framework was the economic and social structure known as capitalism, which has dominated the era through its protean development, and generated historically momentous endeavours to modify or abolish it while retaining the technological advantages with which it is associated.

Neither of these transformations, despite a certain inevitability about the first, was consciously intended; they followed from innovations and practices intended to fit in with the then pre-existent social order. A key proposition of this volume is that from an indeterminate period following the initial establishment of agricultural production, but probably around 7000 years BP, human history has been principally the history of forced labour in multiple forms, what Michael Mann terms 'compulsory co-operation' – which implies a social class division, based on very different varieties of work, between enforcers and enforced. Basic forms of this relationship include tribute exaction, slavery, serfdom and wage labour, which are discussed in the course of the volume, as is the resistance they have provoked.

Sex

So far as there is any specific purpose in the non-human biosphere that purpose is reproduction – at the micro level genes propagating themselves – and for any land-dwelling vertebrate sex is a necessary precursor to the production of offspring. However it is more than that as, even outside the human context, the existence of non-reproductive sexual activity among numerous species (up to 1,500 of them) indicates.

The discussion of sex in subsequent chapters takes account not merely of acts of copulation among human beings, but also of the very numerous forms it can assume, the consequences which it carries and the associated activities which surround it, far exceeding those engaged in by other species.

In the metaphor of 'the fabric of history' the cultural and social context of sex is the red thread that runs across it. Not only does it result frequently in reproduction, creating family groups in diverse forms and implying all that is associated with child-rearing in such contexts. It permeates every pore of human culture, generating differentiation in occupational roles, modes of clothing and deportment, the social interaction both between and within the genders in

particular societies, and is the dominant theme of cultural production – literary, aural and visual – in every one. Endeavours in some cultures to downplay, hide or even deny the importance of sex, such as taboo words, have only served to emphasise it.

Power

According to Michel Foucault power relations constituted by what he would call 'discourse' are crucial to *every* social interaction (and not only work and sex). We need not go quite so far, but even so there is no denying power's centrality. It has in history permeated social relations of almost every sort – though possibly need not do so in the future. Nevertheless, up to the present the voice that has echoed down the millennia has been the voice of command.

Michael Mann's four-volume magnum opus of historical analysis covering developments from the Bronze Age to the contemporary world is entitled *The Sources of Social Power*, and this book is greatly indebted to it, though diverging on crucial aspects. Mann, whose standpoint reflects the influence of Max Weber, identifies three determinant sources, namely economic power, political power and ideological power. He argues that at different times in history one or other of these forms was the dominant one. This necessarily less extensive single volume is concerned to examine how power relations, namely the manner in which a person or persons are in a position to compel another person or persons to do the bidding of the former and how that relationship was resisted. The aim is to examine the complexities of the interweave between such relationships and the other forces which determine the processes of historical development. The concern here is not only with the manner in which these processes work out on a social scale but also to attempt some explanation of the motivations which can be seen or deduced to have inspired individuals, both those who exercise power and those who resist it.

The text embodies the proposition that the most significant of power relations is the means by which elite groups at various levels of society and different phases throughout history forcefully acquire a greater or lesser part of the product of basic producers, the essential foundation of nearly all historical societies to date. Power of course has other dimensions, from the relations within the nuclear family to organisations of varying complexity.

Over the centuries of written history not only has there been a persistent division between elites and basic producers, but they take persistently repeated forms. While relations between the two show multiple variations, they do so within a limited number of basic social structures. Among elites themselves, the parallels in their mode of operation are even more astonishing, whether we are discussing the court of Sargon the Assyrian, that of the Ming dynasty, the Roman and Byzantine emperors, the Muslim caliph, the medieval kingdoms, the Vatican or the

Politbureau. Whether these are polytheist, monotheist or atheist we find the same forms of intrigue, manoeuvre and treachery, flattery and factional alliance. The instances can be multiplied indefinitely and are reflected in organised collectives further down the social scale.

Progress, What Progress?

Unprecedentedly, a creature that was evolved around 200,000 years ago on the African savannah to cope in its ecological niche with the basic objectives of all living organisms, nutrition and reproduction, also, while not neglecting food and sex, ultimately left a representational record of its thought processes and in addition latterly devised technologies covering the globe, so complex in nature that their construction and functioning requires to be carried on by a limited cadre of experts. Moreover, and most remarkably, it has devoted itself to reflection on life, the universe and everything. In the words of the philosopher Raymond Tallis, 'we are cognitive giants'. The phenomenon may be summed up in the fact that the English word 'culture' has two divergent meanings – either the routines of everyday life with the tools which make them possible; or else what we think of as intellectual/artistic achievement.

It was once popular – it is now much less so – to define that course as 'progress'. The concept of 'progress' is a loaded one, and it normally implies approval, as in the phrase, 'We're making progress', but that is not necessarily so; it can be used in the opposite sense, as in Hogarth's title, 'The Rake's Progress'. In this volume it is used neutrally. Certain realities are unquestionable. Since the emergence of the species which has arrogated to itself the arrogant title of *Homo sapiens sapiens* (colloquially, 'very wise guy') its population has expanded from a very small number, possibly only a few dozen at one stage.[3] Peter J Richardson and Robert Boyd argue that 'At the time of the final modernization of the human brain, humans were most likely a rare and, given the nature of the Pleistocene, endangered species',[4] but now six to seven billion in number and still growing, with increasing average longevity. This growth has been accompanied by, and been dependent upon, an unceasing, if irregular, refinement of technique and ability to exercise control over the natural environment, multiplying beyond measure the quantity and character of consumables and material objects available to (some) individuals and communities – I am writing this with a computer keyboard and screen, not with a reed pen on papyrus.

If you like – and with some reason – you can refer to all that as 'progress', but there are few nowadays who would not recognise at the same time its deficiencies and contradictions. As Jacquetta Hawkes once remarked over half a century ago, a man can have equally depraved thoughts whether driving a Cadillac to LA or trotting to Ur on a donkey.

Likewise, the question being addressed is what lies behind or underneath these similarities in social structures and forms of behaviour taking place in radically different circumstances. The 'fabric of history' does not, needless to say, imply any notion of 'human nature', which merely poses the same question in different terms or evades it altogether. No satisfactory answer is pretended here – finding that is a research programme that has been ongoing over many decades past and will be to come. This book tries to bring together a number of considerations – in however introductory a manner – that helps to illuminate the underlying question. It draws on the work of many authors who have contributed to the discussion, as will become apparent. Most of them are of a recent or relatively recent character.

Not by Bread Alone

For all the importance of basic material considerations in relation to long-term historical development, they do not suffice to explain the sphere of social culture both 'high' and 'low' – the whole range from leisure to lawmaking, drinking to drama – nor of ideologies, ethics or attitudes to the imagined invisible world which have at all times, positively or negatively, permeated the waking lives of every human being from cradle to cremation (or alternative means of disposal).

With that in mind, it is scarcely to be disputed that history's course of development is largely determined by the nature of the interaction between productive technique and the hugely varied range of activities, embodied in every collective, from family units to governments, which depend upon it. For example Mao Zedong's aphorism that 'power grows out of the barrel of a gun' implies both a theoretical knowledge and a technology of firearms and explosives. If we can argue that there is a consistency in the socio-economic weave of human societies, nevertheless the patterns of colour incorporated in that weave – in literal terms the range of cultural practices – are as enormously varied and complex as the multiplicity of languages, dialects and argots spoken and written by the bearers of culture. One cultural feature that has had a particularly far-reaching global impact over the past 3,000 and especially the past 2,000 years, has been the emergence, expansion and fragmentation of monotheist religion, originating in a small Levantine community, then spreading and frequently dominating, firstly through Eurasia and part of Australasia, then eventually the remainder of the globe. Its social, cultural and even economic significance has been enormous, and appropriate space is devoted to it in this text, as demonstrating both the consistency and the variation in human practices.

Finally this volume considers contradictions, in the shape of the adverse consequences that have been produced by the course of historical development or progress and the attempts made to overcome them – from the biological consequences of human settlement, increase and agriculture to institutions

such as slavery and wage labour or the increasingly destructive powers of improving technology – and eventually to the growing menace of environmental catastrophe which threatens at the present time. To attempt in short compass a general perspective on the course of human development, is no doubt a foolishly ambitious project, but may, hopefully, represent a modest input into the discussion of how humans can cope with a very uncertain future.

To briefly outline the pages that follow, Chapter One is concerned with the place of *Homo sapiens*, humans, in the cosmos, in their planet's biosphere – and that very specific feature of their biology, the consciousness which makes humans what they are. Chapter Two considers the initial millennia of human development, the different species of humans, their migrations, their technologies and what can be known about their lifestyles. Chapter Three deals with the initial agricultural transformation of c.10,000 years BP, its causes and consequences and its continuing heritage. Chapter Four addresses what has been the central reality of human life in all times and places – sex, reproduction and kinship. Chapter Five focuses upon the emergence of two other major realities, domination and hierarchy, the contexts of economic and social exploitation. Chapter Six, dealing with exploitation and violence, examines the praxis of domination and hierarchy. Chapters Seven to Ten examine dimensions of social practice which are intrinsic to the nature of human existence – ethics, religion and identity. Chapter Eleven is concerned with the lead-up to the second great socio-technological transformation, focusing on the centuries prior to the intrusion of European power into the Americas, Eurasia, sub-Saharan Africa and Australasia. Chapters Twelve and Thirteen deal with that transformation itself, in the shape of European-enforced globalisation and the 'Industrial Revolution'. Chapter Fourteen considers the general theme of opportunity costs and unintended consequences throughout history. Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen discuss attempts which have been undertaken throughout history to overturn the structures of domination and exploitation that have characterised historical development; including the most recent and global, namely socialism. Finally, Chapter Seventeen summarises considerations on the significance of humans in the global environment, the central characteristics of their history and prospects for the future.

1

Cosmos, Creatures and Consciousness

Our Place in the Cosmos

In the English language the term 'history' has two distinct though connected meanings. In one sense it can mean a record of human doings, embodied in a written narrative or analysis, sometimes referred to as historiography, and in another the actuality of what occurred in the past. In the narrower sense of the first, the reconstruction of the events involved depends on written records (sometimes supplemented by artwork) – the general form in which the science of historiography is understood, and has a timespan of roughly 5,000 years.

The approximately 2.6 million years of hominin[1] existence on the planet prior to that are reconstructed by archaeologists through material remains of artefacts or preserved body parts. The drawing together of evidence from the millennia of written history and from the longer stretch of archaeological investigation is sometimes referred to as 'Deep History'. The much lengthier span of organic life, extends to around 3.6 billion years, and is studied through biology and evolutionary history. An even greater timespan which saw the formation of the stars, including our own with its planets, and eventually the Big Bang which generated the universe and where it all started, is the province of cosmology. This in its entirety has lately been referred to by some as 'Big History' and all of it is relevant to the present situation of human beings.

We read from time to time, in discussions of the possible universes that might have emerged from the Big Bang, approximately 13.7 billion years ago, assertions that it was fortunate for us that the one which happened to be actualised[2] was also one that happens to be 'favourable to life'. That is a basic error; our universe is for the most part totally inimical to life, which could not conceivably exist either in the cold of interstellar space or in the interior of a star. Its only possible location is as a thin skin on a planet receiving energy inputs from its parent star, along with other conditions which permit the complex chemistry of life to function; and from what is known of our own solar system or the exoplanets identified so far in other systems, few, if any of these, are anywhere like suitable.

Certain conclusions however strongly suggest themselves. The number of exoplanets so far identified is around 5,000 and rising, and these are all comparatively near us by cosmic standards. It is therefore a virtual certainty that there exist many billions of planets throughout our own galaxy. Another near certainty is that the

process of evolution that has taken place on our own world was an enormously unlikely outcome. Among the billions of these exoplanets some must be suitably constituted and placed to harbour life forms. The likelihood therefore is that life is actually quite prevalent in the universe. The probability is also that it is mainly if not overwhelmingly unicellular, as it was for most of earth's history and that any multicellular organisms that happen to arise are likely to be primitive and simple.

So far as our own sun's family is concerned, on no other of its planets could multicellular organisms survive for more than a few seconds. Extremophile bacteria could perhaps just possibly cope with Mars, some of the Jovian moons or Saturn's moon Titan, but even that is extremely doubtful, and in any case hardly counts. In this particular region of our galaxy, at any rate, we are utterly alone. A further consideration applies to the galaxy as a whole.

It seems that our own galaxy is untypical compared to its neighbours, especially the nearest one, the Andromeda galaxy (with which we are on eventual collision course). The big black hole at the centre of our galaxy, though millions of times larger than the sun, is relatively small as such entities go, and unusually quiescent.[3] The one in Andromeda is much larger and much more active, blasting out deadly radiation in every direction as it consumes interstellar gas and stars caught in its gravitational field and probably making life impossible on any of the planets that galaxy contains. As long ago as 1930, Olaf Stapledon's science-fiction novel *First and Last Men* envisaged an end to human life due to the radiation of a nearby supernova – which is by no means an impossible scenario.

What applies to cosmic space also applies to cosmic time. Although the earth has existed for around a third of the universe's age, that span constitutes the merest blink on its scale – recent calculations show a future of 100 trillion years before the last stars are extinguished and an inconceivable 10^{100} years before all matter disintegrates and what was the universe consists of nothing but radiation. In what we think of as the present, 'the train of cosmic time has barely left the station'. Needless to say, humans will be long gone well before the universe looks any different from how it does at the moment, even considerably before the sun expands to vaporise the inner planets, as it inevitably will in another five billion years or so.

The Biological Reality – Our Place in the Organic World

The sponge is not, as you suppose,
A funny kind of weed;
He lives below the deep blue sea,
An animal, like you and me,
Though not so good a breed.