

Chris Harman and the critique of political economy

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Alex Callinicos, *International Socialism* n°165, January 2020

Chris Harman died suddenly on the night of 6-7 November 2009, on the eve of his 67th birthday. He had been serving his third stint as editor of *International Socialism*. I took over editing this journal after Chris's death. Ten years on, I'm standing down from this position; Joseph Choonara, who worked with Chris both on *Socialist Worker* and then as deputy editor of *International Socialism*, will replace me. So this seems like a good moment to reassess Chris's significance.¹

A no-bullshit Marxist

Why does Chris Harman still matter, ten years after his death? If I were to sum up his significance, I would say that he demonstrated that it was possible to be a classical revolutionary Marxist intellectual in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Perry Anderson famously contrasts the classical Marxism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels themselves, and of the Second and Third Internationals, where the great theorists were excluded from the bourgeois academy and organically integrated in the workers' movement, and post-war Western Marxism, whose leading figures were academics writing at a distance from political practice.² When Anderson wrote this in the early 1970s, the contrast was somewhat overstated: the writings of key figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Galvano della Volpe, Louis Althusser, Lucio Colletti and the Italian workerists are only intelligible when set in their context of the debates in and around mass Communist parties with strong bases in the organised working class. Today, however, those parties have largely disappeared, and Marxist intellectual work is concentrated almost exclusively in the academy.

Chris stood out very sharply against this background. Rather than becoming an academic, he abandoned his PhD at the height of the student movement of the 1960s and became a full-time worker for the International Socialists (from 1977 onwards the Socialist Workers Party). It was amid the practical demands of editing at different times all three SWP publications—*International Socialism*, *Socialist Review* and *Socialist Worker*—that he produced a stream of work of the highest quality. Of course, he—like other SWP intellectuals—had a living model, in the shape of Tony Cliff, the founder of the International Socialist tradition. Cliff had a deep grasp of Marxist theory that he used very creatively, most notably in developing in the late 1940s the theory that the USSR and other so-called "socialist" societies were in fact instances of bureaucratic state capitalism. But those who served with Cliff on the SWP leadership, such as Chris and I, were in awe of his extraordinary practical energy and his ability to focus almost obsessively on whatever he had identified to be the key political tasks of the day.

So Harman followed in Cliff's footsteps. But Cliff came from an earlier generation of revolutionaries who forged the Trotskyist movement during "midnight in the century"—the 1930s and 1940s, when fascism and Stalinism seemed to be the future.³ Chris was a child of the long postwar boom, which consolidated bourgeois democracy in the advanced capitalist societies. Here, outside the southern European dictatorships and the terrorist adventures of the Weathermen, Baader-Meinhof and the Brigade Rosse, his generation of revolutionaries largely avoided the experiences of prison and exile that were the norm for their predecessors.⁴ Particularly after the immediate hopes of revolutionary breakthrough died with the end of the great upturn in class struggle of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the academy could provide a relatively comfortable refuge from which, in the words of Isaac Deutscher, "to watch with detachment and alertness this heaving chaos of a world".⁵

For Deutscher the metaphor of the "watch-tower" justified a distance from the practice of building revolutionary organisation. But even among those who didn't renounce this task, Daniel Bensaïd, Harman's closest counterpart as an outstanding Marxist intellectual who emerged from the 1960s generation, after two decades of work for the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and the Fourth International, taught Philosophy at the University of Paris VIII at Vincennes-Saint-Denis (though he remained a leading figure in the Ligue and its successor the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste). There's nothing dishonourable about this path (it's the one that I've taken myself), but I think it gives a different tone to one's Marxism, in particular affecting how one writes. Bensaïd was a brilliant prose stylist, but, as one of his comrades once put it to me, he "would write around something but, through the vivid images he used, succeed in evoking it much more effectively than if he had written more directly about it".⁶

There was no such indirection or allusiveness in Harman's writing. To borrow the entirely inaccurate self-description that Analytical Marxists such as Jerry Cohen, Jon Elster and John Roemer gave themselves, he was a no-bullshit Marxist.⁷ He wrote well, but in a plain and unpretentious prose, and took great effort to express complex ideas accessibly. One of the last things he wrote was a critique of the French Communist philosopher Louis Althusser, and one reason why he loathed him was the mixture of indirection, technicality and bombast that sometimes marked Althusser's writing. As an editor, Harman could be brutal at any signs of pretention. The style guide for *International Socialism*, which he wrote and which we still use, is full of injunctions like this: "Do not use obscure words and phrases just to make yourself seem learned (something all of us have fallen into on occasions)."

This approach to style was political. In a famous essay, "Politics and the English Language", George Orwell argued that bad writing prevented clear thinking and thereby contributed to "the defence of the indefensible"—for example, "the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan".⁸ Harman agreed: Joseph Choonara recalls that, "when I was due to start working on *Socialist Worker* under Harman, the only preparatory material I was given by the editor was Orwell's essay and a copy of Harold Evans's *Newsman's English...* (I

think the latter is still in print as *Essential English for Journalists, Editors and Writers*)".⁹ But there was also a more specific version of politics involved in Harman's approach to style. Cliff's theory of state capitalism, by identifying Stalinism as a sub-type of the capitalist mode of production, allowed the restatement of Marx's conception of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class. But if workers are the agents of change, then socialists have to speak and write in a way that they understand so that they can make Marxism their own.

This preference for plain writing is common ground in the IS tradition: Cliff too was a no-bullshit Marxist. But Harman stands out as the figure in that tradition who, after Cliff, used this mode of being a Marxist to make original intellectual contributions.¹⁰ It's hard to sum up as large and diverse a body of writing as Chris produced, but one can identify three main themes: first, the Marxist critique of political economy; second, the history of mass struggles and historical materialism more broadly, culminating in his hugely successful *A People's History of the World*; and, third, revolutionary strategy and tactics.¹¹ In this comparatively short article, I shall concentrate on his contribution to the first and most central area of Marxist thought, although inevitably there will be connections with the others, which deserve detailed attention in their own right. Moreover, as we shall see, Harman's approach to the critique of political economy exemplifies his broader approach to historical materialism.¹²

Renewing the IS tradition

Chris's importance in the Marxist critique of political economy emerged comparatively slowly. Probably his most theoretically important writings in the 1960s and early 1970s—with the prominent exception of "Party and Class" (1968-9)—were in the area of Stalinism. He wrote both about its origins, in "Russia: How the Revolution was Lost" (1967), and its contemporary dynamics in "The Stalinist States" (1970). But in a 1969 polemic with the Fourth International leader Ernest Mandel, where Harman was defending Michael Kidron, then IS's leading economist, from Mandel's counter-attack, we see him confidently emerging as a major economic theorist in his own right. Inevitably, one of the main issues at stake concerned whether the Stalinist societies were to be understood as state capitalist or, as Mandel contended, bureaucratic workers' states. Mandel took his ground on Marx's claim that capitalism necessarily involves commodity production, equating the latter with the private market (which existed in the USSR and its like in only limited forms).¹³

Harman responded by offering what he calls "a clear analysis of commodity production":

What is central for Marx's analysis of commodity production then is that through it the labour of individuals is related in a quantitative fashion to the labour of all other individuals with whom they enter into social relations, not consciously, but rather through the relations that come to exist between the products of their labour. This in turn means that the production process itself is determined by factors outside of it, that is, by the relation of its costs to that of production taking place elsewhere. There is "regulation of mutual production by the costs of production...the product is related to itself as a realisation of a determined quantity of general labour, of social labour time."

For the particular commodity producer this means that his methods of production—his particular relationship with nature and other men in the production process—has continually to be changed as there are unplanned and anarchic changes in the methods of production of all other producers. This commodity production becomes capitalist production when labour power, the capacity for performing labour, as well as the products of labour, becomes a commodity, the price of which (ie wages) is determined by the unplanned social interaction between its exploiters that continually forces them to pay for it no more than an historically and culturally determined minimum.

We can sum up what we have been saying up to this point: yes, capitalism is, as Mandel argues, competition on the basis of commodity production. But to fully understand it one has to go further and see that what makes man-produced objects—and above all labour power—into a commodity is precisely competition between producing units that has advanced to the point where each is compelled to continually rationalise and rearrange its internal productive processes so as to relate them to the productive process of the others.¹⁴

This is, in effect, a brilliant restatement of Marx's theory of value. Highlighting capitalism as what Harman would later call a process of competitive accumulation allows him to reaffirm one of the basic propositions of the theory of state capitalism, namely that it was the pressure of military competition with the West, not of the market, that imposed the logic of capital on the USSR. There are, as he would later put it, different dimensions of competition.¹⁵ But there is also a philosophical aspect to Harman's defence of the theory of state capitalism absent from Cliff's original statement. Harman drew here on Marx's conception of commodity fetishism and on the *Grundrisse* to bring out what he regards as the essence of the labour theory of value as about the domination of human beings by the products of their labour. There is, I think, a connection here with Harman's consistent hostility to Althusser, who was near the height of his influence at the time. Althusser argues that the kind of passages on which Harman drew here represent survivals of Marx's "pre-scientific" humanist problematic of alienation in his early writings that was overcome by an "epistemological break" in the mid-1840s that laid the basis for mature works such as *Capital*.¹⁶

Against Althusser, Harman affirms that the “Marxist humanism”, inspired especially by Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 and Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, despite the reformist appropriations that Althusser highlighted, “could also lead towards a thoroughgoing revolutionary socialism from below”.¹⁷ The centrepiece of Lukács’s book is “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”, a brilliant extension of the theory of commodity fetishism into a general critique of capitalist society. Similarly, Harman’s insistence on the unity of Marx’s thought and of the importance within it of the related concepts of alienation and fetishism was not simply a philosophical stance; it reflected his sense of how these concepts were needed to understand the dynamics of contemporary capitalism. A generation later, Harman used the concept of alienated labour to present Marx’s critique of capitalism to the emerging anti-globalisation movement:

The individual capitalists are the human agents who enforce this process on the mass of people. But they have no choice if they are to remain capitalists. If they do not make profits comparable to those made by rival capitalists they will be driven out of business or bought up by their rivals. To this degree the capitalists are as much prisoners of the system as the workers—except they are hugely privileged prisoners... These capitalists preside over a whole world of “alienated labour”, a world in which the products of human activity take on a life of their own and dominate them. This is a world of endless pressure to work and periodic unemployment, of overproduction and starvation, of the driving of people from the countryside into cities, and of a denial of jobs to them when they get there. There is no end to this process. The more powerful capital becomes, the more people become dependent on labouring for it if they are to get a livelihood. Every time they sell to capital their ability to labour, it extracts more labour out of them and becomes more powerful still. Even if they are in an advantageous position and manage to force up their wages for a time, this process does not stop: “If capital is growing rapidly, wages may rise; the profit of capital rises incomparably more rapidly. The material position of the worker has improved, but at the cost of his social position.” Wage labour is still “forging for itself the golden chains by which the bourgeoisie drags it in its train”.¹⁸

Harman went on after the polemic with Mandel, not simply to defend and restate IS theory, but to develop it. He started in his own special area of expertise, Eastern Europe, with a very important two-part article on Poland, which proved to be the black hole into which the Stalinist system would eventually be sucked. He put the rising tide of workers’ revolt—which would reach its climax with the explosive emergence of Solidarność in 1980-1—in the context of Poland’s increasingly direct subordination to the global logic of competitive accumulation through growing dependence on Western import and export markets and foreign debt—in other words, the state capitalist societies were being drawn into economic as well as military competition with the West and thereby intensifying the Eastern version of the “business cycle” that regulates the course of capitalist development. From this vantage point, the eventual collapse of the Stalinist system in 1989-91, which Harman closely followed, could come as no surprise.¹⁹

The role that military competition historically played in binding the Soviet Union to global capitalism pointed to another key feature of the postwar era according to IS theory: the importance of what Kidron called the permanent arms economy—the high level of peacetime arms expenditure in the West during the Cold War—in offsetting crisis tendencies.²⁰ In 1977 Harman found himself defending the theory of the permanent arms economy against its main author, Kidron himself. The latter's rejection of the theory was part of a broader re-evaluation of his thinking about capitalism based on a projected fusion of the state and capital: this prediction was rapidly refuted by the onset of neoliberalism, which involved the imposition of market disciplines on states, capitals and, above all, workers. Harman's reply went beyond the immediate controversy that occasioned it and was an important theoretical contribution in its own right. In particular, Harman offered a restatement of the basis of the theory of the permanent arms economy that was both stronger and more securely rooted in Marx's own analysis in *Capital* than the varying formulas Kidron had used in his pioneering articles written in the 1960s.²¹

Of more immediate political importance, in responding to Kidron's vision of global state capitalism, Harman offered a much more nuanced understanding of the interrelationship between the tendencies towards the statisation and the internationalisation of capital: "The trend is towards state capitalism, towards the complete merger of individual capitals in each country with the national state. But the trend is also to the internationalisation of production: the most modern techniques are developed on an international scale." Moreover, these two tendencies were "both complementary and contradictory". As a result: "Even the biggest capitalisms are not self-contained entities, only relating to each other externally. They are not monads without windows. They are more like sieves—and the more the national state plugs up one hole, the more other holes appear".²² This appreciation of the dysfunctional interdependence of capital and the state informed *Explaining the Crisis*. It offered a valuable guide in the neoliberal world then opening up; it is, if anything, more relevant today, if one thinks, for example, about the complex mutual entanglement of state and capital in the United States and China.²³ Harman further developed the underlying theory in a very important article, "The State and Capitalism Today", published at the height of capitalist triumphalism in 1991.²⁴

More immediately, Harman (amid many other projects, for example, his book on the German Revolution, much political dissension within the SWP, and the onset of Thatcherism) began to work much more systematically on the Marxist critique of political economy. There were probably two main motives for this: first, and more obviously, the fact that capitalism entered in the 1970s a period of crises that still shows no sign of ending—what Robert Brenner would call the "long downturn"; secondly, the intense debates among Marxist economists provoked by critiques of Marx's value theory influenced by the Italian left economist Piero Sraffa and assiduously promoted by *New Left Review*.²⁵ Perhaps there was also a more unconscious feeling that, with Kidron alienated from the SWP and in any case apparently abandoning his economic studies,

responsibility for developing this side of IS theory now rested on Chris himself.²⁶ Coming to terms with Mike's withdrawal wasn't so easy: his sheer brilliance and personal magnetism kept us under his spell even as we began to disagree with him.²⁷

A first fruit of Harman's closer engagement with political economy was "Do Wages Cause Inflation?" (1979), a long article published in one of the early issues of *Socialist Review*, revived under my editorship. How to understand inflation was an important issue at the time: the period between the late 1960s and early 1980s was characterised by what came to be called "stagflation"—the simultaneous emergence, contradicting the Keynesian orthodoxy of the day, of mass unemployment and a rising rate of inflation. Chris sought to address both the dominant bourgeois argument of the time, that rising prices were caused by the wage increases being won by workers, and the connected thesis put forward notably by the Marxist economists Andrew Glyn and Bob Sutcliffe that capitalism was suffering from a profit squeeze caused by rising wages.

This explanation was symptomatic of a tendency common among those Marxist economists who were challenging Marx's value theory to revive David Ricardo's theory of profits, according to which falling profitability is exclusively caused by rising real wages (hence the description of left-wing Sraffians as neo-Ricardians).²⁹ Chris's article was notable for the care with which it dismantled Glyn's claim that the value of labour power had risen, by showing that the post-war increase in public expenditure did not, on the whole, represent a rise in the "social wage" and for the effort it took to cite empirical evidence in support of Marx's own argument that the rate of profit falls due to a rise in the organic composition of capital—that is, a rise in investment in means of production compared to wages. In this context, Harman argues, inflation becomes endemic because the large firms dominating individual sectors are able to raise prices in order to protect their profits.³⁰

These preoccupations were part of a much larger canvas in *Explaining the Crisis* (1984), which first appeared as a series of articles in this journal. It stands out for two reasons. First, Harman intervened in the theoretical debates: in particular, he offered his own solutions to the two main objects of Sraffian attack—Marx's transformation of values into prices of production and the tendential law of the falling rate of profit. To do so was all the more important in that Kidron, in his version of the permanent arms economy, drew on Sraffa and Ladislaus von Bortkiewicz, an early neo-Ricardian critic of Marx's transformation theory.³¹ This figured in 1972-3 in a weird internal debate in IS in which an opposition faction (after being expelled from IS it spawned a breakaway from which the neoconservatives of *Spiked* and Brexit Party MEP Claire Fox eventually emerged) targeted Kidron's reliance on Bortkiewicz in its critique of the permanent arms economy. For a while puzzled readers of the internal bulletin had to struggle through articles full of algebra.

Having defended Kidron during this debate, Harman in what became the opening chapter of *Explaining the Crisis* systematically reviews Marx's tendential law in order both to vindicate Kidron's argument that arms expenditure offsets the tendency of the rate of

profit to fall and to account for global capital's new era of economic disorder. This involves giving his own version of the transformation of values into prices of production, which is distinctive in portraying it as a real process unfolding in time.³² This approach was very different from Bortkiewicz and Sraffa, who seriously distort Marx's value theory by expressing it as a set of simultaneous equations, employing the methods of mainstream neoclassical economics. It anticipates more recent so-called "temporalist" accounts of the transformation of values into prices of production, which recognise that, as Fred Moseley puts it: "Marx's theory is not based on the logic of simultaneous determination, but is instead based on the logic of sequential or temporal determination".³³ Harman would later explicitly embrace the temporalist approach.³⁴

This is not the only way in which time figures in *Explaining the Crisis*. One of the book's main themes is what Chris calls "the ageing of the system", the concentration and centralisation of capital that Marx argues is a necessary consequence of the accumulation process that changes the structure of capitalism, as firms become bigger and interwoven with the state.³⁵ This theme was already present in "Do Wages Cause Inflation?". Chapter 2 of *Explaining the Crisis*, on the Great Depression of the 1930s, shows how state capitalism wasn't a Russian peculiarity, but a general trend in response to the pressures of war and slump in the context of the long-term tendency for the state and big private firms to become interdependent. But perhaps the book's finest achievement lies in the detailed overview that it provides in chapter 3 of the postwar boom and its collapse into renewed crisis in the 1970s, which achieves a nice balance between novelties and the reassertion of the tendencies that are at the centre of *Capital*. One of the most impressive sections of this chapter, which illustrates Harman's totalising understanding of capitalism, is "Labour Power during the Great Boom: The Welfare State, Family and Immigration", which carefully analyses the huge expansion of investment and employment in the reproduction of labour-power in the postwar decades and accurately predicts how difficult it would be to reverse this shift. The attention paid to changing family structures as women became increasingly drawn into wage-labour reflected the debates going on inside the SWP at the time about Marxism and women's oppression, to which Chris made an important contribution.³⁶

Surprisingly, inflation doesn't figure significantly in *Explaining the Crisis*, even though the persistence of stagflation was a key factor in pushing the Western ruling classes to abandon the Keynesian economic policy regime and replace it with neoliberalism. Harman's explanation of inflation in his 1979 article focused on the role of oligopolistic firms acting as price-givers rather than price-takers. But it didn't address the contributions of government policy and the financial system. There is, I think, something to Kidron's argument that, as a result of the tendency for the state to exercise strict controls over the banks in the aftermath of the Great Depression, together with the links between the state and private industrial firms, the system had "lost most of the mechanisms to discipline the individual capitals...That is why we have reached a situation in which inflation is more or less endemic—because nobody can really prevent it".³⁷ But neoliberalism dismantled these connections and exposed capitals much more directly to

competition, often from firms outside the national markets that hitherto had been shielded from foreign rivals. Harman was writing in the early stages of this process, but money and finance are something of a lacuna in *Explaining the Crisis*.

A few years ago, I distinguished between “substantialist” and “etherealist” approaches to value theory, the former treating it as simply an empirical and quantitative theory, the latter preoccupied with the value-form and money to the extent of abstaining from empirical analysis.³⁸ Chris was something of a substantialist: though he had a deep understanding of Marx’s theory of value, he tended (and not just in the case of political economy) to be impatient of questions of form; this may help to explain his relative neglect of money and finance (although Harman’s philosophical stress on alienation and fetishism resonates strongly with much contemporary value-form theory). This is the respect in which David Harvey’s *The Limits to Capital*, which also appeared in the early 1980s, is superior to *Explaining the Crisis*: Harvey’s emphasis on how capitalism’s economic contradictions are displaced onto a “financial fix” and a “spatial fix” involved a valuable exploration of money and finance—although his rejection of Marx’s tendential law for the rate of profit to fall (still incomplete in *The Limits to Capital*) gravely limits his ability to offer an overall account of capitalism’s trajectory.³⁹

Capitalism in the long historical view

Explaining the Crisis established Harman’s credentials as a leading Marxist political economist. He would build on it in numerous later articles, as well as in an important attempt at popularisation, *The Economics of the Madhouse* (1993). One of the most substantial articles, “The Crisis of Bourgeois Economics”, appeared in 1996. At the high noon of neoliberal triumphalism, before it had begun to be punctured by the succession of financial crashes culminating in 2007-8, Harman demonstrated with great detail and sophistication that the neoclassical emperor has no clothes. Tracing the marginalist tradition that dominates mainstream economics to its historical origins in the late 19th century, he focused on Maynard Keynes and his legacy, demonstrating that even the most critical figure to emerge from this tradition was unable to overcome its inherent limitations.⁴⁰ The prominence of neo-Keynesian and post-Keynesian critiques of neoliberal economic policy in the aftermath of the global economic and financial crisis of the late 2000s means that this thoroughgoing demonstration of the incoherences and sophisms of neoclassical orthodoxy (from which Keynes never fully escaped) has lost none of its relevance.

This theoretical critique was accompanied by more substantive analyses. The same year Chris systematically dismantled the dominant ideological theme of the day—the endlessly repeated jargon of globalisation that affirmed that capital was breaking free of national moorings and inaugurating a new era in which nation-states and their conflicts would be rendered obsolete and replaced by forms of “global governance” (Michael Hardt’s and Toni Negri’s *Empire*, published a few years later, was a left-wing version of these ideas). Harman had already, in response to the nationalist upsurges associated with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, shown that capitalism has an

inherent tendency to form nation-states around the dense “networks of trade, administration and language” that have crystallised throughout its history.⁴¹ Now he provided plentiful evidence that transnational corporations were at most regionally rather than globally based, and remained dependent on the support of “their” nation-states. This argument, which very much resonated with the theoretical perspective Harman had developed in the 1970s and early 1980s, would be vindicated by how states stepped in to rescue the banks and industrial firms in response to the crash of 2007-8. It had a prescient conclusion:

The system is unstable and dangerous precisely because capitals retain ties to states, with the possibility of a resort to force continuing to play an important role as multinationals battle each other for global dominance. The fact that the force is normally deployed outside the advanced countries themselves does not diminish its horrific effects on local populations or its destabilising impact on the system as a whole. The bombing of Baghdad [during the Gulf War of 1990-1] is as much part of the logic of the system as the Multifibre Trade Agreement or haggling over royalties for using the latest software.⁴²

Baghdad would soon be bombed again. The same understanding of capitalism that informed Chris’s earlier works was present in his most important theoretical responses to the new mass movements that emerged in the Seattle protests of November 1999 and climaxed in the giant protests against the Iraq War in February-March 2003. In “Anti-Capitalism: Theory and Practice” (2000), he welcomed the new movement against capitalist globalisation, but patiently explored its ideological limitations, in particular its tendency to accept a version of neoliberalism’s attempted self-portrait of a globalised capitalism that had broken loose from its moorings in national-states, and its failure to grasp the centrality of working class agency in any real anti-capitalist struggle. And Harman greeted the anti-war movement with “Analysing Imperialism” (2003), a massive analytical history of modern capitalist imperialism that set the George W Bush administration’s hubristic plans in context.

He returned to the themes of his “Anti-Capitalism” piece in one of his very last major articles, “Theorising Neoliberalism” (2008). Here he pointed to an ambiguity even in Marxist discussion of neoliberalism:

Did it refer to a way of running the capitalist system that could be changed with a change in government policy, or did it refer to something intrinsic to the present phase of capitalism that only challenging the system as a whole could overcome? And was this present phase really described by the right wing “libertarian” anti-statist ideology of the neoliberals or was it a much more complex system of attacks?⁴³

Harman took to task Marxist economists who tended to focus on neoliberalism rather than capitalism as such, to identify the former with the dominance of finance, and to ignore the continuities between the postwar boom and the neoliberal era in, for example, levels of state expenditure and investment in the “social wage”.⁴⁴ Harvey’s

hugely popular idea of “accumulation by dispossession” came in for severe but justified criticism, especially for portraying privatisation as the transfer of resources from “outside” capitalism, rather than as a form of capitalist restructuring.⁴⁵

As Chris pointed out in a footnote, this article was really a taster for the book he was working on, *Zombie Capitalism* (2009), which appeared in the immediate aftermath of the crash. This is a much longer and more systematic work than *Explaining the Crisis*, in some ways a summing up of Harman’s lifework on the Marxist critique of political economy. Part One is devoted to Marxist economic theory, but incorporates his earlier article on the capitalist state. This inclusion signals something distinctive to the IS tradition—that it treats the state (or better, states) not as something outside capital, as Harvey does, indeed even the outstanding Marxist economic blogger Michael Roberts describes the private sector as the “capitalist sector”, implying that the public sector is somehow non-capitalist), but as a constitutive element of the capital-relation. Like Colin Barker, Harman sees the state as capital: his article on the state introduces the very fruitful concept of “political capitalists”, “who, through the state, seek to promote the development of the sibling capitals operating within an individual state”, and who “behave as much like capitalists—as living embodiments of capital accumulation at the expense of workers—as do private entrepreneurs or shareholders”.⁴⁶

The strongly historical approach to political economy implicit in this approach informs the rest of *Zombie Capitalism*, devoted to the trajectories of 20th and early 21st century capitalism, and exploring the neoliberal era in a depth that was impossible in *Explaining the Crisis*, written at its inception in the early 1980s. Thus the book dealt thoroughly with financialisation while refusing to overstate its importance and setting it in the context of the continuing problems of profitability with which the advanced capitalist economies struggled.⁴⁷ Beyond the analytical depth and erudition that Harman shows throughout the book, it underlines the importance of historical time to his understanding of Marxism. His first books—*Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe* (1974) and *The Lost Revolution: Germany 1918 to 1923* (1983) were devoted to crucial episodes in the class struggle, as was *The Fire Last Time* (1988), on the upturn of the late 1960s and early 1970s. *A People’s History of the World* (1999) was on quite another scale, and demonstrated the depth of his knowledge of non-European societies in particular. Harman also developed his theoretical interpretation of historical materialism in two articles, later published in book form as *Marxism and History* (1998).⁴⁸ This profound historical understanding informs his approach to the critique of political economy which emphasises, not formal category construction, but a tough-minded, empirically searching scrutiny of capitalism as a historically developing system whose trajectory is marked by both deep continuities and sudden upheavals.

This long historical view is present particularly when *Zombie Capitalism* strikes a strong new note in a chapter entitled “The New Limits to Capital” (echoing, of course, Harvey’s *The Limits to Capital*) and devoted to “the tendency for the system to undermine the very process of interaction on which it, like every other form of human society, depended”—the destruction of nature that is such a decisive feature of late capitalism.⁴⁹ This

assessment resonates with the work of contemporary Marxists such as John Bellamy Foster, Paul Burkett, Kohei Saito, Ian Angus and Andreas Malm, who have revived and developed Marx's own ecological critique of capitalism. But Chris had already shown that this tendency towards environmental destruction belongs to a pattern that runs through the long sweep of human history.

In his *People's History*, he writes about the collapse of the first great civilisations—Mesopotamia circa 2300 BC, the Egyptian Old Kingdom 150 years later, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro on the Indus circa 1500 BC, Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece a century later. He identifies certain common factors: "First, there is the record of ever-greater expenditure of resources by the ruling class on itself and its monuments." Second, "the growth in the power and wealth of the ruling class drove the living standards of the mass of the people down to the minimum necessary for survival—and sometimes even lower." Third, "the ever-greater absorption of resources by the ruling class was accompanied by a massive slowdown in the growth of humanity's ability to control and understand the natural world." Thus:

A ruling class that had arisen out of advances in human productive powers now prevented further advances. But without such advances its own rapaciousness was bound to exhaust society's resources, until the means of livelihood became insufficient to provide for the mass of the population. At that point it only required a slight change in climate for people to starve and society to shake to its core.⁵⁰

Harman argues that the same pattern would be repeated again and again, for example, in the crises that afflicted the Roman world, China, and India in the 5th century AD and in the 14th century crisis of European feudalism.⁵¹ This long historical view informs his diagnosis of the condition of capitalism at the beginning of the 21st century, as does the rider that civilisational collapse is not inevitable if a class emerges "associated with new, more advanced ways of carrying out production and capable of imposing its will on society as a whole by overthrowing the old ruling class".⁵² We are not so far from our own world, of economic stagnation, slowing productivity growth, accelerating climate catastrophe, and powerful if still politically unfocused mass revolt—though capitalism's very success in hugely expanding humankind's productive powers on a global scale has simultaneously enhanced its destructive potential.

Chris concludes the chapter on the ecological limits to capital with the food shortage of 2008, which provoked riots in many countries: "It is the sort of interaction of the economic, the environmental and the political we should expect to see repeated again and again in the 21st century, producing recurrent, very deep social and political crises that frame the choice between global catastrophe and revolutionary change".⁵³ These are words that an Extinction Rebellion activist would instantly recognise: Chris Harman can thus still speak to those struggling against capitalism in the 21st century.

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Notes

For my immediate response to Chris's death, see Callinicos, 2009a. *International Socialism* 125, published in January 2010, carried a number of tributes to him:

<http://isj.org.uk/issue-125/>

Thanks to Joseph Choonara and Camilla Royle for their comments on this article in draft.

Anderson, 1976.

Birchall, 2011.

The picture was very different in Latin America, where the spread of military dictatorships in the 1960s and 1970s meant gaol, torture, often death for many revolutionary activists. Witness the experience of the Fourth International, recounted in Bensaïd, 2013, chapter 10.

Deutscher, 1984, pp57-58.

Callinicos, 2010.

Cohen, 2000, ppxxv-xxvi. Cohen uses the clumsier phrase “non-bullshit Marxism”, though it isn't as clumsy as his very badly misjudged philosophising about bullshit in Cohen, 2013, ch5.

Orwell, 1970, p166.

Personal communication.

This is not to diminish the contribution of others—above all, and much closer to Cliff in age, Duncan Hallas, but he would have been the first to say that he was a populariser (a brilliant and learned one, one must add) and not an innovator.

For a small selection, see Harman, 2011.

See also the important assessment of Harman's approach to political economy in Choonara, 2010.

Mandel, 1969.

Harman, 1969. The quoted passage comes from the French translation of Marx's *Grundrisse* (the English translation appeared only in 1973). The English version reads (slightly more of Marx's text, part of a very dense discussion of money, is included for the sake of sense): “regulation of reciprocal exchange arises by means of regulation of reciprocal production, and the costs of production, which ultimately resolve into labour time, would thus become the measure of exchange...the product...relates to itself as the realisation of a specific quantity of labour time in general, of social labour time”—Marx, 1973, p205.

Harman, 1984a, pp46-49. My own interpretation of imperialism is deeply indebted to this insight—see Callinicos, 2009b.

Althusser, 1969.

Harman, 2010, p73.

Harman, 2000, pp27-28. For my own view on alienation, which differs from both Althusser's and Harman's, see Callinicos, 2014, pp219-228.

Harman, 1976, 1977a, 1990. There is a first sketch of this analysis in Harman, 1974, pp255-269.

The connections between the theories of state capitalism and of the permanent arms economy are well brought out in Binns, 1975. Joseph Choonara is working on an important article on the permanent arms economy.

Kidron, 1977 and 2019; Harman, 1977b. Kidron's original articles on the permanent arms economy are collected in Kuper, 2018. I must admit to some bias here since I drafted the discussion of productive and unproductive capital in Chris's article, which he somewhat reluctantly accepted.

Harman, 1977b.

See, on China's rise, Harman, 2006.

Harman, 1991.

Brenner, 1998; for the Sraffian assault, Steedman, 1977, and Steedman and others, 1981, and, in response, Mandel and Freeman, 1984. Moseley, 2016, is a monumental study of the transformation problem at the heart of the debates on value theory.

Kidron was in fact later to write a substantial manuscript, though it remained largely unpublished during his lifetime, on the "fractal state". We hope soon to publish part of it.

See the interview with Richard Kuper and John Palmer elsewhere in this issue.

Another important early text is a review article of Mandel's *Late Capitalism* in the first of the new series of *International Socialism* as a theoretical quarterly—Harman, 1978. Here Chris returned to the lists in defence of the permanent arms economy, but also offered a still pertinent critique of Mandel's theory of long waves of capitalist development.

Glyn and Sutcliffe, 1972. There is an extensive critique of this so-called "supply-side" explanation of capitalist crisis in Brenner, 1998.

Harman, 1979.

Kidron, 1967. See Sraffa, 1960, and Bortkiewicz, 1952. For a critique of Bortkiewicz that makes an unnecessary concession to him, see Callinicos, 1976.

Harman, 1984a, pp38-43, and the accompanying footnotes, especially pp160-162, n67.

Moseley, 2016, p25. The temporalist interpretation is powerfully argued in Kliman, 2006. At the time of writing what became *Explaining the Crisis*, Chris was strongly influenced by an article on the transformation problem by the Argentinian Marxist Miguel Garcia, who argues:

To determine cost prices of commodities by their sale prices [which Bortkietwicz criticised Marx for not doing] is a “solution” which recalls that of Baron Munchausen, who descended from the moon several times tying one end of a rope to another, and in order to do this he had to untie them first of all. The transformation of values into prices of production in Marx must be understood as a “determinate abstraction”, as a concrete historical process understood through thinking, but not as a conceptual operation— Garcia 1979, p58.

Chris was so impressed by Garcia’s article that he proposed that it should be translated into English and published in an early issue of the new quarterly *International Socialism*.

Harman, 2009, pp46-50. He seems to have been particularly attracted to the version of the temporalist approach developed in Carchedi, 1991, chapter 3.

He may have taken this phrase from Kidron, who wrote in 1974 about “the ageing of capitalism or, more specifically, the enormous growth in the size and responsibilities of its component units”, Kuper, 2018, p94.

Harman, 1984a, pp102-113; Harman, 1984b.

Quoted in Kidron, 2019, pp153-154, n13. There is a useful discussion of Marxist approaches to inflation in Saad-Filho, 2002, pp99-105.

Callinicos, 2014, pp16-17.

Callinicos and Choonara, 2016. At the time, Harman wasn’t exactly alone among Marxist economic theorists in this neglect: an important book by two Communist Party economists, Ben Fine and Lawrence Harris, has exactly one paragraph on money and crises—Fine and Harris, 1979, p85.

Harman, 1996a.

Harman, 1992.

Harman, 1996b, p30.

Harman, 2008, p87.

The crash has, if anything, stimulated this kind of approach. For a recent example, see Blakeley, 2019.

Harvey, 2003 and 2005. See also Ashman and Callinicos, 2006, pp115-29.

Harman, 1991, pp20, 22; Harman, 2009, p115; Barker, 1978.

Harman, 2009, chapter 11.

See also Harman, 2004. See, for some reservations about Harman's interpretation of the central concepts of historical materialism, Callinicos, 1987, and for an alternative approach, Callinicos, 2004.

Harman, 2009, p307.

Harman, 1999, pp33 and 35.

Harman, 1999, pp103-105 and 147-149. There is a risk here of treating this pattern as a transhistorical law and abstracting from the specific properties of different modes of production. Thus, the European crises of the 5th and 14th centuries had very different outcomes—respectively the partial collapse of the Roman tributary state and the triumph of private landownership in Western Europe, and the centralisation of lordly power in absolute monarchies whose competition eventually gave a selective advantage to those states (the United Provinces and England) that developed a capitalist economic base—Callinicos, 2009b, pp115-136. But Chris rejected the distinction between tributary and feudal modes of production. I remember disagreeing with him about this on a crowded commuter train in Mumbai during the World Social Forum in 2004, only to find a criticism of my views in a long footnote in this journal! See Harman, 2004, pp85-86, footnote 57. I replied with my own lengthy footnote: Callinicos, 2009b, pp. 250-251, footnote 33. Alas, Chris's death soon after cut short the dialogue we had been having for the preceding 35 years.

Harman, 1999, p39.

Harman, 2009, p323.

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