

A History of Humanity

Humanity today functions as a gigantic, world-encompassing system. Renowned world historian Patrick Manning traces how this Human System evolved from *Homo sapiens*' beginnings over 200,000 years ago right up to the present day. He focuses on three great shifts in the scale of social organization – the rise of syntactical language, of agricultural society, and today's newly global social discourse – and links processes of social evolution to the dynamics of biological and cultural evolution. Throughout each of these shifts, migration and social diversity have been central, and social institutions have existed in a delicate balance, serving not just their own members but undergoing regulation from society. Integrating approaches from world history, environmental studies, biological and cultural evolution, social anthropology, sociology, and evolutionary linguistics, Patrick Manning offers an unprecedented account of the evolution of humans and our complex social system and explores the crises facing that Human System today.

Patrick Manning is Andrew Mellon Professor of World History, Emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh, Founding Director of the World History Center, and former president of the American Historical Association. He is a multidisciplinary scholar in African and world history and in historical datasets.

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The Evolution of the Human System

Patrick Manning
University of Pittsburgh



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Preface

During a long career as a historian, I have watched the dramatic changes in what is known as “world history.” At first, I read writings on empires, wars, great men, and European expansion. In time these topics were set into the background by studies of globalization, gender, migration, environmental change, decolonization, and genomes. My own studies – focusing on Africa in world history and on economy, migration, and culture through multiple disciplines – changed along with those of other writers. Throughout, I planned to prepare a new review of world history, surveying the full length of the human experience. In completing this volume during the past three years, I have been repeatedly surprised by the new problems to study and new knowledge about them. The result, by no means definitive, is an update for 2020, addressing much of what is new in world history.

I began work on this volume by identifying a “Human System,” to emphasize the numerous elements of human life, past and present, that interact with one another as parts of an elaborate, evolving organism. I chose to set the Human System in coevolution with “Gaia” – the complex natural environment with which humans interact as individuals and in groups. I also assumed that biological evolution, in giving rise to humankind, somehow linked up with a process of social evolution that gradually created the social groups of life today – cities, schools, nations, companies, teams. I assumed that the rise of speech – syntactic language – was central to the transition to social evolution.

One surprise was to discover that a theory arose in the 1980s on cultural evolution, in between biological and social processes. This theory successfully shows how individual learning was able to build human cooperation to a higher level. But the same theory assumes that no further steps were necessary to achieve large-scale human societies. In contrast, a still-newer theory of social evolution shows how agreements to join groups, especially via spoken language, enabled people to form social institutions with inherent dynamics. While the two new theories have not yet been fit together, I believe their combination can give a satisfactory account of the rise of the Human System. Sorting out these and other theories requires

debate on big questions. Can one treat humanity as a growing and functioning social system? Does there exist a process of social evolution that can explain main trends in history? Can we link social evolution and biological evolution? Is “cultural evolution” part of overall human evolution? How widespread and divergent are the meanings of “culture”? Was spoken language the first social institution? How do we understand our behavior in social groups – does the behavior of human groups bring improved decisions over individual behavior? Is migration helpful or harmful? Is popular culture as important today as capitalism?

My interpretation is the individual-level project of a researcher with a small-scale research design to explore a very big topic. But how can a single scholar assemble knowledge from so many disciplines? Needless to say, my deployment of the various disciplines will be uneven. Nevertheless, in what I expect is not a truly unusual experience in recent years, I have undergone training in several of these areas; I am an autodidact in others. I had undergraduate training in chemistry and biology, followed by graduate training in African history and economic history with a world-historical approach, including some anthropology. Later I conducted a formal study of demography and migration; I have also conducted reading and research on aspects of historical linguistics. I have done reading in genetics and climatology with guidance from specialists; I am self-trained in my recent research in history of science. Further, thanks to work by dedicated scholars, the basic principles and advances of many fields of study have been very well written up in the articles and books I have cited here. A final argument for taking on so many disciplines at once is systemic: the Human System functions through interrelated processes, and studying them at once should lead the researcher to encounter resonances that might not be visible with a piecemeal exploration. In addition, the assertions that I advance here, while I do stand by them, are to be understood as hypotheses rather than confirmed research results.

Research on human social and biological change, in my opinion, is moving in the direction that I have staked out, and I offer this book to point to additional possibilities, hoping to speed the process of research. My central hypothesis is that humans developed speech in Northeast Africa some 70,000 years ago. That assertion raised big questions about the time before and the time after that transformation – questions that are explored here. My second hypothesis, a Human System based on social evolution, gained reinforcement from James Miller’s *Living Systems*, a framework at once biological, social, and systemic. Then began my program of reading and writing on how to link social, biological, and cultural evolution.

At every stage in research, I encountered an incredible wealth of knowledge and debate unfolding in multiple disciplines. My theory and narrative underwent endless twists and shifts as I learned new research results. I have encountered the boldness of physicists, the skill of chemists in locating multiple scales of existence, the tension in biology between theory and empiricism, the struggle of anthropology and sociology to make use of ideology, the strategic but difficult standpoint of psychology, the caution of historians, the extremes of systems and game theory, and the perplexity of “groups” in the minds of all. At one stage I hoped to include, in this book, a review of this two-century intellectual evolution, as an accompaniment to my narrative of human evolution. Instead I have written up that process separately, in *Methods for Human History*. Here, I reaffirm that the developments and exchanges across disciplines have been a fundamental and exciting aspect of learning about the many dimensions of human evolution.

World history is not simply a story. It is a set of puzzles, for which the solutions require the very best in our theoretical analysis and empirical data collection, in all the disciplines of knowledge that address aspects of human experience. In this volume I offer my understanding of major problems, data, and answers in world history, thinking of readers with several types of interests. Readers with an interest in world history will find interpretations of social change tied to innovation and migration. Readers concerned with social dynamics will find analyses of the origins of current crises in society and the environment. Readers attentive to research in disciplines of physical, biological, and social sciences will see the theories applied to human history. Further, students at graduate, undergraduate, and secondary levels will find here an argument that a single author or reader, taking the time to read and discuss the wonderful knowledge resources now available, can explore and reach conclusions on the interplay of big issues in human society. There remain many more big issues to explore.

Acknowledgments

I begin by expressing appreciation to my late father, John V. Manning, a trade unionist intellectual, and to my brother, Curtis V. Manning, an astronomer, for a lifetime of discussions on systems thinking in the human context. During undergraduate days at Caltech, majoring in chemistry (and informally in history), I had exposure to such scientific luminaries as Linus Pauling, Max Delbrück, Roger Sperry, James Bonner, and George Beadle. At the University of Wisconsin–Madison I had the great fortune to do graduate study in African and world history with Philip D. Curtin, Jan Vansina, John Smail, Stuart Schaar, and, in economic history, Jeffrey Williamson.

I benefited from close contact with three great linguists: Christopher Ehret of my own generation and Joseph Greenberg and Noam Chomsky of the previous generation. I had a year of formal study of demography under a Guggenheim Fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania, where I learned from Samuel Preston, Jane Mencken, Susan Watkins, and Tukufu Zuberi. At the Northeastern University World History Center, I worked closely with Alfred W. Crosby and Andre Gunder Frank. Study of Africa and the African diaspora, a world-historical realm in itself, was reinforced by 22 years in the Department of African–American Studies at Northeastern University, working especially with Ronald Bailey and Robert L. Hall and also with Michael Gomez, Kim Butler, Maghan Keita, Chouki El Hamel, and Jean-Jacques Sène. The International Institute of Social History led me to Leo Lucassen, Jan Lucassen, Marcel van der Linden, Karin Hofmeester, Filipa Ribeiro da Silva, Pepijn Brandon, and others. The Global Economic History Network, under a grant from the Leverhulme Foundation led by Patrick O’Brien, put me back in touch with economic historians as their global work began to flourish.

At the University of Pittsburgh, the World History Center has supported scholars worldwide, advancing research on this and other projects: it is worthy of continued and expanded support. The Andrew Mellon Foundation sponsored a three-volume publication project in world

history of science at the Center and the University of Pittsburgh Press, for which my coeditors were Daniel Rood, Mat Savelli, and Abigail Owen. Center Director Ruth Mostern leads the World-Historical Gazetteer project, a resource central to spatial analysis. The Center brought me into contact with Daniel Bain and Aubrey Hillman for consultation in geology; with Monica Green on disease history; with Jason Carson on genomics; and with R. Charles Weller, who encouraged me to complete a chapter-length overview of the Human System in 2016. Pitt grad students James Hommes and Lars Peterson critiqued my world history manuscript; Chris Eirkson, Jack Bouchard, and especially Madalina Veres helped me map language distributions; Ahmet Izmirlioglu assisted me on language and network analysis; Matt Drwenski brought key insights in economic history. Jeremy Black and Felipe Fernandez-Armesto each kindly provided me with copies of their book manuscripts in process. Boris Michev and Daniel Andrus of Pitt's University Library System skillfully prepared the maps for this volume.

My daughter, Pam Manning, showed me the benefits of wide reading on humans and animals. Liu Jiafeng and the Shandong University Institute for Global and Transnational History generously hosted me for seven lectures and support for writing in 2017. Readers of drafts of this study have provided valuable commentary: Eugene Anderson, Iris Borowy, Lincoln Paine, Christopher Ehret, Felipe Fernández-Armesto, Matthias van Rossum, Pim de Zwart, Ahmet Izmirlioglu, Bennett Sherry, Molly Warsh, and two anonymous referees for Cambridge University Press. Michael Watson of Cambridge University Press has skillfully shepherded this volume through the past two years of its revisions.

I dedicate this work with deep love to Susan Manning, my wife, with whom I have shared many happy years. She has been warmly and imaginatively supportive of the preparation of this book.

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