

**Macrohistory and Macrohistorians:  
Perspectives on Individual, Social, and Civilizational Change**

**Johan Galtung + Sohail Inayatullah (editors)**

Praeger 1997

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A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 1998 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

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The larger part of *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians* consists of short articles on twenty macrohistorians: Ssu-Ma Ch'ien, Augustine (with a glance at Aquinas), Ibn Khaldun, Giambattista Vico, Adam Smith, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, Vilfredo Pareto, Max Weber, Rudolf Steiner, [Oswald Spengler](#), Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Pitirim Sorokin, Arnold Toynbee, Antonio Gramsci, Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar, Riane Eisler, and James Lovelock (the Gaia hypothesis). Each of these contains a brief biographical sketch and an outline of the writer's macrohistorical system. Appendices contain a brief summary chart and visual models of each of the systems.

The treatments are uneven and clearly reflect the biases of the contributors — and Eisler has written the entry on herself. Obviously it is impossible to do justice to complex thinkers in five or six pages, and the accounts do sometimes seem to reduce their systems to clichés. At this level, all trace of details is lost, most notably the extensive empirical (historical or sociological) grounding which is the saving grace of some of the macrohistorians, distinguishing Marx and Toynbee from Hegel and Teilhard de Chardin, for example. But there are new perspectives on familiar figures to be found here — and perhaps an introduction to some unfamiliar ones.

For me, the most interesting part of *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians* is a comparative chapter by Inayatullah. He considers ten themes across the twenty macrohistorians and their systems: their episteme and context; their views on historiography (how they situate their own writings); the chosen units of analysis, the proposed causes and mechanisms of change, the role of metaphysics and the transcendent, the metaphors of time used, and the resulting stages and patterns of history; the role of a "vanguard"

(minority leadership in transitions from one stage to another); exits from the theories (whether they claim to be the final truth or have openings to other theories); and the application of the theories to our own future. He also incorporates perspectives and ideas from other macrohistorians and historians, among them [Fernand Braudel](#), Michel Foucault, Ashis Nandy, and [Immanuel Wallerstein](#).

A chapter by Galtung tries to combine the different macrohistorians, suggesting synergies between some of the possible pairings of ten out of the twenty covered. This produces some very superficial analysis, however, with lists of comments such as "Khaldun could teach Comte how epistemic stages reflect interests of social carriers; Sorokin could teach Spengler that life is not only culture/ideational; ...". More interesting is an attempt to apply metaphors taken from macrohistory to microhistory (prosopography or human life-history analysis) and, moving in the other direction, to extend social macrohistory (of civilizations and cultures) to the history of the world system as a whole.

There is much interesting material in *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians*, but I suspect it does as much as can usefully be done at such a level of abstraction. To proceed further along this path, without engagement with the complexities of history and the hard problems of sociology, is unlikely to be productive. As a "toolkit", to be drawn on by historians for inspiration, *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians* may prove useful, but I fear its seductive simplification and abstraction may lead others astray.

March 1998

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%S Perspectives on Individual, Social, and Civilizational Change  
%E Galtung, Johan  
%E Inayatullah, Sohail  
%I Praeger  
%D 1997  
%O hardcover, bibliography, index  
%G ISBN 0275957551

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