

Human Systems

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This essay is a modest attempt at understanding how our past, present and future are shaped. The spark of humanity, at scale and in each of us individually, remains a vast ocean we are only beginning to navigate. We do not get the luxury of final answers. We are left to wonder about what we are, what we have built, and whether any of it was the right thing. Human systems theory does not resolve that uncertainty. It tries to make it more legible. To model what is happening around us clearly enough that our next reaction, individually and collectively, is a little less blind than the last one.

Theory of human systems

Our environment was made by people reacting to each other. When we are in an environment, we are not acting inside of it. We are reacting to it. Our reaction changes it. The changed environment produces the next reaction. When multiple humans do this together, their collective reactions become the world they now inhabit. This motion is a human system: an environment made from other people's reactions. It puts the environment at the center as both the product of reactions and the producer of them simultaneously. Our future is being made at this instant as we react to the environment we ourselves created. It never stops.

The mechanism works like this. An environment exerts pressures: on safety, status, belonging, meaning, access, or survival. The psychology of the reactor filters how those pressures are perceived and what reaction follows. That reaction creates a new environment. The loop continues.

When multiple people exist inside the same system, the complexity multiplies. Each person is no longer reacting only to static conditions, but also to the reactions of everyone else. Those reactions accumulate into the shared environment, which shapes the next round of perception and response. A human system is this process running continuously across a group.

The three fields

Every environment we inhabit is made of three fields of constraint.

The material field is what physically exists around us, what we can access, and what we cannot. Resources, geography, infrastructure, other bodies. Anything that constrains us through its physical presence or absence.

The informational field is what we know and believe. Facts, education, media, technology. Anything that shapes what we are able to understand or decide through its informational content alone.

The social field is what we are expected to do. The norms we follow or face consequences for breaking. The hierarchies that determine our access. The relations and identities that bind us.

These three fields are not separate. They are one environment seen from three angles. The same element can constrain us across all three simultaneously. Another person is a material presence that competes for resources, an informational source that changes what we know, and a social relation that carries obligations and enforces norms. They appear in all three fields at once because they constrain us in all three ways at once. Together they form the total environment we perceive and react to at any given moment.

A change in any one field changes the others.

For instance, sudden scarcity in the material field can destroy trust in the social field and rewrite what people believe in the informational field simultaneously.

The group that was sharing begins hoarding. Hierarchies form around whoever controls what remains. What started as a resource problem becomes a social order and then a belief system. The cascade of reactions runs in every direction. The three fields are not parallel tracks. They are one environment viewed from three angles, and pressure applied to any one angle deforms the whole.

No two people perceive an environment the same way. Our psychology, our history, and everything we have lived through shape the surface expression of our reactions.

Reading a human system

To understand any human system, identify what is materially constraining action, what is informationally shaping perception, and what is socially regulating behaviour.

Once the environment is mapped, identify the pressures it is generating. Then look at the actors inside it. Their psychology and history shape how they read those pressures and what reaction follows.

That reaction changes the environment. Map the new one. Run the loop again.

Do this clearly enough and the probable reactions become legible. What comes next begins to take shape before it arrives.

History

History can be read as overlapping human systems.

When Tolstoy was writing *War and Peace*, he realised he could not tell the story of the Decembrists returning from exile without going back to their revolt against the Tsar in 1825, and he could not do that without going back further to Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812, which had triggered the very authoritarianism they were rebelling against. He kept pulling the thread backwards and there was no beginning. No single event stands alone. Each emerges from prior conditions, many of which were themselves shaped by human reaction.

The French Revolution was not random. It was the reaction of a population to the environment France had become by 1789. What followed was the new environment those reactions produced. The reactions of every prior generation are embedded in the environment we inherited. We will embed ours into the environment of those who come after us. You pull one thread and you hold the full tapestry.

Even the figures who appear to have shaped history alone are products of their environment. Napoleon, Caesar, Mao. Whatever their singularity, they arose within conditions that made certain kinds of leadership possible, legible, and consequential. The leader is not separate from the system. The leader is one of the system's most concentrated outputs. Remove a particular figure, and similar conditions may still produce a similar type of actor.

Today

In today's world, every institution is a human system in motion. Markets react to fear, to confidence, to scarcity. Political orders react to the economy, to the population, to geopolitical pressure, all of which are themselves outputs of prior reactions. Social phenomena are populations reacting to the environment the previous generation created, which was itself a reaction to the one before. Every individual reaction adds to an enormous shared pool that compounds without end.

Everything has a cause. Our past, present, and future are one thread of a system, still running.

Why this matters

This theory begins with a simple claim. Individuals react to environments. Their reactions alter those environments. Across groups and time, that loop becomes a cycle full of patterns we call history. Everything is a product of the environment it emerged from, including our perception of it.

The goal is to understand the system behind what has shaped, is shaping, and will shape our world.

The human system is running right now, in every market, every institution, every conversation, every decision being made anywhere in the world at this moment. Understanding the mechanism gives us clarity. And in a world moving faster than any prior generation has had to navigate, clarity is the most useful thing there is.

What reacts can be understood, what can be understood can be anticipated, and what can be anticipated can be navigated.