

## Big History

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Many years ago, when I first started teaching, one of my courses was the “History of Western Civilization” (this was before “Eurocentrism” became a pejorative term). I began by going to the far left of the long blackboard and drawing a line to the far right. I then informed the class that Western Civilization occupied the dot at the end of the line, which represented the 13.8 million years since the big bang. Perhaps unknowingly I was practicing big history *avant la lettre*.

At about this time, I was also engaged in reading some of the books by Sir James Jeans and by Arthur Eddington, outstanding astrophysicists at the time. They speculated on the history of the universe since the big bang. Thus the practitioners of big history seemed to be cosmologists rather than historians.

Recently this situation has changed. Led by David Christian, a cohort of historians has taken up the idea. A sign of their significance is the appearance of a textbook, *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* (2013), by David Christian, Cynthia Stokes Brown, and Craig Benjamin. When a subfield of history creates a textbook, academics know that the subject has arrived. It is a beautiful volume, filled with attractive illustrations, charts, and graphs. My intent, however, is not to review the book but to engage in reflections on the general subject.

Perhaps it has been the step out into space, and a landing on the moon, that has fueled the interest in big history. We see ourselves now as one with the universe. Historians must now tell us about that past—our past. To help do so, another book can usefully be placed alongside of Christian’s. It is called *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (2011), and is the work of many authors, though Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail are the leading figures (2011). A critical chapter in their book is the last one, on scale.

Both *Big History* and *Deep History* seek to answer “the big questions of what it means to be human” (Shryock and Smail 2011, x). Their starting point is in interstellar space. The point at the end of the blackboard is when the J-shaped curve of humanity suddenly leaps upward. It is the period most historians label as “modernity.” Christian breaks it into two parts. He remarks, “The period from 1350 to 1700 CE witnessed the most momentous expansion in exchange networks in the entire history of humanity. This is when humans became, for the first time, a truly global species, as societies in all the world zones were stitched into a single network of exchange” (Christian et al. 2013, 229).

And here, I believe, is where the deficiencies of big and deep history arise. Having spoken eloquently of the roughly 13.8 billion years before the modern period, they stop asking questions about the present. For it is in this period that the rise to dominance of the scientific method begins, and displaces the religious attitude. This fact also points to their neglect of religions in their accounts. 35,000–40,000 years ago, when Cro-Magnon man emerges, the attempt to

understand the cosmos gives rise to various religions. In the process priesthoods were created.

Big history puts forth two major hypotheses: that *Homo sapiens* is the species that not only adapts to its environment, but changes that environment drastically and increasingly; and, that evolutionary change tends toward complexity. The first hypothesis is supported by the history of technology, and the second by prolonged observation.

Christian et al. know this, but fail to think through its implications. After all, it is this development that allows them to “think scientifically” about big history. For it is in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mainly in Western Europe, that the so-called Scientific Revolution occurs. It is this Revolution that allows Christian to think and work as he does. What is neglected is the increasing consciousness, self-consciousness, and historical consciousness that begins to surround humanity. For this, one does well to turn to Hegel.

Responding to Aristotle’s imperative, to “Know Thyself,” Hegel deepens our understanding of self. It is worth quoting him at length. In his *Philosophy of History* (1837), he states that,

Now this is Freedom, exactly. For if I am dependent, my being is referred to something else which I am not; I cannot exist independently of something external. I am free, on the contrary, when my existence depends upon myself. This self-contained existence of Spirit is none other than self-consciousness—consciousness of one’s own being. Two things must be distinguished in consciousness; first, the fact *that I know*; secondly, *what I know*. In self-consciousness these are merged in one. (Hegel 1900 [1837], 12)

Thus, it is a new self that is able to go on and do big and deep history, a development that tends to be overlooked by their practitioners. I make my arguments at greater length in a chapter of my recently published book, *Reflections on the Modern and the Global* (2013). It is the tiny dot at the end of the blackboard. It assumes the theories of evolution put forth by Charles Darwin. It also allows for the emerging globalization now being experienced by the human species. Globalization involves increased interconnection along with a compression of space and time. This, in turn, promotes a sense of one Humanity, even though existing in diverse cultures. The arguments as to why this must continue are made at great length by Martha C. E. Van Der Bly in her article, “Pananthropoi—Towards a Society of All Humanity” (2013).

It is this Human Self that combines with its technological expression and is behind the discovery and use of the telescope and the microscope, which fosters a vision of the near and the far, the small and the large. (I have gone into great length on the role of technology in my book, *The Fourth Discontinuity: The Co-Evolution of Man and Machines* (1993)). It is the telescope that has opened up the heavens and allows for big history.

Christian’s is a big book. With *The Structure of Big History: From the Big Bang Until Today* (1996), Fred Spier tried to deal with the same subject in 113 pages (1996). Like Christian’s, his is an attempt to transcend Eurocentrism and to encourage what has come to be known as World History. (Christian had published at least two articles in Jerry Bentley’s journal, *The Journal of*

*World History*.) It is, of course, quite a feat to cover over 3.8 billion years in just over 100 pages. I must refer the reader to my review of Spier's book, along with that of Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1997) (Mazlish 1999).

Can we come to any conclusions on the subject? I will attempt to do so in the form of a few questions. Has the reaction to Eurocentrism gone too far? After all, it was in the West that the modern scientific method was most strongly promulgated and propelled (this does not mean we should neglect other areas and times when science flourished, such as in China and the Middle East). Does the embrace of big history mean the rejection of "Little History"? Surely, this is a rhetorical question.

Would it not be well to end our discussion with an invocation of Mao's "let a hundred flowers bloom"? Only we mean it. There is no reason why numerous sub-fields of history cannot co-exist. Big history can be big enough to recognize other approaches, and small history ecumenical enough to welcome it.

History, following Herodotus, literally means "inquiry." Such inquiry arose in fifth-century Athens as part of the initiative to understand both natural and human phenomena. It is a notable way of thinking, united today in the pursuit of both big and little history.

## Works Cited

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