

INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICALLY SPEAKING FORUM ON BIG HISTORY

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Big history courses survey the past at many different scales, from those of cosmology to those of modern history. They work in much the same way as traditional creation stories, yet they use the information of modern, scientific scholarship. And their number is growing.

To most professional historians today, the idea of big history may seem, frankly, daft. Having struggled over many years to complete the sharply focused research that leads to a PhD, and having finally landed an academic position after many painful interviews in the cattle markets of modern scholarship, why should any historian decide to start reading (and perhaps even teaching!) cosmology, geology, biology, and prehistory as well as the normal stuff? Having created, against the odds, a moderately safe scholarly space bounded, let's say, by the administrative history of early 19th century Russia (the subject of my doctoral dissertation), why would you want to leave this comfort zone? Given the conventions and structures of the history profession today, this doesn't look like a smart career decision.

And yet, stepping outside that scholarly comfort zone is what an increasing number of historians are doing today, as the two essays reprinted below tell us. Both convey the excitement and challenge of teaching big history. Students (above all the very best students) find it exhilarating to be invited to consider very big questions: what makes humans (and human history) different? Why is human history so different from chimp history, or the history of any other large mammal species? Is there a direction to human history? Does that direction have anything to do with the direction of pre-human history? Are we part of the biosphere? Or completely separate from it? Are we accidents or freaks? Or are we in some sense a pre-ordained product of the Universe's evolution? Are we alone? What does it mean to contemplate 13 billion years of history? And is it significant that the 100,000 years or so of our species' existence seems such an utterly insignificant part of such a large story?

No course in big history can answer these questions satisfactorily, and the best students understand that. What big history courses can do is to reassure students that the questions are serious, and that if they are willing to borrow ideas and information from many different disciplines, they may be able to piece together some preliminary answers. I have found in my own experience that validating the big questions that many students really want to ask makes for powerful and exciting teaching and learning.

For teachers the excitement is in watching the large story appear; it's a bit like watching a photograph appear in an old-fashioned dark room. Eventually, we begin to realize that the many stories we have taught over the years acquire new meaning when seen as parts of much larger stories. None of this requires that we abandon the research skills or the scepticism towards evidence and sources that we learnt as graduate students. Yes, any big history story needs to be interrogated carefully for cultural bias, naivety, dogmatism, and simple errors of fact. And no, there is not just one big history story, though there are (as in any historical field) important pieces of information that every scholar must deal with: that the Universe appears to have originated 13.7 billion years ago, for example, or that we would not exist if a meteorite had not landed in Mexico 67 million years ago and wiped out most of the dinosaurs. In fact, historians, because they are so sensitive to the hidden messages of stories about the past, are in a wonderful position to ensure that the narratives told by teachers of big history are as good, as open, as objective and as precise as they can possibly be.

Above all, big history is exciting because it helps us (and our students) see the underlying unity of modern knowledge, the fact that knowledge consist of more than a scattered archipelago of knowledge islands (some chemistry today, some German tomorrow, some medieval history the next day and then some philosophy). Astronomy has plenty to tell historians about, for example, the scales at which human history works, while biology has much to tell us about the strangeness of our species. Historians, in turn, have much to tell scientists about the power and the pitfalls of historical narratives.

All in all, teaching big history is exciting and rewarding. That may explain why the field is booming. These are early days for big history, but to get a sense of how rapidly the field is growing and how varied it is already, it is worth looking at the articles on big history in the October 2009 issue of the on-line journal on world history teaching, "World History Connected".

[<http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/6.3/rodrigue.html>] Amongst them you will find Barry Rodrigue's survey of big history courses. To the surprise of many of us teaching big history, it turns out that there are currently at least 30 tertiary level courses on big history being taught in seven different countries. Most are being taught in the USA, but big history courses are also being taught in Australia, the Netherlands, Russia and elsewhere. There is also a small bibliography of works on or about big history, some of which are listed in the articles printed below or at the end of Barry Rodrigue's directory of big history courses or on Fred Spier's web site on big history. There exist two largeish texts on big history and a third is in preparation. There are serious plans afoot to create a free on-line website offering a high school syllabus in big history. By bringing together into a single, coherent course, knowledge from the sciences and the humanities, such courses should help students begin to see the underlying unity of modern knowledge and help them understand that knowledge is more than just a mass of facts.

After teaching big history for a bit you start to wonder why the idea once seemed so strange. And in fact a little careful historiographical thought shows that it is not really strange at all. It is just an idea that professional historians and modern educators in general seem to have (temporarily) lost sight of. Every society we know of has generated and taught in some form a unified account of the past at all scales. Often we think of these accounts as "creation stories". When taken out of their context, collected and pasted into a modern collection of creation myths like beetles pinned to a collector's album, such stories often seem naïve. What is often forgotten is that they were embedded in rich traditions of empirical, social and ethical knowledge, much of which was very practical (and therefore of little interest to modern collectors, who were more attracted by cultural exotica). Furthermore, we can be sure that those who told and heard such stories were as capable as we are today of understanding their metaphorical dimensions, just as no cosmologists seriously think there was a bang at the moment of the "big bang".

In literate traditions, too, it is always possible to find, somewhere, attempts to bring together into a single narrative all that is known of origins. In the Christian tradition, Augustine played a significant role in creating the stories that would dominate historiographical thinking for 1500 years and more. In the Muslim tradition, too, there existed many regional traditions of history writing that traced the lineages of ruling dynasties back to mythical founders and, ultimately back to the lineages of Adam and Noah. Such narratives anchored the present moment in a larger, universal history. They were world maps for history. Even within the more secular traditions of the modern era, the project of constructing universal histories was taken seriously. It was a central project for enlightenment historians and central to the work of the nineteenth century system builders from Hegel to Spenser. Even Ranke famously began writing a "Universal history" at the end of his life, having long believed that: "The study of particulars, even of a single detail, has its value, if it is done well. ... But this specialized study ... will always be related to a larger context; ... all of these epochs themselves, ... belong in turn to the entire whole which we call universal history." [Cited from Leopold Ranke, "A Fragment from the 1860's", in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, 1956, pp. 61-2]

Then, about a century ago, universal history vanished from the practice of professional historians. We lack a thorough analysis of why this happened, but we know some of the reasons. None of the great nineteenth century systems attained the rigor or persuasiveness of the most successful paradigms in the natural sciences. Furthermore, in retrospect it is easy to see how tendentious and culture-bound they were in their attempts to demonstrate the superiority of European civilization. It was also impossible to assign dates to any event before the appearance of the first written documents, just a few thousand year ago. Beyond that, without reliable dates, it was hard to construct any serious historical narratives. (H.G. Wells tried but he understood the difficulties.) In such a context, it made sense for historians to hunker down and focus on the details, on those parts of the past that could be studied with some "scientific" rigor. A century later, historians have got a lot more details right, and palaeontologists, geologists and cosmologists can tell us much more about what happened before humans appeared. Particularly important is that fact that since the 1950s modern dating techniques have generated absolute chronologies that reach back 13.7 billion years, right back to the big bang. But in the intervening century we seem to have forgotten entirely what it was Ranke believed the details were supposed to be for: to help us create a general account of human history and its place in a larger cosmos. Big history represents little more than the return, a century later, to a project that vanished from the field of professional historical scholarship and is due for a return.

The essays published below were written by two of the pioneers of big history. They offer some insight into the difficulties and the exhilaration of that project.