

An Evaluation of the Re-Emergence of the *Longue Durée* and its Implications for the Twenty-First Century

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Synopsis

There has been increasing anxiety about the role historians are to play in the twentieth century. In the past few decades historians have largely been silent in public debate about how to combat the challenges of a world which is experiencing rapid globalisation, climate change and rising inequalities. This has been the consequence of the specialisation of history in the post-war era, driven by the postmodernists' disillusionment with the progressive meta-narratives that came to define the twentieth-century.

This crisis of short-sightedness, as some historians are beginning to view it, has inspired a return to *la longue durée*, a movement embodied by David Christian's Big History. With increasing support for a temporally extended approach to history, I found it essential to evaluate the implications of this trend for both present and future generations. While I had initially considered exploring such macro issues as whether world history can escape its Eurocentric perspective, and the usefulness of David Christian's Big History in terms of its contribution to world history, my chosen historical focus allows me to explore an issue which I believe has much more significant ramifications for humanity.

This essay evaluates the expositions of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Keith Jenkins, David Christian, Jo Guldi and David Armitage, in order to determine whether the *longue durée* of the twenty-first century, reified by Big History, is culpable to the critiques stemming from postmodern theories of truth and power, questions of scale, and the role of history in public debate that were responsible for the denunciation and demise of the *longue durée* in the late twentieth century, or whether it has been able to transcend them. This essay, ultimately, argues the latter, a position which has strong

implications regarding the broader question of whether the modern *longue durée* should be accepted into historical canon.

Essay

"Where shall I begin, please your majesty?" he asked.

"Begin at the beginning," the King said, very gravely, "and go on till you come to the end; then stop."

Lewis Carroll
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Macro-history is one of the most contentious terms in modern historical debate. It appeared to reach its apogee with French historian Fernand Braudel's *longue durée* in 1958,¹ which endorsed a study of history wherein long-term historical structures were prioritised over *l'histoire événementielle*, and in the years after became substratum to the Annalist movement. Almost immediately after establishment, however, it was dismantled by post-war disillusionment in the form of the linguistic and cultural turns. By the end of the twentieth century it appeared that histories of the grand scale had been all but completely consigned to the dustbin of historiography, in favour of a telescoping of historical time. Yet now, engendered by what a growing number of historians identify as a 'crisis of short-terminism,'² support for the increase in the temporal and spatial scale of historical inquiries is burgeoning. Moreover, this movement is spearheaded by the most temporally and spatially grand *longue durée* ever: Big History.³ Big History is a universal history that is coterminous with the universe itself, spanning all of history from the Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago from a global perspective. Like the traditional *longue*

durée, it is multidisciplinary, drawing on the findings of cosmology, astronomy, geology and evolutionary biology as well as more conventionally historical disciplines like archaeology and historical sociology. Big History has rapidly gained traction in recent years ever since business magnate and philanthropist Bill Gates decided to fund the Big History Project in 2011. Alongside David Christian, the Project's aim is to implement a Big History curriculum in schools. In January 2015 the Project was running in 1,200 high schools around the world.⁴

In light of what is poised to be the next paradigm shift in historiographical trends, it is imperative to evaluate the epistemological and methodological foundations of this revenant and incredibly ambitious *longue durée*, and the implications for humanity. The major contributors to this debate are Jean-François Lyotard, Keith Jenkins, Jo Guldi and David Armitage, and Big History creator David Christian. From their work emerges a *compte-rendu critique* on the place of truth and myth in history, the existence and impact of power discourses, the relationship between the micro-history and macro-history, and the methodological implications of Big History. Ultimately, this elucidates the incredible importance of the modern *longue durée*, currently manifesting itself in Christian's Big History, for contemporary humanity, and, moreover, how it coheres to the fundamental purposes of history itself.

The decline of macro-histories in the late twentieth century is epitomised by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard defining postmodernity in 1979 as 'incredulity towards meta-narrative'.⁵ Ernst Breisach delineates the meta-narrative as a narrative⁶ that overarches other narratives, by linking smaller historical accounts together to a single narrative that stretched over long periods of time.⁷ From this perspective it is easy to see how the postmodernist attack on the meta-narrative was easily transferred onto histories of the *longue durée*. Postmodernist struggle against the meta-narrative was triggered by disappointment with modernity's paradigmatic meta-narratives of progress, particularly Marxist economic determinism and the Enlightenment's universalising and humanist aspirations, which in the course of the twentieth century had proven to be too dangerous. Lyotard and other postmodernists, predominantly Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida, condemned these ameliorative meta-narratives for the crucial support they rendered to hegemony by legitimising oppressive ideological

attempts to reconstruct the world, facilitating exploitation inside of Western culture and colonialism outside of it.⁸

This anti-metanarrative argument is rationalised by postmodern theories of truth. This is a denunciation of the modernist belief that through empirical research truth is accessible, a criticism that postmodernist Keith Jenkins establishes with four premises.⁹ Firstly, no historian can cover and thus recover the totality of past events because their 'content' is virtually limitless. Secondly, no account can recover the past as it was because the past was not an account, but events and situations. This entails that what has gone before is always apprehended through sedimented layers of previous interpretations and through the reading habits and categories developed by previous/current interpretative discourses. Consequently, there is no real account that enables historians to check all other accounts against it. Thirdly, as no one can divest themselves of their knowledge or assumptions, it is inevitable that no matter how verifiable, how widely acceptable or checkable, history remains a personal construct and manifestation of the historian's perspective as a 'narrator'. Finally, in hindsight, the historian knows more about the past than the people who lived in it. Inexorably, time is resultantly foreshortened, details selected, relations simplified, and so on. This is not to deliberately alter the events, but to give them meaning.¹⁰

History is thus relegated as '[e]pistemologically fragile,' allowing for historians' readings to be multifarious, and accordingly undermines any claim to an objective and truthful representation of the past.¹¹ History becomes contested discourses where people, classes and groups autobiographically construct interpretations of the past to legitimise their practices and institutions.¹² Any consensus, which Jenkins says is inexorably only temporary, can only be reached when dominant voices silence others, either by overt power or covert incorporation.¹³ While all scales of history are illegitimate in the face of the postmodern theories of truth, it is the totalising and universalising histories which are the most dangerous as they tend to preserve their continuity and, thereby, tend to prolong this oppression of these alternative voices, what Derrida denotes as the 'Other.'¹⁴

Promulgating the abandonment of the meta-narratives, postmodernists offered a structure of how history in the postmodern world would operate in their absence.

Postmodernists sought to dissolve in historical discourses the continuity that underpinned the meta-narratives of progress, wherein a *telos* propelled history toward an end stage of fulfillment.¹⁵ Continuity was to give way to change, so that human beings would never fall prey to illusions of certainties and closure.¹⁶ Lyotard espoused this was only possible if the grand scaling of historical inquiries were reduced to the ‘petits récits’.¹⁷ While meta-narratives created only one legitimate ‘language game’ in society, the ‘short durée’, or the ‘replacement of History by histories’ as Jenkins described it,¹⁸ would generate such heterogeneity in historical narratives that metaphysical claims to privilege based on permanence could no longer prevail.¹⁹

Thus the meta-narrative fell into decline and micro-histories proliferated.²⁰ This produced an examination of many of the voices of the previously dominated Others, with the growth in history from below and new insights into race, class and power. This served to aid public contextualisation of great forces like racism and nationalism as constructed developments as opposed to a natural social order somehow predestined to shape human minds for eternity.²¹ This success in giving a voice to marginalised groups solidified the aversion to grand-scale inquiry.

David Christian’s Big History emerged in the wake of this deep cynicism towards histories on the grand scale, and, correspondingly, is very aware of it. This becomes clear in the way Big History transcends the criticisms assigned to the traditional *longue durée* by postmodernist theories of truth. Christian does not try to legitimise Big History by evoking the appearance of objective truth. Instead, he develops Big History as a ‘creation myth,’ providing a narrative in which humanity can trace its complete origins.²² He acknowledges that a modern creation myth ‘will not and cannot hope to be “neutral”’ and that all accounts of reality are ‘provisional’.²³ This, however, does not mean humanity must commit to a nihilistic relativism and condemn Big History for being parochial, as it offers greater benefits than just simply ‘the truth’. Creation myths provide ‘universal coordinates’ within which people can fulfill their deep spiritual, psychic and social need for a sense of place and a sense of belonging in the larger scheme of things.²⁴ Without this, French sociologist Émile Durkheim asserts, life is suffused by ‘anomie,’ a subtle but pervasive condition of instability and disorientation.²⁵

There remains the issue of Big History potentially conforming to the hegemonic tendencies of the progressive meta-narratives previously experienced. The predominance of the micro-narrative has served to upset many of the harmful mythologies created by the twentieth century meta-narratives, including the myth of white racial superiority and the benefits of western colonialism.²⁶ However, as Christian stresses, his case for Big History does not constitute an attack on ‘small history’. On the contrary, his advocates the two exist equipoised.²⁷ Guldi and Armitage advocate ‘a kind of history with a continuing role for micro-historical, archival work embedded within a larger macro-story woven from a broad range of sources,’²⁸ emphasising how as microhistory continues to evolve it will help shape and adapt *longue durées* like Big History and thus ensure the constant state of flux postmodernists deemed essential for the prevention of oppressive authoritative ‘truths’.²⁹ Furthermore, Christian emphasises that ‘construction must precede deconstruction’, and only when a modern creation myth has been formulated will it be possible to take the next step of ‘criticising it, deconstructing it, and perhaps improving it.’³⁰ As more historians risk writing histories of the grand scale the field will produce competing meta-narratives to which the overwhelming flow of parish, regional and national histories can be reconnected.³¹

Moreover, not only do micro-narratives serve to destabilise harmful overarching reductionist myths and falsehoods; so too do those of the *longue durée*. Guldi and Armitage emphasise that in the last forty years the public has embraced a series of proliferating myths about humanity’s long-term past and its meaning for the future, including climate apocalypse, the end of history, and species predestination for capitalism.³² This coincides with what David Cannadine condemns as the ‘cult of professionalism,’³³ where academic historians were essentially removed from public debate as their short-term focus rendered them unable to comment on long-term historical trends. While professions like Climate Science and Economics elucidate vital information and trends, they inevitably suffer from the lack of historical insight. Both often create a vision of the world in which alternative futures are scarce or non-existent. History, by analysing past agricultures and patterns of consumption, holds the potential to point out alternative utopian directions, as opposed to the fundamentalist preaching by scientists and economists of elite control of wealth and scientific monitoring of all earth systems as the only way to avoid catastrophe.³⁴ One of history’s primary capabilities is to analyse different time-scales, events and individuals

and their complex relationships with each other, which is necessary in order to understand long-term change. Thus the return of the *longue durée* poses to reinstate the historical voice in public debate, facilitating the replacement of harmful modern myths by more helpful, democratic perspectives.³⁵

The *longue durée* has also experienced criticisms outside of postmodernist theorem in regards to the scale of Big History. The argument is that on large scales history must 'lose detail, texture, particularity, and substance' and eventually become 'vacuous'.³⁶ To this Christian contends that all historical frames are inevitably exclusionary, and just as much as Big History excludes it reveals.³⁷ Stemming from the aforementioned critique is also the idea that Big History's intention to tell a history in which humans are encountered 'not as Americans or Germans or Russians or Nigerians but as members of a single, genetically homogeneous, species, *Homo sapiens*' does not serve to fulfill its humanist sentiments.³⁸ Rather, as sociologist Frank Furendi argues, it is a 'reduction of humanity to a biological species,' which serves to estrange humanity from ideas of civilisation, culture and community. However, Christian emphasises that accounts of the past that focus primarily on the divisions between nations, religions, and cultures are in many ways 'parochial' and 'anachronistic', as they essentially hide humanity itself.³⁹ As established, Big History proposes to synthesise with, rather than eradicate such small-scale history, and therefore these histories which connect humanity to their various groups still retain influence. What is gained is a global identity to meet the needs of the increasingly globalised world; to diminish the lethality of group encounters and cultivate a more unified front to which modern challenges like climate change and global inequality can be systematically addressed.⁴⁰

Evidentiary reproaches have also been leveled at Big History. The essence of these critiques is that its interdisciplinary nature unavoidably requires historians to move beyond the boundaries of their discipline, and inevitably there will be errors and misunderstandings. Astrophysicist Eric J. Chaisson⁴¹ criticises much of Big History is decipherable only by scientific means, and despite big historians greatest efforts to use 'the best available empirical evidence and scholarly methods'⁴² many falter when computing, interpreting, or merely using numerical quantities. One major complication is big historians often are unable to distinguish between real science and pseudo-science, and often fall prey to spurious evidence. Thus Big History, in many ways, is

alienating the natural sciences that undergird its very own existence. Chaisson's critique, however, does not necessitate the abandonment of Big History. As Christian emphasises, the possibility of intellectual synergy between disciplines and the potential for an enriching of each singular discipline overcomes the reservations regarding the potential for 'blunders and mistakes'.⁴³ If Big History is able to, as Chaisson himself promotes, genuinely embrace modern sciences central dogma, thereby accepting the need to scientifically test ideas, it has the potential to become a 'bright and shining light in an otherwise dark firmament of mysticism.'⁴⁴

In the face of incredible scepticism from the historical profession and other social and scientific disciplines, the revenant *longue durée* of Christian's Big History ultimately avows and surpasses the denunciations directed at it and emerges as an incredibly valid historical way of thinking in the modern globalised world. In a time of ever-growing inequality, amid crises of global governance, and under the impact of anthropogenic climate change, even a minimal understanding of the conditions shaping human life demands a scaling-up of historical inquiries. The temporal extent to which Big History analyses the past enables a discussion of the future in ways that are not possible when concentrating on the short term.⁴⁵ Additionally, the rise of big data has given Big History a technological capability and dynamism it has never had before, and consequently it has much greater critical potential, for historians, for other social scientists, for policy-makers, and for the public.⁴⁶

The essence of the purpose of history is to understand the multiple pasts which give rise to our conflicted present.⁴⁷ The differing spatial and temporal scales of historical inquiry each offer a unique insight into the makeup of humanity and the world we live in, and all are indispensable. On the micro end of the spatial and temporal spectrum of history it serves to offer insight into the deepest facets of human emotion and psychology, while simultaneously allowing a new perspective of the wider issues at play.⁴⁸ At the macro end, the intimately human gives way to questions and issues of latitudinous proportions that plague the global political, economic and social climate. Humanity needs both of these extremes, and all that exists in the interstices between, if it has any hope of meeting the psychological and physical needs of present and future generations. The re-emergence of the *longue durée* in the form of Big History will hopefully provide this essential macro-historical vantage point that has been absent for almost fifty years.

Endnotes

- 1 The term 'longue durée' was coined in Braudel's *Histoire et Science Sociale: La Longue Durée* (1958)
- 2 Guldi, J., Armitage, D. 'The History Manifesto' (2014) p. 2, United Kingdom, University of Cambridge Press
- 3 For more on the Big History Project see: <https://www.bighistoryproject.com/home>
- 4 Armitage, D., 'What's the big idea?' (2012) p. 1, The Times Literary Supplement: <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1129685.ece> (accessed 22/4/15)
- 5 Lyotard, J.F., 'La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir' (1979), pp. xxiv, Les Editions de Minuit. English translation 1984 by University of Minnesota, UK, Manchester University Press
- 6 In some discussions of this issue, narrative is equated with 'event history', but this essay follows Paul Ricoeur's argument that all history takes some kind of narrative form. For a discussion of this, see: Burke, P., 'History of Events and Revival of Narrative' (2001) in idem (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, 2nd ed., pp. 283–300, University Park, PA
- 7 Breisach, E. 'On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and Its Aftermath' (2003), p. 122, USA, University of Chicago Press
- 8 Ibid. p. 134
- 9 Jenkins, K., 'Re-thinking History' (1991) p. 23 New York, Routledge
- 10 Ibid. p. 13
- 11 Ibid. p. 14
- 12 Ibid. pp. 23–24
- 13 Ibid. p. 23
- 14 Breisach, E. 'On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and Its Aftermath' (2003) pp. 130–133, USA, University of Chicago Press
Derrida's key argument against the deceptive solidity of the meta-narrative emphasized that the term 'text' pointed the reader not only to what was 'present' in the text but also to that which was 'absent' from it. That 'other' was the excluded one, who by implication was always an oppressed one, resulting from either conscious suppression or simply omission.
- 15 Ibid. p. 124
- 16 Ibid. p. 136
- 17 Boje, D. 'Narrative Methods for Organizational and Communication Research' (2001) pp. 35–38, London, Sage Publications Ltd
- 18 Jenkins, K., 'Re-thinking History' (1991) p. 8 New York, Routledge
- 19 Breisach, E. 'On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and Its Aftermath' (2003), p. 124, USA, University of Chicago Press
- 20 Such micro-narratives as Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976), Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984), and Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1984) grew in prominence.
- 21 Guldi, J., Armitage, D. 'The History Manifesto' (2014) p. 40, United Kingdom, University of Cambridge Press
- 22 Christian, D. 'Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History' (2005) p. 2, London: University of California Press, Ltd.
- 23 Ibid. p. 2
- 24 Armstrong, K. 'A Short History of Myth' (2005) pp. 135–137
- 25 The term was introduced by Durkheim, a French sociologist, in his study of suicide. When a social system is in a state of anomie, common values and common meanings are no longer understood or accepted, and new values and meanings have not developed. According to Durkheim, such a society produces, in many of its members, psychological states characterized by a sense of futility, lack of purpose, and emotional emptiness and despair. <http://www.britannica.com/topic/anomie>
- 26 Guldi, J., Armitage, D. 'The History Manifesto' (2014) p. 55, United Kingdom, University of Cambridge Press
- 27 Christian, D. 'The Case for "Big History"' (1991) p. 238, *Journal of World History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, University of Hawaii Press
- 28 Guldi, J., Armitage, D. 'The History Manifesto' (2014) p. 55, United Kingdom, University of Cambridge Press
- 29 Breisach, E. 'On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and Its Aftermath' (2003) p. 124, USA, University of Chicago Press
- 30 Christian, D. 'Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History' (2005) p. 8, London, University of California Press Ltd.
- 31 O'Brien, P., 'Is Universal History Possible?' (2000) p. 13, Nineteenth International Congress of Historical Sciences
- 32 Guldi, J., Armitage, D. 'The History Manifesto' (2014) p. 54, United Kingdom, University of Cambridge Press
- 33 Cannadine, D. 'British History: Past, Present – And Future?' (1987) pp. 176–177, *Oxford Journal Past and Present*, Oxford University Press
- 34 Guldi, J., Armitage, D. 'The History Manifesto' (2014) p. 43, United Kingdom, University of Cambridge Press
- 35 Armitage, D. 'How history forgot its role in public debate' (2014) p. 3, Aeon: <http://aeon.co/magazine/society/how-history-forgot-its-role-in-public-debate/> (accessed 5/03/15)
- 36 Christian, D. 'Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History' (2005) p. 8, London: University of California Press, Ltd.
- 37 Ibid. p. 8
- 38 Furedi, F., "'Big History'": the annihilation of human agency', (24 July 2013) Spiked: http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/frank_furedi_on_history/13844#.VYqq6WxFO4 (accessed 11/19/14)

- 39 Christian, D. *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (2005) pp. 8, London: University of California Press, Ltd.
For an in depth discussion of these parochial trends in historiography see: Cannadine, D., 'The Undivided Past: History Between our Differences' (2013) Penuin Books, London, pp. 263–64
- 40 Christian, D. *History and Global Identity*, pp. 146–149, Macintyre, S (ed.) *The Historian's Conscience: Australian Historians on the Ethics of History*, (2004), Melbourne University Press, Carlton
- 41 An astrophysicist at Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics who is renowned for his writing on the interdisciplinary science of cosmic evolution.
- 42 Mission statement of International Big History Association:
<http://www.ibhanet.org> (accessed 20/06/15)
- 43 Christian, D. *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (2005) p. 8, London: University of California Press, Ltd.
- 44 Chaisson, E. *Big History's Risk and Challenge* (2014) p. 94
https://www.cfa.harvard.edu/~ejchaisson/reprints/Expositions_BH.pdf (accessed 26/05/15)
- 45 Christian, D. *The Case for "Big History"*, *Journal of World History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1991, University of Hawaii Press
- 46 Guldi, J., Armitage, D. *The History Manifesto* (2014) pp. 88–89, United Kingdom, University of Cambridge Press
- 47 Ibid. p. 60
- 48 Steele, H., *Microhistory And Macrohistory: Different Approaches To The Analysis Of History*:
<https://historiasenconstruccion.wikispaces.com/file/view/macromicro.pdf> (accessed 18/06/15)

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