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Linking Micro and Macro

Contribution to GTI Forum [Big History and Great Transition](#)

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Suggestions for a bigger, more capacious history than the familiar—Eurocentric/human-focused/relatively recent—narratives that pass for History are surely to be welcomed, given the existential risk confronting every living being on Earth and the benefits of an overview of how we got here. This is helpful because it is not only living beings that are at risk. Degradation of the inorganic fabric of the planet and its atmosphere is also a component of systemic collapse. While the sources of impending catastrophe (and any viable solution to it) are rightly laid at the door of human agency—in particular, of modern Westernized humans since the Industrial Revolution—and catalogued by changes associated with the Anthropocene, it is therefore helpful to situate more recent changes within wider and longer contexts, as practiced by Big History. From this perspective, the inclusion of biology and geology as vital elements of the historical record can only add to a common appreciation of the enormous challenges we collectively face.

That said, it seems to me that the concept of a “Big” History, with its connotations of a very grand, very general, narrative may not do justice to what is required. If such a History is to be more than a story of cosmic origins and, in essence, an account of pre-history as constructed by scientists, then—and this is the main point I want to make—it needs to be supplemented and enriched by fine-grained, detailed analyses of the organic and inorganic chains it identifies, including the ways they have become enmeshed within geopolitics and political economy.

Specifically, what I mean by this is that while Deep (geological) Time and cosmic/evolutionary processes might appear to be a good way to tell an impartial tale in which everyone is invested, as soon as this Big History touches on the present (as it surely must, since climate change and mass extinction are the denouement of the story, even perhaps the final act of the drama), it needs to relate its vaster spatio-temporal and geo-bio accounts to more contemporary

distributions of power and behavior. The insight of Big History is that without its bigger perspective, the latter remain too superficial and divisive, too short-term, to galvanize sufficiently radical and cooperative responses. This adds a valuable dimension to our understanding of the crisis at hand. Yet it is within the messy, nitty-gritted processes of decimation that remedial action is required, and this suggests that a more micro-approach needs also to accompany, and to be woven into, the macro-account.

What would this mean in practice? Many examples already exist in Science and Technology Studies (STS) and in methodologies working under the aegis of the New Materialism. Sometimes influenced by such thinkers as Michel Foucault or Giorgio Agamben, the approach I am suggesting might select some crucial element—carbon, say, or even a crop like the tomato—then trace its complex geo-bio itinerary within long-term ecosystems. But this should also include more recent conduits and switching points, interests, and blockages that complicate the narrative by adding shifting geopolitical distributions of power and economic interests that exploit, commodify, and trade natural resources. By following the intricate micro-flows of matter in this way, the insights of Big History can also accommodate myriad tiny histories, the aim being to discover points of leverage and the ways shifting power relations have become inseparable from the very structures of life and of the planet.

One advantage of this approach is that it shows how, over time, human agents have become more involved in the histories of the biotic and abiotic dimensions. But also how humans, in turn, have been affected by efficacious nonhuman entities that push back, influence, and repel or encourage courses of social action. In other words, as the processes documented by Big History approach the conventional historical world, the integration of macro and micro studies, as well as the inclusion of both human and nonhuman agency (as ineluctably entangled), become more dialectical and more capacious in their appreciation of agentic capacities. This certainly yields a very big history, but also a very complex and dynamic one that avoids human-centrism without ignoring humans' responsibilities for and to the environment and its transition.

As highlighted by David Christian's [essay](#), humanity's first glimpse of the Blue Planet from space still marks a seminal moment in our appreciation of the beautiful yet fragile world we share as our common home. However, while it remains a beguiling and influential image, is

the implication that we might only recognize our shared interests and plight from some extra-terrestrial viewing platform, and that this entails a bird's eye view hovering above the messy differentiations apparent to anyone actually inhabiting the planet, not problematic?

Science helps (within its own terms) to construct an objective account of our cosmic origins and their evolution; it thereby extends our understanding of the complicated and interrelated processes in which we have meddled at our peril and of their chemical and physical properties. It implies humility and a sense of perspective, given how late on human beings—and, in particular, the modern industrial societies that have wrought such environmental havoc—have appeared. Perhaps this can provoke a more cooperative response to the bigger story of our common legacy and the habitation of shared space. But inasmuch as our ecologically disastrous societies are the culmination of billions of years of evolution, it is here that we need to find the motivation and solutions to avoid existential collapse. And this, however unpalatable, does mean cycling our dense and variegated histories of organic and inorganic processes through more contemporary circuits of power, market relations, shifting demographics, special interests, entrenched identities, diverse cultural commitments, and so on. Because it is ultimately out of this variegated and confused milieu that the cooperation and mutual understanding necessary for enacting a Great Transition will have to be forged.

In conclusion, briefly: Big History, yes! But one that includes all the material density, complexity, and flows of the present, and one that also recognizes the contribution and inseparability of both human and nonhuman, social and geological-biological, elements in weaving a viable future. This will rely on numerous local, diverse micro-contributions, as well as on the planetary-wide cooperation-coordination and the mutual understanding of the immediacy of our plight that Big History hopes to inspire.

About the Author



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