



May 2023

Narratives of Unity

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

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In his [opening essay](#), David Christian asserts that “[o]ur challenge today is to normalize more expansive ways of seeing and thinking that can offer the guidance, motivation, and hope needed to unite humans behind the colossal project of the Great Transition.” To the extent that some Big History narratives support a transition toward global conditions in which every individual and social group can flourish, we should welcome them. But we should beware that other Big History narratives can lead in other directions.

Some commentators have suggested the need to account for the way that a pluriverse of premodern indigeneity and their multiple histories have been supplanted by the oppressive and earth-destroying hegemony of Western modernity. This dichotomous distinction helps us imagine the new pluriverse we might construct in response to the global cataclysm brought on by Western modernity. But the distinction can also lead us to overly romanticize premodern indigeneity and demonize every aspect of Western modernity.

This dichotomous distinction also obscures other major civilizational forms that repeatedly rose and fell on every continent for millennia: civilizations with largely agricultural economic bases ruled by powerful aristocratic, priestly, and/or military hierarchies who often had expansionist imperial ambitions. Such civilizations constituted a frequently oppressive and relatively violent part of the actual premodern pluriverse. Western modernity also largely supplanted these civilizational forms, even as it retained some of their most problematic characteristics.

Of course, it is possible to draw much more fine-grained distinctions than this, in a typology of premodern social forms, if time permitted. But let this distinction serve to point in the direction

of a slightly more complex rendering of Big History that goes beyond premodern indigeneity and Western modernity.

The premodern pluriverse—in all its complexity—did indeed embody remarkable cultural diversity. But it did not provide a viable framework for global interdependence in which humanity as a whole, in all its diversity, could truly flourish. It thus repeatedly gave rise to the will for power, militaristic empires, genocidal wars, enslavements, oppressive social norms, and even some bio-regional ecosystem collapses. As history demonstrates, a pluriverse can embody diverse cultures that, at their best, express that which is most noble in human nature. But a pluriverse can also be a very dangerous place if it lacks any framework of moral restraint.

Modernity, both despite and because of its profound flaws, has forced us to recognize our global interdependence. It has also enabled us to advance a searching global discourse about the moral implications of our ever-increasing interdependence and the depths of socio-spiritual transformation needed to learn how to live together on this planet. But the cultural logic that undergirds modernity prevents us from making the transition toward a diversity-embracing, peaceful, just, ecologically viable, morally coherent global community of communities.

As we extrapolate from aspects of human history alluded to above, and try to discern a path forward, it seems to me that we need to pay special attention to two fundamental challenges that characterize the human condition. First, human beings are wired for egoism and competition as well as altruism and cooperation, and which of these qualities become most fully expressed depends, in part, on which of them are cultivated through processes of socialization and reinforced through communal norms and institutional structures. The path forward requires us to learn how to cultivate and reinforce cooperation and altruism much more universally and systematically than we have yet learned how to do. And this will be needed across the pluriverse. Fortunately, this is a pragmatic path of learning and capacity building that is within our abilities. There are undoubtedly many insights we can draw from the premodern pluriverse, and from modernity itself, to advance us on this path. But even as we draw on these insights, there is much we will still need to learn about how to advance on this path under conditions of heightened global interdependence and increasingly complex global challenges.

Second, human beings are deeply susceptible to drawing in-group and out-group distinctions. The latest science indicates we begin to instinctively and spontaneously draw such distinctions from infancy, often over the most trivial observations of difference. The same empirical sciences indicate that we tend to engage in altruistic and cooperative behaviors within our in-group, while we tend to engage in egoistic and competitive behaviors in relation to outgroups. The path forward will therefore require us to learn how to foster in young people, during their earliest formative periods, a profound and lifelong consciousness of the organic oneness of humanity, which encompasses an equally profound appreciation for diversity as the enriching and ennobling requisite of oneness, so that we can overcome our basest instincts toward othering and, in turn, extend our capacities for altruism and cooperation within a framework of global belonging. No human community, premodern or modern, has adequately accomplished this—especially in the context of eight billion people from diverse cultural backgrounds within an increasingly interdependent global community of communities facing increasingly complex existential threats.

These two challenges are not merely challenges of human psychology—or a challenge of hearts and minds. They will also need to be addressed at the level of institutional structures and the level of communal cultures. Doing all of this will require us to radically transcend the basic logic of Western modernity, which is rooted in egoism and competition.

We can, of course, identify many other requisites of the Great Transition, beyond the two identified above. But, for the sake of brevity, let the two fundamental requisites alluded to above stand in for that larger conversation.

Finally, if Big History is to contribute to a profound transition in human civilization, beginning on these fundamental levels, it will need to grapple with the question of whether human history writ large has a moral arc—or whether it can be bent along such an arc.

In 1853, the American abolitionist Theodore Parker said, “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.” A century later, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. distilled this sentiment

into the widely cited yet increasingly contested statement “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Protagonists of social change today are right to reject simple deterministic interpretations of this statement. If the universe has a moral arc, human agency is surely required to bend it. But is this even possible? And is it coherent with empirically based Big History metanarratives?

Postmodern thinkers tend to reject this possibility. For instance, in the 1980s, the postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard popularized the view that all metanarratives are inherently oppressive. As he rightfully pointed out, oppressive metanarratives abound—such as those used to justify colonization, those used to justify religious proselytization and violence, or those used to justify Cold War conflict. Lyotard argued that humanity has outgrown the need for metanarratives. Ironically, his argument merely constituted a new metanarrative. Indeed, subsequent critical reflection on his thesis has led many to conclude that it is not possible for a meaning-making species to transcend metanarrative. As the cognitive sciences are now demonstrating, human meaning-making depends on storytelling. In addition, even the view that human history is meaningless and directionless constitutes a (nihilistic) metanarrative.

Our challenge, it seems, is to articulate Big History metanarratives that empower us to collectively strive, by degrees at least, to overcome the myriad forms of oppression—including the tendency to impose cultural homogenization—that have characterized so many social arrangements of the past. In this context, the premise that collective human agency can bend the moral arc of history seems like an essential article of faith underlying any empowering story of human history—as the many “people’s histories” written in recent decades demonstrate.

Ultimately, a metanarrative that leads toward human flourishing needs protagonists. In this regard, it is possible to see individuals, communities, and institutions as distinct kinds of protagonists. Each are needed to play their respective roles and make their unique contributions to processes of social change. Moreover, our collective learning process requires us, in part, to rethink inherited relationships between these three kinds of protagonists, and to accept their organically interdependent nature. The underlying logic of Western liberalism, by itself, does not offer an adequate framework for this—in part because it focuses almost exclusively on

the relationships between individuals and institutions. But communitarian social and political philosophies of the past often obscure the significant role played by individuals or institutions. A new synthesis is needed, harmonizing the distinctive contributions of each of these protagonists, within chapters of the story of humanity that have yet to be written.

Finally, any metanarrative capable of inspiring people to bend the long arc of human history toward justice and related moral commitments will need to render those commitments meaningful. In this regard, we will need to overcome the widely assumed false choice between dogmatic moral universalism and extreme moral relativism. On one hand, no society has yet arrived at a mature understanding of the moral principles upon which human flourishing depends, or how to best apply those principles to the betterment of humanity. On the other hand, the dismissal of such principles as mere subjective preferences or mere cultural constructs is proving untenable. If we aspire toward a pluriverse that is entirely neutral or relativistic on all such principles, then we have little chance of ensuring that human diversity itself can flourish.

About the Author



Michael Karlberg is Professor of Communication Studies at Western Washington University. His interdisciplinary scholarship examines prevailing conceptions of human nature, power, social organization, and social change—and their implications for the pursuit of peace and justice. He authored the books *Beyond the Culture of Contest* and *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change* along with numerous articles and book chapters on related themes. His most recent community-engaged research focuses on the role of radical constructive agency in the creation of more peaceful and just social forms.

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Cite as Michael Karlberg, “Narratives of Unity,” contribution to GTI Forum “Big History and Great Transition,” *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2023), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/big-history-karlberg>.

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