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Escaping Modernism

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

Jeremy Lent

As someone who has researched and written extensively about the deep underlying structures of human cognition that have shaped history, I felt naturally aligned with the Big History movement from its outset. Since that time, I have spoken at several of their conferences, and was gratified to see my book *The Patterning Instinct: A Cultural History of Humanity's Search for Meaning*, featured and reviewed in their newsletter.

However, in recent years, I have found my interest in the Big History movement waning, as my attention focused increasingly on the deep sociocultural changes needed to avert the looming catastrophe toward which our civilization is currently careening. Why is that?

I think the root of this disaffection has to do with the underlying modernist epistemological framework in which [David Christian](#) and the Big History movement appear to be trapped—perhaps without even realizing it. As I trace in *The Patterning Instinct*, each culture constructs its worldview on a root metaphor of the universe, which in turn defines people's relationship to nature and each other, ultimately leading to a set of values that directs how that culture behaves. We tend to assume that our worldview simply describes the world the way it is—rather than recognizing that it is a constructed lens that shapes our thoughts and ideas into certain preconditioned patterns. That is what makes worldviews so powerful as drivers of our collective behavior.

Early hunter-gatherers, for example, understood nature as a “giving parent,” seeing themselves as part of a large extended family, intrinsically connected with the spirits of the natural world around them. When agriculture first emerged about twelve thousand years ago, new social phenomena such as property, hierarchy, and wealth appeared, leading early civilizations to form

a new root metaphor of the universe as a “hierarchy of gods” who required propitiation through worship, ritual, and sacrifice.

As a rule, culturally derived values emerging from given worldviews have played a large part in shaping history—and by the same token, the future will be shaped to a great extent by the underlying values of our dominant culture, arising from the modern worldview.

This worldview emerged in seventeenth-century Europe with the Scientific Revolution, which laid the cognitive foundation for the world we are living in today. It has accomplished a lot. It wrested intellectual control from the superstitions of traditional Christian theology and set the groundwork for modern science—one of humanity’s greatest achievements. But it has also been an underlying cause of the horrendous devastation suffered by non-European peoples and cultures, and boundless destruction of the natural world. The fundamental flaws in its construction have now become so gaping that they threaten the very survival of our civilization—and much of the living Earth.

Distilled to its essence, the modern worldview is based on a core mechanistic metaphor of nature and an ontology of separation. Its basic building blocks arise from that ontology and may be roughly summarized as follows: “Humans are selfish individuals. All creatures are selfish—in fact, selfish genes are the driving force of evolution. Nature is just a very complex machine, and human ingenuity has, for the most part, figured out how it works. The modern world is the spectacular result of technology enabled by the market forces of capitalism, and in spite of occasional setbacks, it is continually improving. There may be problems, such as global poverty or climate change, but technology, powered by the market, will solve them—just as it always has in the past.”

In fact, each of those building blocks has been shown by modern science to be flawed. The depiction of humans as selfish individuals, the view of nature as a resource to be exploited, and the idea that technology alone can fix our biggest problems are all profound misconceptions that have collectively led our civilization down an accelerating path to disaster. The only way we can truly change our trajectory is by approaching society’s problems from the foundation of an alternative worldview—one that affirms life, rather than the accumulation of wealth above all else.

Big History, however, seems to have chosen to reside in the ontological domain of modernism; as a result, it sees itself as detached from the very processes it purports to study. Perhaps this is out of deference to funders and proponents like Bill Gates, or perhaps from a deeper desire to be fully embraced by the mainstream academy, and therefore to avoid any value orientation that may undermine its presumed objectivity.

The study of society as a complex system, however, cannot be divorced from a value stance. While Big History embraces a systems-based understanding of evolutionary change, it has appeared less willing to follow some of the ontological implications of systems thinking, which erode the sacrosanct distinction between the observer and observed that allows scientists to claim their methodology is “value-free.”

In recent decades, systems thinkers in multiple scientific disciplines have overturned this notion of pristine scientific objectivity. Recognizing nature as a dynamic, self-organized fractal complex of nonlinear systems, which can only be truly understood in terms of how each part relates to each other and the whole, they have shown how these principles apply, not just to the natural world, but also our own human social systems. A crucial implication is that the observer is part of what is being observed, with the result that the observer’s conclusions and ensuing actions feed back into the very system being investigated.

This insight holds important ethical implications for how we approach the great problems facing humanity. Once you recognize that you are part of the system you are analyzing, there is a moral imperative to act on your findings, and to raise awareness of others regarding their own intrinsic responsibilities. The future is not a spectator sport—in fact, every one of us is on the team and can make a difference in the outcome.

This is where I believe Big History may part company with the urgent imperative felt by those of us working on catalyzing deep systemic transformation. At this point, global norms need to shift to a worldview arising from a recognition of our deep interconnectedness with each other and all aspects of the universe, one that exalts the primacy of life through its entire value system. This alternative worldview already exists—it has been constructed over millennia by wisdom traditions around the world and is soundly validated by the findings of modern science—but it has not yet achieved widespread adoption.

If humanity makes it through the cataclysms of this century with an intact civilization, it will likely be because enough people, seeing the bankruptcy of the current worldview, have reoriented their value system toward that life-affirming worldview. It would be wonderful if Big History could play a part in this transformation, but to do so, its proponents may first need to reevaluate some of their own ontological moorings.

About the Author



Jeremy Lent is an author and speaker whose work investigates the underlying causes of our civilization’s existential crisis and explores pathways toward a life-affirming future. His award-winning books, *The Patterning Instinct: A Cultural History of Humanity’s Search for Meaning* and *The Web of Meaning: Integrating Science and Traditional Wisdom to Find Our Place in the Universe*, trace the historical underpinnings and flaws of the dominant worldview, and offer a foundation for an integrative worldview that could lead humanity to a flourishing future. He is founder of the Deep Transformation Network, an online global community devoted to facilitating a deep transformation toward a life-affirming future on a regenerated Earth.

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