

# Can 'Big History' Help Lay the Foundations for World Government?

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In an earlier essay for the *World Orders Forum* [1], I made the case that images of the Earth from space provide a cosmic perspective on human affairs that argues strongly, if implicitly, for the political unification of our world. Here, I want to suggest that, in addition to this spatial perspective, a *temporal* perspective on humanity's evolutionary origins may have a similar unifying effect. Such a perspective often goes under the name of 'Big History', a term coined in the early 1990s by the historian David Christian [2] of Macquarie University in Australia.

Big History is nothing if not ambitious, as it aims to integrate human history with the deeper history of the whole universe. Thus, the story begins with the origin of the universe in the Big Bang some 13.8 billion years ago. It continues with the formation of subatomic particles and the origin of simple atoms, principally hydrogen and helium. This is followed by the origin of stars and galaxies, and the creation of chemical elements heavier than helium in stars. Our own solar system formed 4.6 billion years ago from material produced by these earlier generations of stars. Within a few hundred million years, life appeared on Earth, and gradually increased in complexity. Following the evolution of animals some 600 million years ago, we can trace the evolution of ourselves through successive stages of fish, amphibians, reptiles, mammals and primates. Various species of hominins appeared a few million years ago. With the eventual appearance of *Homo sapiens* some 300,000 years ago, recognizably human history can finally take over [3].

This is the vast perspective on human history that Big History seeks to make better known. As sketched here it seems very anthropocentric. If bacteria, or trees, or dolphins were formulating their own versions of Big History the latter stages would be rather different. On the other hand, and this is important, the earlier stages would be exactly the same - all life on Earth has shared a common history for most of the age of the universe. Indeed, as Christian has recently argued [4], Big History can be viewed as a modern 'origin story' for humanity, but one with the great advantage of being as factually true as modern science can make it. Moreover, as science learns more about the universe and our place within it, the narrative can be continually corrected and updated.

It is generally accepted that Big History can yield intellectual benefits by encouraging academics in different disciplines to work together. For example, it forces astronomers to talk to geologists, and evolutionary biologists to talk to anthropologists. In this respect, it has some synergies with astrobiology, the interdisciplinary science devoted to searching for life in the universe [5]. Moreover, by getting scientists to engage with the humanities, the study of Big History may also help bridge the “two cultures” divide identified by C.P. Snow in his famous 1959 Rede Lecture at the University of Cambridge [6].

Here, however, we are interested in whether a wider appreciation of Big History would yield more practical benefits for society. This was the subject of a meeting held on 19th July 2018 at the Australian National University (ANU) under the auspices of the Humanities Research Centre [7]. At least two possible societal benefits of Big History relevant to the interests of the World Government Research Network emerged from discussions at this meeting.

Firstly, the evolutionary perspective provided by Big History powerfully reinforces the fact that all life on Earth is related and shares a common history. Moreover, as far as we know today, Earth is the only place in the universe where life and intelligence have arisen. Once grasped, this realization implies that humanity has a strong duty of stewardship to our planet and to our fellow travelers on ‘Spaceship Earth’. For all we know, the fate of life in the whole universe may depend on us, and on us alone. It follows that we have a responsibility to develop international social and political institutions appropriate to managing the situation in which we find ourselves.

Secondly, Big History may provide a basis for drawing different human cultures closer together. At a time when populist nationalism and religious ideologies are acting to fragment humanity, it is important to find unifying perspectives that can counter these centrifugal tendencies. As Ursula Goodenough put it in her book *The Sacred Depths of Nature* [8]:

“Any global tradition needs to begin with a shared worldview: a culture-independent, globally accepted consensus as to how things are. ... our scientific account of nature, an account that can be called The Epic of Evolution. ... this is the story, the one story, that has the potential to unite us, because it happens to be true.”

Goodenough’s ‘Epic of Evolution’ is clearly Big History by another name, and its potential role in unifying humanity has also been noted by Jo Leinen and Andreas Bummel in their recent and powerfully argued book *A World Parliament: Governance and Democracy in the 21st Century* [9]:

“Big History provides an account of the origin of all existence and of life on Earth on a strictly scientific basis. The cosmological worldview thus helps us on the path to an integral consciousness and creates an important frame of reference for planetary identity.”

Realizing these societal benefits will require that Big History becomes much more widely known by the global public, which will necessitate introducing it into educational curricula around the world. As noted by several speakers at the ANU meeting, there is currently an overemphasis on the teaching of national histories in schools. National histories tend to reinforce nationalism, as

they are doubtless intended to do, whereas teaching universal, or “big”, history would reinforce more cosmopolitan worldviews. As the big historian Fred Spier has observed [10]:

“The study of human history as a whole has only rarely been practiced up to the present. ... to do so would produce global identities.”

Regardless of whether one is an advocate of a centralized world government, a federal arrangement of existing nation-states, or some weaker arrangement of global ‘governance’, probably all readers of these pages will be convinced of the desirability of strengthening a sense of global identity. Indeed, it is difficult to see how significant progress could be made in developing democratic institutions for world government/governance otherwise. Thus, combined with the spatial (‘cosmic’) perspective provided by space exploration [1, 11], a wider appreciation of the temporal perspectives provided by Big History could help lay the foundations for the eventual political unification of planet Earth.

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