

## “History and Theory: The Next 50 Years”

### “The Return of Universal History”

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“The historian’s business is to know the past, not to know the future, and whenever historians claim to be able to determine the future in advance of its happening, we may know with certainty that something has gone wrong with their fundamental conception of history.” [R.G. Collingwood, from *The Idea of History*]

#### INTRODUCTION & PREDICTION:

How will historical scholarship and teaching evolve over the next 50 years? As I write this I can hear the specter of R.G. Collingwood tut-tutting somewhere behind the wainscot. By the time I and my fellow presenters have finished I suspect others will have joined him (G.R. Elton, perhaps? Or Jean-François Lyotard?), and they’ll all be tut-tutting away in an increasingly frenzied chorus. I want to thank the editors of *History and Theory* for encouraging us all to break the rules!

My essay falls somewhere between a letter to Santa and a genuine attempt at prediction. My wish/prediction is this: A major development in historical scholarship and teaching over the next fifty years will be the return of what was once called “Universal History”. But this will be a new form of universal history that is global in its practice and scientific in its spirit and methods.

**The Prediction: The Return of Universal History:** I define universal history as the attempt to understand the past at all possible scales, up to those of cosmology, and to do so in ways that do justice to the contingency and specificity of the past and to the large patterns that help make sense of the details.<sup>2</sup>

I predict that in fifty years’ time, all historians will understand that it is possible and fruitful to explore the past on multiple scales, many extending far beyond Braudel’s *longue durée* by reaching back to the origins of our species, the origins of the earth and even the origins of the cosmos. The new universal history will transcend existing discipline boundaries, exploiting the powerful intellectual synergies available to those willing to use the methods and insights of multiple disciplines. It will treat human history as one member of a large family of historical disciplines that includes biology, the earth sciences, astronomy and cosmology. By doing so, it will blur the borderline between history and the natural sciences (a borderline Collingwood took very seriously) as history rediscovers an interest in deep, even law-like patterns of change.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed., ed. Jan Van der Dussen, Oxford and New York: OUP, 1994, p. 54. Collingwood argues that historians who try to predict the future have fallen for the deterministic logic of the natural sciences, and lost sight of human agency

<sup>2</sup> Marnie Hughes-Warrington distinguishes 4 possible definitions of “Universal History”: “a comprehensive and perhaps also unified history of the known world or universe; ... a history that illuminates truths, ideals, or principles that are thought to belong to the whole world; ... a history of the world unified by the workings of a single mind; and ... a history of the world that has passed down through an unbroken line of transmission.” *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History*, ed. W.H. McNeill, 5:2096. I use the phrase primarily in the first of these four senses.

<sup>3</sup> Collingwood argued that history dealt with an unpredictable world of conscious acts rather than law-governed events. The historian’s goal, therefore, was not to seek general laws, but to “penetrate” the thoughts that motivated past actions. That was why historians seemed to occupy a different epistemological universe from natural scientists. *The Idea of History*, p. 214. Why this distinction is no longer tenable is discussed elegantly in Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”, in *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (Winter 2009), pp. 197-222, pp. 201 ff.; thanks to Dr. Kim Yong-Woo of Ewha University’s Institute of World and Global History for alerting me to this article

In this expanded form, history will have a powerful impact on public thinking about the past because it will begin to play a role similar to that of traditional creation stories: it will aspire to create a map of the past as a whole. That map that will allow individuals and communities throughout the world to see themselves as part of the evolving story of an entire Universe, just as they once mapped themselves on to the cosmologies of different religious traditions, from the dreamtime stories of indigenous Australians to the Ptolemaic maps of medieval Christianity. The new universal history will contain a clear vision of humanity as a whole, for within its universal maps of the past it will be easy to see that all human beings share a common, and quite distinctive, history. Understanding of this shared history will help educators generate a sense of global citizenship, just as nationalist historiography once created a sense of solidarity within different nation states.

I make these predictions with some confidence because, in various guises and under various names, such scholarship is already emerging, though it remains marginal within the community of professional historians. After a century and more of detailed empirical scholarship in many different historical fields, it is now possible to construct accounts of the past at very large scales with a precision and rigor unattainable in the late nineteenth century. It is also apparent that the new universal history may yield results that are exciting and profound enough to transform our understanding of the past.

### A SHORT HISTORY OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY

“ . . . ‘I wish you wouldn’t keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy.’ ‘All right,’ said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.” [From *Alice in Wonderland*, Ch. 6]<sup>4</sup>



**The Absence of Universal History Today:** Today, universal history has about as much visibility within the history profession as the Cheshire cat’s grin. In 1979, the French post-modernist theorist, Lyotard, famously announced that “the grand narrative has lost its credibility.”<sup>5</sup> As recently as 2005, Barbara Weinstein referred to “the virtual abandonment of the grand narrative tradition among historians of a strong theoretical bent . . .”<sup>6</sup> To most historians, universal history seems a naïve, archaic and outdated form of historical thought, abandoned, along with chronicle-writing, as the history discipline matured into a modern, professional branch of scholarship in the late nineteenth century. Universal history makes occasional spooky appearances, perhaps in

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<sup>4</sup> From the Gutenberg Project text of *Alice in Wonderland*: accessed May 2009 at <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~rgs/alice-table.html>

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, transl. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984), xxiii, xxiv, cited from Kerwin Lee Klein, “In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People without History”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Dec. 1995), pp. 275-298, p. 283; my thanks to Andrew Dunstall for alerting me to this important article

<sup>6</sup> “History Without a Cause? Grand Narratives, World History, and the Postcolonial Dilemma”, *International Review of Social History*, 50 (2005), pp. 71–93, from p. 71

undergraduate courses on historiography, but it soon vanishes, leaving behind, like ripples in the air, a few derisive remarks about the failings of a Toynbee or a Spengler. Trevor-Roper captured these attitudes perfectly when he remarked of Toynbee's *Study of History*, that "as a dollar earner ... it ranks second only to whiskey."<sup>7</sup>

One sign of the effectiveness with which universal history has been eliminated from the practice of professional historians is the interest shown in Fernand Braudel's *longue durée*. I remember vividly the sense of spaciousness I felt when first reading his wonderful volumes on the Mediterranean. That Braudel is so often taken as a model for historical scholarship at large scales is telling because, measured against the time scales of human history, Braudel's *longue durée* is not very *longue*: just a few centuries in a history extending back at least 60,000 years and perhaps 200,000 years.<sup>8</sup> William McNeill's pioneering world history, *The Rise of the West*, was so exciting in part because its scales were even more spacious than those of Braudel.

Even the booming field of world history focuses mainly on the modern era, and few world historians are comfortable with the idea that world history might try to embrace the whole of history.<sup>9</sup> In a recent survey, Patrick Manning insists that: "World history is far less than the sum total of all history."<sup>10</sup> I suspect most world historians share Manning's caution, preferring to define world history in ways more compatible with the methods of detailed archival research that dominate modern historical scholarship.

#### Why the absence of Universal History is so Curious:



"The executioner's argument was, that you couldn't cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from: that he had never had to do such a thing before, and he wasn't going to begin at his time of life. The King's

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<sup>7</sup> Cited from Gilbert Allardyce, "Toward World History: American Historians and the Coming of the World History Course" (1990), in Ross Dunn, ed., *The New World History*, Boston & New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000, p. 30

<sup>8</sup> For arguments defending alternative dates for the origins of our species (and therefore the beginnings of human history) see Richard Klein with Blake Edgar, *The Dawn of Human Culture*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002, and Sally McBrearty and Alison Brooks, "The Revolution That Wasn't: A New Interpretation of the Origin of Modern Human Behavior," *Journal of Human Evolution*, 39 (2000): 453-563; there is a summary of this debate in Paul Pettit, "The Rise of Modern Humans," in Chris Scarre, ed., *The Human Past: World Prehistory and the Development of Human Societies*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, Ch. 4

<sup>9</sup> Jerry Bentley, the editor of the *Journal of World History*, notes that only 17 of the 195 articles published in that journal between 1990 and 2006 dealt with periods before 1500. Bentley adds that this "is not surprising ... since most professional historians work in these eras for which relatively abundant documentation and source materials survive." At a conference on world history research organized by Patrick Manning in November 2006, only 4 of 36 presenters discussed research work on eras before 1500. See Patrick Manning, ed., *Global Practice in World History: Advances Worldwide*, Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2008, pp. 20 and 133-4

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past*, New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2003, p. 3

argument was, that anything that had a head could be beheaded, and that you weren't to talk nonsense.” [Alice in Wonderland, Ch. 8]

Universal history has vanished so completely that few historians even notice its absence. Yet when we view the evolution of historical thought on larger scales, the disappearance of universal history begins to look distinctly curious. I say this because before the late nineteenth century universal history (as I have defined it) pervaded historical thought in most human societies, and the reasons for expelling it were less weighty than is often assumed.

In non-literate societies universal history took the form of what we somewhat patronizingly call “creation myths”—attempts to use the best available knowledge to place society within a large, often cosmological, context.<sup>11</sup> Universal histories were also constructed within all literate traditions, usually in tension with more sharply focused histories of particular groups, regions or eras (a tension William McNeill finds in the contrasting perspectives of Herodotus and Thucydides).<sup>12</sup> Universal histories can be found in the Muslim world (in the work of Tabari, Rashid al-Din and Ibn Khaldun), or in the encyclopaedic tradition of Chinese official historiography, or in the chronicles of Mesoamerica.<sup>13</sup> In the Mediterranean world, Raoul Mortley has traced the emergence of a self-conscious tradition of universal history soon after the conquests of Alexander the Great.<sup>14</sup>

Christian historical thought was organized around a paradigmatic universal history, constructed in the time of Augustine. This would frame European historical thinking until the Enlightenment, and still frames Christian fundamentalism today. As Collingwood puts it: “The conception of history as in principle the history of the world ... became a commonplace. The symbol of this universalism is the adoption of a single universal chronological framework for all historical events. The single universal chronology, invented by Isidore of Seville in the seventh century and popularized by the Venerable Bede in the eighth, dating everything forward and backward from the birth of Christ, still shows where the idea came from.”<sup>15</sup>

Bruce Mazlish argues that Bishop Bossuet’s *Discourse on Universal History*, published in 1681, represents the

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<sup>11</sup> A century ago, Durkheim had already argued that “belief-systems, including primitive religions, should be treated as cosmologies.” Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work, a Historical and Critical Study*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985, p. 449. More recently, in a critique of Lyotard’s claim that creation myths, such as those of the S. American Cashinahua, should be regarded as “little stories”, Kerwin Lee Klein insists that this seems true only from the globalized perspective of today’s world. “So far as the Cashinahua are concerned, ‘The History of the Cashinahua’ and ‘The History of Humanity’ are interchangeable phrases; there is no difference between them. Both are ‘universal history,’ and Lyotard’s designation of such stories as ‘local’ or centered on ‘rigid designators’ reflects a retrospective, ironic intervention (the Cashinahua may have believed that they alone were truly human, but we moderns know better; humanity is a much vaster category).” Kerwin Lee Klein, “In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People without History”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Dec. 1995), pp. 275-298, cited from p. 285

<sup>12</sup> William McNeill, “The Changing Shape of World History,” in *History and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Theme Issue 34: World Historians and Their Critics (May, 1995), pp. 8-26

<sup>13</sup> Marnie Hughes-Warrington, “Writing World History,” in William McNeill, ed., *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History*, Vol. 5, Great Barrington, Conn. 2004, 2095-2103. On the historiography of big history see Marnie Hughes-Warrington, “Big History,” in *Social Evolution & History*, Vol. 4, Issue 1 (Spring 2005), ed. Graeme Donald Snooks, 7-21 [also available in *Historically Speaking*, November, 2002: 16-17, 20]; see also William McNeill’s essay, “The Changing Shape of World History,” in *History and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Theme Issue 34: World Historians and Their Critics (May, 1995), pp. 8-26, particularly pp. 8-9 for the argument that the sacred or philosophical histories of all the world’s major historiographical traditions all produced accounts that can legitimately be described as “World Histories”

<sup>14</sup> Raoul Mortley, *The Idea of Universal History from Hellenistic Philosophy to Early Christian Historiography*, Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Rev. ed., intro. by Jan van der Dussen, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 51

“last gasp” of this historiographical tradition.<sup>16</sup> But secular forms of universal history would flourish for another two centuries during the Enlightenment and in the hands of the great nineteenth century system builders from Hegel to Marx and Spenser. Fred Spier has noted that Alexander von Humboldt began, but did not finish, “a cosmical history of the universe.” In the introduction to the first volume, published in 1845, he summarized his aims: “Beginning with the depths of the space and the regions of remotest nebulae, we will gradually descend through the starry zone to which our solar system belongs, to our own terrestrial spheroid, circled by air and ocean, there to direct our attention to its form, temperature, and magnetic tension, and to consider the fullness of organic life unfolding itself upon its surface beneath the vivifying influence of light.”<sup>17</sup> Even Leopold von Ranke, the iconic pioneer of archive-based empirical research, understood the importance of universal history, and at the end of his life, he even attempted such a history. Earlier in his career, he wrote that: “Universal history comprehends the past life of mankind, not in its particular relations and trends, but in its fullness and totality. The discipline of universal history differs from specialized research in that universal history, while investigating the particular never loses sight of the complete whole, on which it is working.”<sup>18</sup>

Then, towards the end of the nineteenth century, professional historians expelled universal history from the discipline. Since then it has languished in exile, despised by professional historians and practiced only by mavericks such as H.G. Wells or Hendrik Willem van Loon, whose engaging writing style and financial success was often taken as proof of how bad their historical scholarship was.<sup>19</sup> The expulsion of universal history was an important part of the process by which the history discipline demonstrated its “scientific” credentials. As Gilbert Allardyce writes: “The new history defined itself against the old, and apprentices in the vocation, reared on specialized research, learned to hold world history in suspicion as something outmoded, overblown, and metahistorical.”<sup>20</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century, other macro-narratives suffered a similar fate and even Science came under suspicion.<sup>21</sup> “A chorus of criticism consigned the grand or meta-narrative to the dustbin of historiography, if not history. ...; postmodernists of various stripes questioned whether historical narratives could escape the teleological tendencies of the master narrative of the Western/liberal tradition; and recently a leading postcolonial theorist has denounced all historicism, broadly defined, as incurably eurocentric.”<sup>22</sup> As R.I. Moore puts it: “... much of the resistance to world history among professional historians has arisen ... from the fear that the attempt to grapple with questions too large to be tackled by means of the critical appraisal *de novo* of the relevant primary sources, ... might lead to a resurgence of the grandiose and sinister speculative structures that they associate pre-eminently with the names of Spengler and Toynbee.”<sup>23</sup>

**Why did universal history disappear?** Seen in this broad historiographical context, the disappearance of universal history is curious and needs to be explained. Why did it vanish?

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<sup>16</sup> Bruce Mazlish, “Terms”, in Marnie Hughes-Warrington, ed., *World Histories*, Basingstoke, 2005, 20-23.

<sup>17</sup> Fred Spier, *Big History and the Future of Humanity* (provisional title), chapter 1

<sup>18</sup> Leopold von Ranke, cited from Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, 1956, pp. 61-2

<sup>19</sup> Van Loon was particularly vulnerable to the charge of carelessness with facts

<sup>20</sup> Cited from Gilbert Allardyce, *Towards World History* (1990), in Dunn, ed., *The New World History*, p. 30. On the complex process of establishing and policing a clear border between “scientific” and “literary” approaches to history in England, see Ian Hesketh, “Diagnosing Froude’s Disease: Boundary Work and the Discipline of History in Late-Victorian Britain,” *History and Theory* 47 (October 2008), 373-395

<sup>21</sup> See the survey of this transition in Appleby, Joyce, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, New York: Norton, 1994

<sup>22</sup> Barbara Weinstein, “History Without a Cause? Grand Narratives, World History, and the Postcolonial Dilemma”, *International Review of Social History*, 50 (2005), pp. 71–93, cited from p. 71; the reference in the last sentence of this passage is to Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000

<sup>23</sup> R.I. Moore, “World History”, in Michael Bentley, ed., *Companion to Historiography*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 941-59, from pp. 942-3

I am no specialist in nineteenth century historiography, so I offer the ideas that follow tentatively. However, my overall argument does not depend on their accuracy. My hunch is that the most powerful currents in the perfect storm that blew universal history away were: 1) a growing concern for “scientific” rigor, 2) nationalism, and 3) the rapid institutionalization of “Rankean” methods of teaching and research.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, those who attempted universal histories did so partly in the hope of turning history itself into a science as powerful, as scientific and as law-governed as physics or biology. By the end of the century, however, most historians felt that the speculative and subjective elements in these narratives outweighed their scientific rigor. As Popper would argue, they were too rubbery even to refute. They failed as science, and this failure reverberated throughout the embryonic history discipline. Historians lowered their sights, insisting that factual rigor must precede high theory. At the 1900 International Congress of Historians, Henri Houssaye thundered: “We want nothing more to do with the approximations of hypotheses, useless systems, theories as brilliant as they are deceptive, superfluous moralities. Facts, facts, facts—which carry within themselves their lesson and their philosophy. The truth, all the truth, nothing but the truth.”<sup>24</sup> Houssaye’s naive inductionism became the dominant methodological slogan of historical scholarship in the early twentieth century. To demonstrate their scientific rigor, it seemed, historians would have to narrow their field of vision, and set more modest goals. In their influential *Introduction to the Study of History*, written in 1898, Langlois and Seignobos wrote: “The historian works with documents. Documents are the traces which have been left by the thoughts and actions of men of former times ... No documents, no history.”<sup>25</sup> This methodological asceticism ruled out universal history for, as Langlois and Seignobos pointed out: “For want of documents the history of immense periods in the past of humanity is destined to remain for ever unknown.”<sup>26</sup>

It is easy to caricature the “empirical turn” of the late nineteenth century. But it is important to remember that similar strategies seemed to have worked well in the natural sciences. Darwin was a superb empirical researcher.<sup>27</sup> Yet he never lost sight of the ultimate goal of a unifying paradigm. In his autobiography, he wrote: “My industry has been nearly as great as it could have been in the observation and collection of facts.”<sup>28</sup> But he adds: “From my early youth I have had the strongest desire to understand or explain whatever I observed, that is, to group all facts under some general laws. These causes combined have given me the patience to reflect or ponder for any number of years over any unexplained problem.” Perhaps, in the light of Darwin’s experience, it was not so naïve to hope that the patient accumulation of accurate information might produce equally powerful paradigm ideas in history.

But that’s not what happened. Historical scholarship narrowed its focus without generating new unifying ideas, and the discipline broke into numerous isolated islands of historical knowledge. Historians lost any remaining consensus about the fundamental questions, problems and themes of their discipline. In a recent review article, Georg Iggers describes the result: “History, like other fields in the social sciences and the humanities, is caught in an iron cage of increasing professionalization and specialization with all the limits they set on the imaginative exploration of knowledge.”<sup>29</sup>

Nationalism encouraged the narrowing of scholarly focus. It offered a historical object—the nation state—which set clear, manageable, even alluring boundaries to historical research, attracted significant amounts of

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<sup>24</sup> Cited in Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge: CUP, 1988, p. 37-8

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Dan Smal, “In the Grip of Sacred History”, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 110, No. 5 (Dec 2005): 1337-1361, from pp. 1350-51

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Dan Smal, “In the Grip of Sacred History”, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 110, No. 5 (Dec 2005): 1337-1361, from pp. 1350-51

<sup>27</sup> See Janet Browne’s superb biography, *Charles Darwin*, 2 vols., London: Jonathan Cape, 2002

<sup>28</sup> Paul H. Barrett and R.B. Freeman, Eds., *The Works of Charles Darwin*, 29 vols., London, 1986-1989, Vol. 29, 159

<sup>29</sup> Georg Iggers, “Historiography in the Twentieth Century,” review of Lutz Raphael, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeitalter der Extreme: Theorien; Methoden; Tendenzen von 1900 bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich: C. H. Beck, 2003, *History and Theory*, 44 (October 2005), 469-476, from p. 471

government funding because of its importance in public education, and attracted the attention of a wide readership interested in the history of its own imagined community. Nationalism also offered the history discipline an artificial sense of wholeness.

The shift towards small-scale empirical research was soon institutionalized. “Historians were now trained as professionals, not as people of broad learning. Career patterns were established. Scholarly journals were founded which, unlike those of the eighteenth century, addressed a professional readership.”<sup>30</sup> The appearance of specialist journals, the rite of passage of the doctoral dissertation based on archival sources, the increasing respect for precision over relevance—these traditions left no room for the grand narratives of universal history. In an introduction to *History and Theory*’s 1995 “stock-take” on the state of world history, Philip Pomper describes how this methodological revolution squeezed out universal history. “The task of grand synthesis requires hedgehogs, Isaiah Berlin’s great system-builders or holists, whereas the history profession attracts foxes, Berlin’s thinkers who relish detail and particularity.”<sup>31</sup>

### THE RETURN OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY:

“... she noticed a curious appearance in the air: it puzzled her very much at first, but, after watching it a minute or two, she made it out to be a grin, and she said to herself ‘It’s the Cheshire Cat: now I shall have somebody to talk to.’ ‘How are you getting on?’ said the Cat, as soon as there was mouth enough for it to speak with. Alice waited till the eyes appeared, and then nodded. ‘It’s no use speaking to it,’ she thought, ‘till its ears have come, or at least one of them.’ In another minute the whole head appeared, and then Alice put down her flamingo, and began an account of the game, feeling very glad she had someone to listen to her.” [Alice in Wonderland, Ch. 8]

In an interview with Ved Mehta in the early 1960s, Arnold Toynbee insisted that the disappearance of universal history was a temporary aberration: “he comforted himself with the thought that the days of the microscope historians were probably numbered. They, whether they admitted it or not, had sacrificed all generalizations for patchwork, relative knowledge, and they thought of human experience as incomprehensible chaos. But in the perspective of historiography, they were in the minority, and Toynbee, in company with St. Augustine—he felt most akin to him—Polybius, Roger Bacon, and Ibn Khaldun, was in the majority.”<sup>32</sup>

Toynbee was right. Like the Cheshire cat, universal history is reappearing, beginning with the easy bits. In recent years there has been a resurgence of large-scale narratives in world history, global history, trans-national history, macrohistory, or whatever we choose to call it. In 1995, Philip Pomper described world history as “a lively and creative, but still small subdiscipline of history.”<sup>33</sup> In 2009, 14 years later, world history is flourishing, and not just in the USA.<sup>34</sup>

Universal history, the most ambitious of these large narratives, remains out of focus. Nevertheless, we are beginning to see the outlines of a modern, scientific reincarnation of universal history. There are now several

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<sup>30</sup> Georg Iggers, “Historiography in the Twentieth Century,” p. 470

<sup>31</sup> Philip Pomper, “World History and its Critics,” introduction to a theme issue of *History and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Theme Issue 34: World Historians and Their Critics (May, 1995), pp. 1-7, cited from pp. 1-2

<sup>32</sup> Ved Mehta, *Fly and the Fly-Bottle: Encounters with British Intellectuals*, Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1962, p. 143

<sup>33</sup> Philip Pomper, “World History and its Critics,” introduction to a theme issue of *History and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Theme Issue 34: World Historians and Their Critics (May, 1995), pp. 1-7, cited from p. 1; in the same year, Michael Geyer and Charles Bright wrote: “It [world history] is still a hesitant and fledgling historiography, which remains mired in the old, unsure of its scholarly status, and with a tendency to serve existing knowledge rather than create new knowledge. But a start has been made ...” From “World History in a Global Age,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (Oct., 1995), pp. 1034-1060, from p. 1038

<sup>34</sup> For two recent surveys which show that macro-history is reviving in many parts of the world, see the special issue of *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften*, on “Global History”, edited by Peer Vries, in 20. Jg., Band 2, 2009, and Patrick Manning, ed., *Global Practice in World History*

courses in what is often described as “big history”, in the USA, in Australia, in the Netherlands and in Russia.<sup>35</sup> And there is emerging a small literature on big history that explores themes across many different historically-oriented disciplines from history to biology to geology and cosmology.<sup>36</sup>

**Why is universal history making a comeback?** In a sense universal history, like the Cheshire cat, never really disappeared anyway. It was lurking. In a remarkable article, published in *History and Theory* in 1995, when universal history seemed more securely entombed than ever, Kerwin Lee Klein argued that the coffin had always leaked.<sup>37</sup> “From Lévi-Strauss to Lyotard, from Clifford to Fukuyama, we remain haunted by history, returning ever and again to the big story even as we anxiously affirm our clean break with the evils of narrative mastery.”<sup>38</sup> Even when it seems most absent, universal history manages to survive as the shadow of all those pasts we try to exclude. And, like shadow in Jungian psychology, it may be that what we exclude—what we define as the “other” in historical thinking—defines our thinking as powerfully as what we include. If history is to recover its wholeness as a discipline, it may have to look once again at the many shadow histories it has overlooked or repressed, the many “others” of universal history.

A second reason for predicting a return of universal history is that a century of detailed research in history and neighboring disciplines has transformed the data base on which historians can draw. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, European world historians such as Marx simply did not have enough reliable information to generalize convincingly about the history of Asia or Africa. With the limited information available within western scholarship, it seemed obvious that the “East” of Marx’s “Asiatic Mode of Production” was a realm of stasis. Today, it is apparent that nineteenth century historiography was projecting on to a nearly empty historiographical canvas a sort of shadow identity of Europe. Asia was cast as the shadow of everything European or Western. Today, historians throughout the world have better access to traditional regional historiographical traditions, and can draw on a vast amount of modern scholarship, and this makes it easier to detect and counter such crude, culture-bound projections.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, one of the great achievements of modern world historical scholarship has been the refutation of Eurocentric images of a static East.<sup>40</sup> Analogous changes

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<sup>35</sup> Barry Rodrigue is compiling a list of big history courses to be published in *World History Connected*

<sup>36</sup> Though I have reservations about the label, I coined the term “big history” in an article published in 1991: David Christian, “The Case for ‘Big History’”, *Journal of World History*, 2, No. 2 (Fall 1991): 223-38; on big history, see Fred Spier, *The Structure of Big History: From the Big Bang until Today*, Amsterdam University Press, 1996, David Christian, “*Maps of Time*”: *An Introduction to “Big History”*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004, Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present*, New Press, 2007, and Eric Chaisson, *Epic of Evolution: Seven Ages of the Cosmos*, New York 2006; and see a recent collection of essays from a conference on big history, Cheryl Genet, Brian Swimme, Russell Genet, and Linda Palmer, eds., *The Evolutionary Epic: Science’s Story and Humanity’s Response*, Santa Margarita, CA: Collins Foundation Press, 2009; for a recent survey of the rise of big history and some of its central concepts, see Fred Spier, “Big History: the Emergence of a Novel Interdisciplinary Approach,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 2008, Vol. 33, No. 2, 1-12; Spier’s forthcoming monograph, provisionally entitled *Big History and the Future*, promises a powerful theorization of big history around the central notions of increasing complexity and energy flows

<sup>37</sup> Kerwin Lee Klein, “In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People without History”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Dec. 1995), pp. 275-298

<sup>38</sup> Klein, “In Search of Narrative Mastery”, pp. 276-7

<sup>39</sup> Vinay Lal has written a forceful critique of the Eurocentrism of much recent scholarship in world history (including my own work) in “Much Ado about Something: The New Malaise of World History”, *Radical History Review*, Issue 91 (Winter 2005): 124–30; but Lal’s own article, together with the rapid growth of world historical scholarship outside of the English-speaking world, raises the hope that in a more international scholarly community, such projections will be exposed and corrected more easily than in Marx’ time. For a discussion of similar critiques of world history, see Dominic Sachsenmaier, “World History as Ecumenical History?” in *Journal of World History*, Vol. 18 (2007), No. 4, pp. 465-89

<sup>40</sup> Scholars such as Ken Pomeranz, Bin Wong, Andre Gunder Frank and Jack Goldstone, have demonstrated that as late as 1800 the Chinese economy was as dynamic, as commercial and as technologically creative as those of W. Europe. The changes that help explain the remarkable power of “the west” in the 19<sup>th</sup>



within archaeology and prehistory have transformed our understanding of the 100,000-200,000 years of human history before the appearance of the first written documents.<sup>41</sup>

Similar changes have also occurred in the more historical of the natural sciences. Particularly important has been the development of new dating techniques during what I have described elsewhere as the “Chronometric Revolution”.<sup>42</sup> By chronometry I mean the techniques by which we assign absolute dates to past events. Chronometry is fundamental to historical scholarship. As M.I. Finley put it: “Dates and a coherent dating scheme are as essential to history as exact measurement is to physics.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, so fundamental is chronometry that historians all too often take it for granted. Yet in the last half century (and largely unnoticed by professional historians) a profound chronometric revolution has transformed many historically oriented disciplines. It is easy to forget that before the middle of the twentieth century written records provided almost the only reliable way of assigning absolute dates to past events. As Colin Renfrew writes: “Before World War II for much of archaeology virtually the only reliable absolute dates were historical ones—Tutankhamun reigned in the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC, Caesar invaded Britain in 55 BC.”<sup>44</sup> H.G. Wells confessed in a chronological appendix to the universal history he attempted in *An Outline of History* that: “Chronology only begins to be precise enough to specify the exact year of any event after the establishment of the eras of the First Olympiad [776] and the building of Rome [753].”<sup>45</sup> This fundamental chronometric barrier confined empirical historical scholarship to a scale of several thousand years and in practice to the study of literate societies and their elites. Though nineteenth century geologists had determined *relative* dates for many geological eras, *absolute* dates seemed unattainable. This is why the emergence of radiometric dating techniques in the 1950s was so revolutionary.

The basic principle of radiometric dating was understood in the first decade of the twentieth century. Though the decay of an individual radioactive atom is unpredictable, the rate of decay of large numbers of atoms can be predicted with great accuracy. Each radioactive isotope has a precisely measurable half-life, a period during which half of its atoms will have decayed. Carbon-14, for example, has a half-life of 5,730 years, while Uranium-238 decays to an isotope of lead with a half-life of about 4.5 billion years. This means that it is possible to determine when a lump of material containing radioactive material was formed, by measuring the relative proportions of the original material and the materials into which it had decayed. The practical difficulties are considerable, however, which is why such methods could not be used routinely before the 1950s, when Willard Libby established reliable methods for using the decay of Carbon-14 to date archaeological materials. In 1953, Claire Paterson used the much longer half-life of Uranium to determine for the first time the age of the earth, at about 4.56 billion years.

Colin Renfrew, one of the first to demonstrate the revolutionary implications of these techniques for European prehistory, writes:

The second half of the twentieth century saw major changes in the nature of prehistory. .... the development of radiometric dating methods, including radiocarbon, allowed the construction of a chronology for prehistory in every part of the world. It was, moreover, a chronology free of any

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and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries emerged suddenly and rather late. Two fine surveys of this historiographical revolution are Robert Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World. A global and ecological narrative from the fifteenth to the Twenty-first Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, and Jack Goldstone, *Why Europe? The Rise of the West in World History, 1500-1850*, McGraw-Hill, 2008

<sup>41</sup> For a fine overview of recent scholarship on human prehistory, see Chris Scarre, ed., *The Human Past: World Prehistory and the Development of Human Societies*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2005

<sup>42</sup> See David Christian, “Historia, complejidad y revolución cronométrica” [“History, Complexity and the Chronometric Revolution”], *Revista de Occidente*, Abril 2008, No 323, 27-57, and “The Evolutionary Epic and the Chronometric Revolution”, in Cheryl Genet, Brian Swimme, Russell Genet, and Linda Palmer, eds., *The Evolutionary Epic: Science's Story and Humanity's Response*, Santa Margarita, CA: Collins Foundation Press, 2009, pp. 43-50

<sup>43</sup> Cited from Bruce Mazlish, “Terms”, in Marnie Hughes-Warrington, ed., *World Histories*, p. 19

<sup>44</sup> Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, *Archaeology: Methods and Practice*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1991, p. 101

<sup>45</sup> H.G. Wells, *Outline of History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1921 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1920], p. 1102

assumptions about cultural developments or relationships, and it could be applied as well to nonliterate societies as to those with written records. To be prehistoric no longer meant to be ahistoric in a chronological sense. As a direct consequence, a new kind of world prehistory became possible. It was feasible to date, quite independently of one another, all the ancient civilizations of the world. ... it became possible at last to date the fossils documenting the various stages of human evolution, and their accompanying artifacts.<sup>46</sup>

The implications of the chronometric revolution go far beyond archaeology. Since the 1950s, it has been possible to create a timeline that is based on reliable absolute dates, and extends beyond the appearance of writing, beyond even the appearance of our species, to the origins of the earth and the Universe. Suddenly, we can do prehistory, paleontology, geology and even cosmology with the sort of chronometric precision that had previously been possible only in the study of human civilizations.

The chronometric revolution was one element in another important change, the historicization of the natural sciences. Paleontologists, geologists and cosmologists began to realize that they, like historians, were in the tricky business of constructing a vanished, and often highly contingent past using the few clues it happened to have left to the present day.<sup>47</sup> Suddenly, it seemed, history was merely one of a whole family of scholarly disciplines that studied the past with chronological rigor. What distinguished it was not its concern with change in time, nor its concern for chronological precision, but merely the fact that, along with archaeology and prehistory, it focused on the history of a single species, our own.

### THE IMPACT OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY ON HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

*The Cat only grinned when it saw Alice. It looked good-natured, she thought: still it had very long claws and a great many teeth, so she felt that it ought to be treated with respect.* [Alice in Wonderland, Ch. 6]

If we do see a return to universal history in a new, scientific, guise, how will it affect historical scholarship?

**Seeing the Large Patterns:** A revival of universal history will affect the context of historical scholarship much more than its practice. After all, rigorous empirical research is the meat and drink of scholarship in all fields including the natural sciences. So I suspect that for most historians “normal history” will carry on regardless. But the *context* of historical research will be transformed. Seeing human history as part of a much larger story will affect how historians think about research, the questions they ask, the ways they collaborate and the way they judge the significance of scholarship. This is because a history discipline that sees itself as part of a larger, inter-disciplinary universal history will surely acquire some features of a Kuhnian paradigm.<sup>48</sup> There will surely emerge a loose consensus about the very large patterns apparent in history, and this will change how we think about the problems we study at more conventional scales.

The first reason for saying this is that universal history will encourage collaboration between historians and scientists. More and more, historians will find themselves working with historically-minded scholars in the natural sciences who take it for granted that good empirical research is always linked in some way to large, paradigm-like ideas. Collaboration will be particularly important at the border between human history and biology. What makes human history different from the history of, say, our biological cousins, the great apes?

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<sup>46</sup> Colin Renfrew, *Prehistory: The Making of the Human Mind*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007, p. 41; in 1973 Renfrew published *Before Civilisation: the Radiocarbon Revolution and Prehistoric Europe*, London: Jonathan Cape

<sup>47</sup> W.H. McNeill, “History and the Scientific Worldview”, *History and Theory*, 37, No. 1 (1998):1-13

<sup>48</sup> T.S. Kuhn, T. S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. Kuhn famously argued that modern science is characterized by the existence of paradigms, fundamental models of how things work and how they should be studied. He argued that a paradigm “provides a map whose details are elucidated by mature scientific research. And since nature is too complex and varied to be explored at random, that map is as essential as observation and experiment to science’s continuing development” *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 109

After all, as individuals they are just about as clever as us. Why do we have a rich history of long-term change when they, apparently, don't? To tackle such questions seriously, historians will have to negotiate the tricky border they share with sciences organized around Kuhnian paradigms (such as natural selection).

Second, the sheer scale of universal history will encourage historians to start looking once again for large, paradigm-like patterns in human history. I would like to discuss this point in more detail.

The narrow focus of modern historical scholarship hides the large patterns. At the scale of a few years or decades, or even a few centuries, the contingent aspects of human history stand out and the unpredictable consequences of human agency. Even at the scales of demographic or economic history, contingencies loom large: think of the Chinese government's one-child policy for example. The birth of Chinggis Khan was a contingent event that reverberated throughout Eurasia for many centuries.<sup>49</sup> So contingency and agency dominate historical thought even at the scales of the Braudelian *longue durée*. This, I think, is why, in Toynbee's words, so many historians: "sacrificed all generalizations for patchwork, relative knowledge, and ... thought of human experience as incomprehensible chaos."<sup>50</sup> Something similar also happened in archaeology. Colin Renfrew writes that for many archaeologists, "The world ... is constructed through individual actions by individual people. It is a rich palimpsest, testifying to human creativity, and perhaps little more is to be expected than the collection and collation of regional narratives."<sup>51</sup> Yet, like many other historians and archaeologists, Colin Renfrew finds the idea that there is no deep pattern to human history profoundly unsatisfying. After the passage I have just cited, he adds: "To those, however, who see science as the search for pattern and for explanation, this ramifying richness of complexity leaves something to be desired. ... Are there no simplifying perspectives which, while not denying individual agency and creativity, will reveal some underlying order?"<sup>52</sup>

A return to universal history will show that there are indeed "simplifying perspectives" that reveal a profound orderliness in human history. However, the large patterns can be seen clearly only at scales of many millennia, or at the even larger scales of human history as a whole. The shift in perspective as one moves to larger scales is similar to the shift physicists experience as they move from the quantum level, where processes such as radioactive breakdown are unpredictable, to the scale of everyday life, where the same processes yield powerful, law-like patterns such as those that make radiometric dating feasible. Two centuries ago, Kant already understood that in history as in the sciences, contingent processes could give rise to law-like patterns: "what seems complex and chaotic in the single individual may be seen from the standpoint of the human race as a whole to be a steady and progressive though slow evolution of its original endowment."<sup>53</sup> Kant illustrated his argument by noting how the free demographic choices of millions of families resulted in highly predictable demographic patterns. At large scales, the pixels of human action generate clear patterns, and awareness of these patterns will inevitably change how we think about history at smaller scales. Though contingency can loom large even at very large scales (think of the asteroid impact that drove the dinosaurs to extinction and opened a path to our own evolution), Collingwood was missing half the story when he insisted that history was essentially about the free actions of individual actors.<sup>54</sup> (Tut-tut!)

At the scale of human history as a whole, three large, interrelated patterns stand out. The first is increasing (and eventually *accelerating*) control of biospheric resources by humanity as a whole. The results are palpable today, but the trend was already present in the Paleolithic era as our ancestors learnt how to exploit many different environments, from tropical forests to arctic tundra, until they settled all of the earth's continents. In the almost

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<sup>49</sup> For a fine recent discussion see Michal Biran, *Chinggis Khan*, Oxford: One World Publishers, 2007

<sup>50</sup> Ved Mehta, *Fly and the Fly-Bottle: Encounters with British Intellectuals*, Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1962, p. 143

<sup>51</sup> Renfrew, *Prehistory*, pp. 74-5

<sup>52</sup> Renfrew, *Prehistory*, pp. 74-5

<sup>53</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," in *Kant on History*, ed. Lewis White Beck, New York: Macmillan, 1963, pp. 11-26, from pp. 11-12

<sup>54</sup> That story is told superbly in Walter Alvarez, *T. Rex and the Crater of Doom*, London: Vintage, 1998

four billion year history of life on earth, no other single species has shown such sustained adaptability. The second pattern, made possible by the first, is a slow and accelerating increase in the total number of human beings. The third, intimately tied to the first two, is an eventual increase in the complexity, diversity and interrelatedness of human societies once population growth ceased to take the form of migrations, and began, instead, to generate larger and denser communities. It was the appearance of agriculture, from 10,000 years ago, that allowed this fundamental change. None of these large trends were apparent to those who lived through them, nor can they be seen at the scales of conventional historical research. At small scales it is the fluctuations that stand out. The long trends can only be seen at large scales and in retrospect. “The owl of Minerva, takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering.”<sup>55</sup> (“My point exactly,” mutters Collingwood.)

That these trends are linked in some ways with the very nature of our species is apparent from the fact that they can be seen in the histories of communities that had no contact with each other.<sup>56</sup> The best example of these strange parallels is perhaps the evolution of agrarian societies. In most agrarian regions (Papua New Guinea, with crops that discouraged prolonged storage, is an interesting exception), the spread of agriculture led quite independently to the emergence of the large communities often described as agrarian civilizations.<sup>57</sup> In all of them we find cities, states, armies, networks of exchange and tribute-taking, literacy, astronomy and ... pyramids. It may well be that the particular design of the pyramids or the cities or the astronomical observatories varied in different “cultures” or “civilizations” as the result of contingent decisions taken within each region at particular times. These features may have been, in the economists’ jargon, “path-dependent”. But the fact that all agrarian civilizations built pyramids, cities and observatories was not. That reflects something deeper. Robert Adams, who explored this problem in a classic study published in 1966, *The evolution of urban society: early Mesopotamia and prehispanic Mexico*, concluded that “both the societies in question can usefully be regarded as variants of a single processual pattern”.<sup>58</sup>

Remarkably, it seems that the trends apparent in human history may be intimately related to even larger trends. Eric Chaisson, who has taught a form of universal history for well over twenty years, has argued that one of the central themes of big history is that of increasing complexity.<sup>59</sup> We can think of complex things as entities composed of diverse elements assembled according to a specific plan. Stars are complex, so are planets, so are living organisms, so is human society. Complex entities also display “emergent properties”, qualities that cannot be deduced by studying their component parts, because they arise not from the components but from the way those components are arranged. The qualities of water, for example, cannot be predicted from knowledge of the qualities of hydrogen and oxygen atoms. Arrange those atoms in different ways and you get different emergent properties. Emergent properties seem magical because it is impossible to detect them in the components that make up any complex entity; instead they seem to appear out of nothing once those components are arranged in a specific way. There is a famous Buddhist sutra, known in English as the “Questions of Milinda,” that captures the idea of emergence well. When the Greco-Bactrian ruler, Milinda (Menander) asks the Buddhist sage Nagasena about the Buddhist doctrine of non-self, Nagasena asks how Milinda came to their meeting. In a chariot. Nagasena then asks what a chariot is. If you took its wheels away would it still be a chariot? If you took away the driver’s seat? If you arranged its parts randomly would it still be a chariot? Like a star, a chariot is not a chariot (or a self a self) unless its many components are arranged in specific ways. Only then does the quality of “chariotness” or “self” or “star” or even “humanity” appear. Each type of complex entity appears to have its own distinctive emergent properties.

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<sup>55</sup> Hegel, Preface to the Philosophy of Right, cited from Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. S.W. Dyde, Kitchener, Ont.: Batoche Books, 2001, p. 20

<sup>56</sup> Does the idea of a “species” history commit one to a form of essentialism? Not necessarily, as Dipesh Chakrabarty points out in “The Climate of History”, pp. 214-15

<sup>57</sup> Why tropical gardening discourages the storage of surpluses is discussed in J.R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird’s Eye View of World History*, New York & London: W.W. Norton, 2003, pp. 34-5

<sup>58</sup> The paraphrase of Renfrew, *Prehistory*, p. 71

<sup>59</sup> Eric Chaisson, *Epic of Evolution*

There are powerful reasons for thinking that in the 13.7 billion year history of our Universe, the upper levels of complexity have slowly increased. The early universe was simple. It contained huge clouds of hydrogen and helium atoms through which flowed various forms of energy. (I ignore dark energy and dark matter, even though they make up perhaps 95% of the mass of the Universe, because neither seems to have had the same propensity as atomic matter for forming complex entities.) Over time, from these elements, more complex entities have emerged, including stars, new chemical elements (formed in the death-agonies of large stars), planets, and living organisms such as ourselves. Each reveals new emergent properties that provide the research agendas of the sciences that study them, from astronomy to earth sciences to biology to human history. As Eric Chaisson has pointed out all complex entities depend on energy flows. This raises the possibility that we might be able to estimate degrees of complexity with some objectivity by calculating the “density” of the energy flows through different complex entities.<sup>60</sup> Chaisson’s rough calculations suggest that living entities are much more complex than dead things (a cockroach is vastly more complex than a star); and today’s global human society appears to be, by a large margin, the most complex entity we are aware of. That, surely, is a conclusion to make even the most empirically-minded of historians sit up and listen!

Awareness of large patterns such as the ones I have described will affect the practice of historical research by raising new questions and setting new research agendas. How can I make sense of the processes I am studying in the light of these large patterns? Are they part of these patterns? Do they represent counter-patterns? Do they have no bearing at all on the large patterns?

**Explaining the Large Patterns of Human History:** Then there are deeper questions about the nature of the patterns themselves. How can we explain them? How, for example, can the history of a species as quirky, willful and unpredictable as our own, yield the sort of powerful long-term trends we see in human history? And how does human history fit into an even larger story of increasing complexity?

We already have some interesting candidate answers to these questions. The trends we have already seen show a species that keeps adapting in new ways so that it slowly increases its control of biospheric resources. Of course, all species “adapt”. They evolve in ways that ensure that most individuals can extract enough resources from their environment to survive and reproduce. Darwin’s great achievement was to explain *how* species do this through the mechanism of natural selection. But the patterns we see in human history are different. Humans do not just adapt, they *keep* adapting, and at a pace that cannot be explained by natural selection alone. Continuous adaptation provides the species as a whole with more resources than are needed simply to maintain a demographic steady state. Something unusual is going on. And there is already emerging a consensus about how we should describe this difference, which distinguishes the history of human beings from the histories of all other species on earth. In a recent lecture advocating an “evolutionary history of humanity”, Eric Hobsbawm puts it like this: “The changes in human life, collective and individual, in the course of the past 10,000 years, let alone in the past 10 generations, are too great to be explained by a wholly Darwinian mechanism of evolution via genes. They amount to the accelerating inheritance of acquired characteristics by cultural and not genetic mechanisms? I suppose it is Lamarck’s revenge on Darwin via human history.”<sup>61</sup> In fact, even Hobsbawm’s scales are too small; the history of Paleolithic migrations shows that the same mechanisms have functioned ever since the appearance of our species, some 100,000 years ago.

How can we explain this remarkable capacity for sustained and accelerating adaptation that seems to be a new emergent property of our species, and the primary driver of change in human history? I have argued elsewhere that the key is the remarkable fluency of human language, which allowed humans alone to share learned knowledge so efficiently that it could accumulate within the memory banks of entire communities. Human language linked humans into highly efficient information networks through which the learning of each individual could be shared, added to, and passed on to future generations. The slow mechanism of genetic

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<sup>60</sup> See Eric Chaisson, *Cosmic Evolution: The Rise of Complexity in Nature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, particularly chapter 3 and the table on p. 139

<sup>61</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Asking the Big Why Questions: History: A New Age of Reason,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, Dec. 2004; thanks to Dr. Kim Yong-Woo of Ewha University’s Institute of World and Global History for alerting me to this article

inheritance was overlaid by the much faster mechanism of knowledge transfer. The long term trends that make human history so different are driven, in other words, by a new and more rapid adaptive mechanism that we can call “collective learning”.<sup>62</sup> As a species we cannot help accumulating new knowledge by exchanging it. That explains our remarkable plasticity, the astonishing variety of behaviors that we find in individuals and in different human societies, and the extreme difficulty we have in trying to pin down any single “human nature”. Yet behind this variety there is one constant: our propensity for sharing the insights of each individual, thereby generating a collective capacity for sustained adaptation. It is this propensity that seems to have driven human societies with radically different cultures and in very different environments along broadly similar paths, and ultimately towards greater control of resources, larger populations and greater social complexity.

Is it too optimistic to suppose that ideas like these may contain in embryo a Kuhnian paradigm for human history? If so, then one consequence of a return to universal history will be the final collapse of the barriers that have divided the humanities from the natural sciences for so long. If Chaisson’s ideas about the extraordinary complexity of modern human society are correct we may also be able to explain why generating paradigm ideas for human history has proved so difficult: historians deal with levels of complexity much greater than those described in, say, physics.

What will be the institutional implications of the collapse of this particular “Berlin wall”? Will we see the emergence of new “Faculties of Historical Sciences”, with historians sharing offices and seminars with cosmologists? Will the very nature of historical change emerge as a fundamental question to be tackled across multiple disciplines? None of this is clear. What is clear is that the return of universal history will have profound institutional as well as intellectual consequences because it will break down the scholarly fragmentation on which current institutional structures are founded.

## **THE IMPACT OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY ON EDUCATION IN GENERAL**

The return of universal history will have a significant impact on education in general, in three main ways.

First, if universal history as I have described it begins to penetrate school curricula, it will help students grasp the underlying unity of modern knowledge. Today, modern education has neither the intellectual nor the institutional resources needed to integrate the many forms of knowledge that are taught in schools and universities. Yet, as I have found in my own teaching, there is a profound yearning among students for a less fragmented vision of reality. Courses in universal (“big”) history can help overcome this sense of fragmentation. They are already being taught in Universities, and I hope over the next few years to collaborate in constructing on-line curricula that can be taught in high schools. The barriers to such a proposal are both institutional and intellectual. If they can be surmounted, it should be possible to teach about the past in ways that help students understand that history and literature and biology and cosmology are not separate intellectual islands, but parts of a single, global and inter-disciplinary attempt to explain our world.

Second, the coherent vision of the past described in this paper should help people in many different walks of life to understand better the complex relationship between our own species and the biosphere. Such understanding will be increasingly important as we learn more about some of the dangerous consequences of our astonishing ecological and technological creativity as a species. Understanding how and why all human communities are driven to store and accumulate knowledge should help us be more choosy about how we use this astonishing creativity.

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<sup>62</sup> I have explored these arguments in David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004. The idea of collective learning attempts to generalize ideas central to the work of William McNeill. In a 1995 essay, McNeill writes: “it seemed obvious to me in 1954 when I began to write *The Rise of the West*, that historical change was largely provoked by encounters with strangers, followed by efforts to borrow (or sometimes to reject or hold at bay) especially attractive novelties.” William McNeill, “The Changing Shape of World History,” in *History and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Theme Issue 34: World Historians and Their Critics (May, 1995), pp. 8-26, particularly p. 15

Finally, only at the scales of universal history will it be possible to grasp the underlying unity of humanity as a whole. We have seen that the overall trajectory of human history cannot be seen within the constricted time scales of Rankean scholarship. Consequently, the revival of universal history will allow historians to take up a challenge that some historians already understood at the beginning of the twentieth century: that of constructing histories of humanity as powerful and inspiring as the great national histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the aftermath of World War I, many argued that historical teaching organized around the idea of the nation state could only guarantee more and even bloodier wars in the future. As John Tosh writes: “The League of Nations campaigned vigorously for the downplaying of war and nationalism in the history curriculum in schools. The historian Eileen Power believed that world citizenship would come nearer if history teaching enlarged the sense of group solidarity and demonstrated that ‘everyone is a member of two countries, his own and the world.’”<sup>63</sup> H.G. Wells wrote his *Outline of History* in a similar spirit. Peace, he argued, required the creation of “*common historical ideas*. Without such ideas to hold them together in harmonious co-operation, with nothing but narrow, selfish, and conflicting nationalist traditions, races and peoples are bound to drift towards conflict and destruction. This truth, which was apparent to that great philosopher Kant a century or more ago ... is now plain to the man in the street.”<sup>64</sup>

More recently, the great American world historian, William McNeill, has written: “Humanity entire possess a commonality which historians may hope to understand just as firmly as they can comprehend what unites any lesser group. Instead of enhancing conflicts, as parochial historiography inevitably does, an intelligible world history might be expected to diminish the lethality of group encounters by cultivating a sense of individual identification with the triumphs and tribulations of humanity as a whole. This, indeed, strikes me as the moral duty of the historical profession in our time. We need to develop an ecumenical history, with plenty of room for human diversity in all its complexity.”<sup>65</sup>

Among many other reasons for welcoming the prospect of a return to universal history, then, is the possibility that it may provide the framework within which we can create histories that can generate a sense of human solidarity, or global citizenship, as powerfully as the great national histories once created multiple national solidarities. As Jerry Bentley has argued, “[an] ecumenical world history might take on a more explicit ideological dimension by allying with movements seeking to advance the causes of global citizenship, cosmopolitan democracy, cross-cultural dialogue, and related projects. In recent years, political scientists, moral philosophers, and others have devoted considerable energy to the articulation and development of these ideals.”<sup>66</sup> By taking on this important challenge, historical scholarship and historical teaching may be able to play a vital role in helping to tackle the many global problems we face today, and in avoiding some of the dangers inseparable from nationalism in a world equipped with nuclear weapons.

*‘Cheshire Puss,’ she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider. ‘Come, it’s pleased so far,’ thought Alice, and she went on. ‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’ ‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat. ‘I don’t much care where—’ said Alice. ‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,’ said the Cat. ‘—so long as I get somewhere,’ Alice added as an explanation. ‘Oh, you’re sure to do that,’ said the Cat, ‘if you only walk long enough.’ [Alice in Wonderland, Ch. 6]*

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<sup>63</sup> John Tosh, *Why History Matters*, Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2008, p. 125; he cites Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History: Eileen Power, 1908-1940*, Cambridge, 1996, p. 223

<sup>64</sup> H.G. Wells, *Outline of History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1921 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1920], p. vi

<sup>65</sup> “Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians”, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No. 1, (Feb., 1986), pp. 1-10, from p. 7

<sup>66</sup> Jerry Bentley, “Myths, Wagers and Some Moral Implications of World History,” *Journal of World History*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 51-82, from p. 78. The same page includes a short bibliography on the idea of global citizenship

