

Bad History

Big History: Between Nothing and Everything

David Christian, Cynthia Stokes Brown, and Craig Benjamin

McGraw Hill Education, New York, 2014

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Big History is a reference text for universities across the United States and around the world. David Christian (D.Phil., Oxford University) is a lecturer in history at Macquarie University Sydney Australia. In 2010, he founded the ‘Big History Project’ with Bill Gates. Cynthia Stokes Brown (Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University) has written extensively on civil rights history. She is also the author of *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present* (2007). Craig Benjamin (Ph.D., Macquarie University) is an Associate Professor of history at Grand Valley State University in Michigan.

These authors boast that “this is the first modern text on big history” (p. 4), and claim to have created a new vision of the past that draws from many different scientific disciplines including history, geology, biology, and cosmology. These alleged insights in our understanding of the past have occurred largely since the middle of the 20th century, and partly as a result of what they call the Chronometric Revolution. At the centre of this Chronometric Revolution is a series of new techniques for dating past events. Because historical studies traditionally relied on written documentary evidence, historical studies have therefore been constrained to the events of human history, so there is no way of knowing events that happened before the advent of humans.

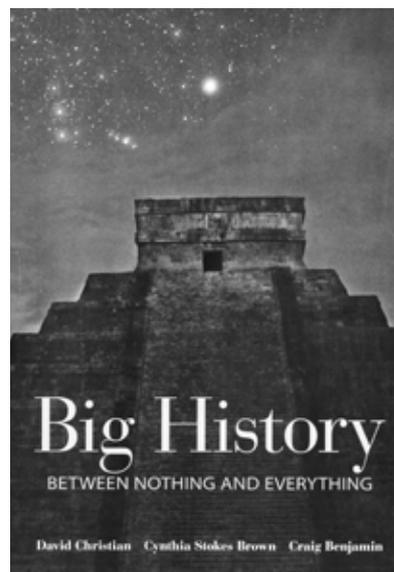
These supposed new ways of dating past events have allegedly made it possible to assign ‘absolute dates’ to events not mentioned in any documents, including the origin of life and origin of the universe. The authors are speaking, of course, about radiometric dating (including carbon-14 dating and uranium-lead dating) in which they place great faith and confidence—although even scientists who are ardent defenders of the accuracy of radiometric dating would never claim that it produces absolute dates.

The authors summarily dismiss the notion of divine revelation, describing it as merely “whispered words of divine beings or inner voices” (p. 6).

What is big history?

The authors claim to have formulated a new secular and materialistic origin story to replace religious origin stories—especially the biblical account of creation. To them, origin stories such as the Genesis account are “naive and simplistic” (p. 12), and the miraculous birth and death of Christ are dismissed as being merely great stories with “almost magical power” (p. 12). In fact, they assert that it is a mistake to take origin stories such as the Genesis account too literally, and that those who told them did not themselves always treat the stories as the literal truth.

The authors assert that there is no objectively verifiable evidence to support the creationist view and no way of testing it. Therefore, scientists regard supernatural creation as a matter of belief or as a metaphor. Instead, scientists look for naturalistic explanations that can be supported by objective evidence. The authors seem blind to the fact that big bang



cosmology and biological evolution are mere forensic reconstructions that have no direct evidence and there is no way of testing them.

Indeed, the authors describe big history as an attempt “to reconstruct the history of the whole of time ... based on the conclusions of modern scientific scholarship” (p. 3). Big history, then, is a modern, universal, scientific, origin story.

The authors claim there is a single thread that runs through the whole story: the emergence of more and more complex things over time. It is clear from their statements that they presuppose chemical evolution operating in a materialistic universe. Again, the authors claim that big history is based on the best knowledge available to us—in other words, knowledge derived from modern science. For them, modern science is the dominant form of knowledge in the modern world, because it is global in its reach, and employs what they believe is the rigorous use of carefully tested evidence.

Big history and ‘science’

The authors follow the standard big bang model as the modern scientific

explanation of the origin of the universe, claiming that the universe ‘appeared’ 13.8 billion years ago. So where was it before it appeared? Was it hidden? When did it actually come into existence? The authors don’t say.

The authors speak of ‘flows of energy’. But where are these flows of energy, and where did they come from? Indeed, what is energy? How does a materialist explain it? This sounds like new age drivel rather than science!

Biological evolution is presented as another ‘just-so’ story: “for a period of over 3 billion years, single-cell organisms floating in the ocean evolved to acquire the ability to *photosynthesise* ...” (p. 45). How did these single-cell organisms ‘acquire’ this capability? What chemical or biological processes caused this?

There is of course the mandatory reference to the supposed ‘Tree of Life.’ For evolutionists, this means that humans are closely related to apes, rather than being a special creation of God made in His image:

“Worse yet for traditional Christian believers, Darwin’s theory clearly implies that if repeated over millions of years, blind processes alone are able to produce exquisitely complex organisms; a creator God is not necessary to explain the huge variety on earth” (pp. 59–60).

How can the authors possibly know that blind processes can create complexity? They offer no scientific justification or actual examples. Again, this is just plain wishful thinking! It is a mere assertion with no basis at all in fact.¹

The authors even make reference to Ernst Haeckel’s discredited and fraudulent theory of embryos: “In its early stages, a human embryo has traits found in fish, amphibians, and reptiles before developing its mammalian characteristics” (p. 61).²

Assertion as fact

The authors constantly present assertions and assumptions as simple fact. But despite the authors’ absolute insistence that evolution is true, their language often betrays them with phrases like “*the most likely*”, “the question that has *yet to be answered fully*, the *gap in our understanding*”, “*how life emerged remains a mystery*”, and “*no one can explain this*”. Indeed, baseless and fantastic assertions permeate the entire book.

Human history

Regarding the loss of body hair in the story of human evolution, the authors suggest that “females selected males with little hair because they could feel certain that such males had fewer parasites” (p. 86). But how could a dumb chimp possibly know what a parasite was and that they lived in a potential mate’s body hair?

The authors state that human history began when our ancestors began to collaborate in new ways. This assertion is a bit of a stretch given that collaboration is generally limited to within particular communities or cultures. History is littered with wars between different clans, tribes, and cultures, and there have been numerous genocides—some of which have been justified on evolutionary grounds.

According to the authors:

“... most of human history has taken place in this paleolithic era ... the period during which we became who we are and began to realise our species’ potential physically, socially, technologically, and linguistically. Examining this period helps provide answers to the fundamental question of what it means to be human” (p. 93).

Not surprisingly, the alleged transition from hunter-gatherer societies to agrarian, agricultural

societies is explained in terms of *social evolution*. By agrarian societies, the authors mean civilisations that have developed agriculture, cities, states, specialisation and a division of labour, armies, writing, and tributes.

Note that the Bible presents both Cain and Abel as agrarian agriculturalists (Gen 4:2), and Cain built a city (Gen 4:17), so humans had agrarian characteristics right back in the beginning.

The authors use the world of social insects (termites, and bees and wasps) to explain the emergence of power:

“There is a close parallel between the social world of termites and evolving human societies in the Early Agrarian Era. ... In the same way that social insects adapted genetically to living in large colonies, humans adapted culturally to the new realities of sedentary, communal, interdependent living that emerged following the transition to agriculture” (p. 121).

They go on to assert that early leaders in the agrarian period were appointed by consent and had not yet learned to impose their will by force. But how could they possibly know this? It appears they are simply reading their preconceived ideas of social evolution into world history. Indeed, they argue that the process of more complex social arrangements emerging out of less complex ones is “similar to the evolution of multicellular organisms: entities that were once independent become linked into larger unities” (p. 128). They continue: “around the world a similar process of increasing complexity occurs, no matter what the environment, whenever the human population reaches a certain density” (p. 148). “Just as the DNA of modern humans produces individuals who are very similar to each other despite some interesting differences, so too agrarian civilisations seem to be generated by a sort of social and historical DNA that ensured they were quite alike” (p. 153).

In any case, their assumption of social evolution leads to an incorrect chronology. The Bible makes it clear agrarian civilisations existed at the beginning before stone age cultures. Stone age cultures emerged after the dispersion at Babel because the resulting isolation of certain people groups led to a loss of technology.

The authors also make the following curious comment: “Virtually all of our knowledge of ancient Hebrew history comes from the Old Testament of the Hebrew Bible, although much of this has yet to be substantiated by archaeologists” (p. 158). This is complete rubbish! Biblical history has an incredible record of archaeological confirmation.³

Regarding the rapid decline of some agrarian civilisations (e.g. the Mayan civilisation in South America), the authors suggest the cause was overpopulation and a deteriorating agricultural landscape, which produced famine, disease, population movements, frequent wars, and a loss of confidence in rulers. Of course, they do not consider spiritual decline as a cause, despite history repeatedly demonstrating that ungodly and perverse societies have never flourished and do not last.

Their comments regarding Australian Aborigines are just as fantastic: “it is tempting to think that if the region’s history had played out for a few more centuries without European interference, we might have seen developments similar to those in Mesopotamia at the time of the first appearance of agriculture” (p. 211). Again, this is nonsense and a complete fantasy. If Aborigines had been in Australia 60,000 years prior to European colonisation, as most anthropologists now claim, then why hadn’t they already discovered agriculture? The truth is that they would never have discovered agriculture because it goes against their traditional animistic beliefs about

nature and the land. Their faith in social evolution has blinded them to what more objective historians have previously pointed out.⁴

The modern revolution

The authors note that “the technologies and social structures that enabled humans to increase their control over resources arose from the ancient process of innovation through the sharing of information” and then ask “why should the pace and synergy of collective learning have accelerated so sharply in the modern era? And why did rates of change vary so greatly from region to region?” (p. 216). However, you will not find credible answers to these questions in this book. Readers should consult the works of Thomas Sowell and Rodney Stark who answer them in great detail.⁵

The authors assert that societies have been generally hostile to “new ideas, new ways of doing things, new religions and technologies, and innovations in general” (p. 217). They contend that conservatism has been the rule in most societies, although some individuals have been willing to go against the grain and searched for new knowledge and new ways of doing things. But their assessment is grossly simplistic. While Christian societies have been morally and socially conservative, they have also sought and highly valued new knowledge. Indeed, they were instrumental in creating centres of learning, including universities, not to mention the scientific revolution.

Anti-Western sentiment

European colonisers and traders are routinely presented as bad guys and a negative influence on more primitive societies. According to the authors, the Dutch and English used “brutal

tactics” and instituted “short and brutal campaigns” (p. 234). They add:

“The Spanish had a political edge insofar as they operated under the brutal military and political rules of Europe’s constantly warring states, and felt free from the moral constraints of the societies they were invading. Both Herman Cortes [*sic*] in Mexico and Passaro [*sic*] in Peru succeeded in part by capturing and massacring the leaders of their opponents, breaking all the diplomatic and moral rules of the societies they had entered. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, Europeans succeeded because they brought with them new diseases, to which the populations of the Americas lacked immunity” (p. 234).

Of course, no one back then knew that diseases were caused by microscopic organisms. Also, both the Aztecs and Incas were brutal regimes, and it wasn’t hard for the Conquistadors to gain allies among the peoples oppressed by the regimes.

Their description of the African slave trade makes it sound like it was all created and sustained by Europeans, but that is not even close to the truth. Blacks enslaved other blacks and sold them to Arabs, who in turn sold them into Europe. Europeans, then, brought them to the USA. In fact, slavery was a global phenomenon. Blacks enslaved other blacks; blacks enslaved whites; whites enslaved blacks; and whites enslaved other whites. What the authors fail to acknowledge is that it was Europeans (Catholics and British Christians) who were chiefly responsible for the abolition of slavery.⁶

European colonials are generally presented as rapers and pillagers of the environment. Indeed, there is a very strong pro-environmentalism, anti-development, anti-capitalist, and anti-human sentiment throughout the book. No attention is given to the positive

aspects of British colonisation in both Africa and South-East Asia.

Islam, on the other hand, is presented in a more positive (yet distorted) light, despite the fact that Islam has always been a parasite on other societies and has spread primarily through conquest.

The authors suggest that Europeans had an inflated opinion of themselves and saw themselves as unlocking the secrets of nature, while amassing great wealth and military power, all at the expense of other regions:

“[T]hey judged other peoples and cultures as inferior and took on the arrogance of believing themselves superior to all others. In many cases, this belief was added to their already existing belief in the superiority of their religion, Christianity” (p. 257).

Yet, the reality is that Europeans were entirely justified in thinking this way. Indeed, their greater power, greater wealth, and greater freedom, not to mention their technological

superiority, was proof enough of their cultural superiority. Of course, European elites also believed that their cultural superiority was due to them being more ‘highly evolved’ than those from other cultures—a point that the authors once again fail to acknowledge.

Their contempt for Europeans, however, does not stop them from painting hagiographic portraits of both Marx and Engels and their socialist program. But you won’t find any reference to Magna Carta, the Reformation, or the Westminster system of government despite their monumental impact on both European and world history.

Politics and economics

In regard to international relations and global politics, they note that the post-WWI League of Nations (and related institutions) were the first formal structures of world government but they were too weak to keep the peace. The same could be said for the post-WWII United Nations.

According to the authors, communists saw themselves as the leaders of the oppressed classes throughout the world, the workers and peasants, and were prepared to use coercive methods (i.e. violence and brutality) in their attempt to build a better society. They attempted to build a modern industrial economy without capitalism’s motivational forces, because they viewed capitalism as the source of exploitation and inequality. In order to do this effectively, the state had to exercise great unilateral power and had to be willing to rule brutally when faced with opposition.

In the authors’ estimation, “the Soviet Union offered a tempting alternative to the capitalist societies of the West” (p. 273). Russia had, through

violent struggle, escaped the grip of the capitalist world and built a powerful modern economy against the odds. The Soviet Union also gave economic, technical and sometimes military support to its allies, including Cuba, Nigeria, and Egypt. They claim that some of the results were spectacular: “In China, in North Korea, and in parts of Eastern Europe the methods of the Soviet Union were used to build the foundations of modern industrial economies” (p. 273). On this point, the authors are delusional! The only things the Soviet methods brought were equally distributed poverty, oppression, suffering and death! The Soviets and their allies were responsible for all the greatest of human slaughters in history—Communist dictatorships murdered hundreds of millions of their own people.⁷

The authors later claim that the Industrial Revolution raised the wealth of Europe and North America but led to a sharp decline in the relative wealth of East Asia. There is a subtle implication here that East Asia’s sharp decline is the fault of Europe and North America, presumably because they plundered and exploited East Asia! But nothing could be further from the truth. Firstly, Europe’s rise was not uniform. Not every European nation had the same economic success and rise in wealth. Secondly, those that did see economic gains were the beneficiaries of their own technological innovations that were encouraged and embraced.

Environmentalism and climate change

The authors go on to suggest that humans are unfairly dominating and exploiting the earth:

“[T]he big story of the twentieth century is how one species suddenly began to dominate the energy and resources of the biosphere as a whole.

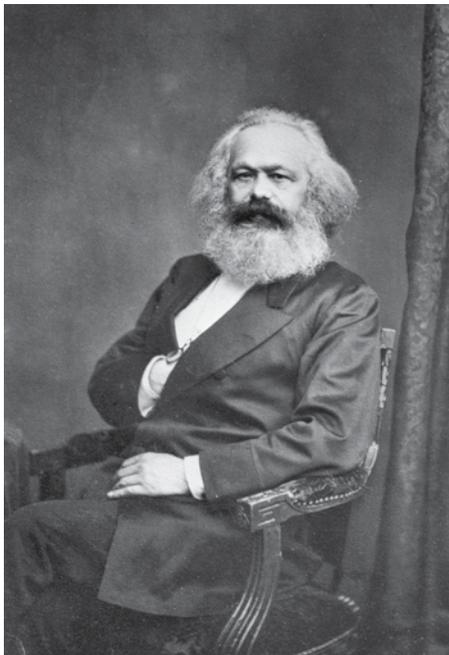


Figure 1. *Big History*, like many other modern education texts, reflects Karl Marx’s ideas about social evolution and his anti-capitalist, anti-western, and anti-Christian sentiments.

What was ‘growth’ for humans was experienced by many other species as a decline in available land, food, and habitat. Human activity also began to destabilize nonliving geological and meteorological systems, such as the movement of water and patterns of climate change or the ancient biochemical cycles of carbon and nitrogen. Can humans keep extracting more and more resources from the biosphere? Or is growth beginning to threaten the ecological foundations on which modern societies depend?” (p. 283).

This is typical of the modern anti-human, ‘equal consideration’ ecological ethics espoused by Peter Singer. Humans are supposedly a parasite consuming the world’s resources and destroying the planet in the process. In reality, there is still plenty of available land, modern technology has improved water quality and prevented damaging floods, and the planet is not burning up.

Nevertheless, the authors’ catastrophic view of climate change shines through, claiming that “[w]ithin a few decades many of the world’s great aquifers will dry up...” (p. 284) and “we are now beginning to transform the atmosphere in ways that are likely to have a profound impact on global climates and ocean levels in the next century” (pp. 284–285). Climate change alarmists such as Tim Flannery have been saying as much for years yet none of their dire predictions have come even remotely true.

In fact, there is a real deep green Gaia streak in this book. The authors assert:

“... we cannot regard the biosphere as a passive object: it is, rather, a complex, evolving super organism that will react to the actions of humans in ways that may not always please us. It will, to put it anthropomorphically, defend itself against us if that is necessary” (p. 285).

Regarding population growth, the authors claim that the human footprint

likely surpassed Earth’s carrying capacity some years ago. So what do they propose? A global reduction in standard of living? A rationing of food and medicine? Culling by means of forced abortion and euthanasia?

Unsurprisingly, the authors speak favourably of all the standard Green Left policies including doing something about climate change, slowing population growth, reducing CO2 emissions, taxing fossil fuels, establishing green belts and animal migration corridors, reducing consumption, and having fewer children.

There is also some sci-fi dreaming about humans using terraforming on planets such as Mars in order to set up habitable human colonies. They imagine that

“... isolated populations of humans will almost certainly evolve and change in different star systems. Eventually, our species will divide into numerous subspecies... That piece of speculation is a reminder that our species, like all others, evolves. Whether or not we start steering our evolution through genetic manipulation, we will change, and there will eventually come a point where it will no longer be clear... whether our descendants count as humans or not” (p. 302).

Conclusion

This book is ultimately a new secular and materialistic origin story intended to replace religious origin stories—especially the biblical creation account.

It seeks to present Darwinism and social evolution as verified and hard scientific fact supported by a conclusive array of incontrovertible evidence. But because this is meant to be a history book, none of the actual science is explained or justified. There are no detailed footnotes to academic works, although there are a few reference works listed in a further reading section at the end of

each chapter. The text simply tells the currently accepted materialistic and naturalistic story of the beginnings of the universe in narrative prose as if it was unquestionably true. The words ‘emerge’ and ‘emergent properties’ permeate the whole book. What does this actually mean? Where do things emerge from? What caused them to emerge? The authors never say.

Moreover, there is no mention of the implicit racism in Darwin’s theories and writings.

This book is not a true work of history. It is merely a propaganda tool for the indoctrination of students with a materialist and, indeed, Marxist, worldview. Students who want serious, well-researched and documented works of history, should consult the book of Genesis, Geoffrey Blainey’s *A Short History of the World*⁸, any work by Rodney Stark⁹ and Thomas Sowell’s *Conquests and Cultures, Wealth, Poverty and Politics, Migrations and Cultures*.

References

1. See Wells, J., *Icons of Evolution: Science or Myth?*, Regnery, Washington, DC, pp. 29–58, 2000.
2. See van Niekerk, E., Countering revisionism—part 1: Ernst Haeckel, fraud is proven, *J. Creation* 25(3):89–95, 2011; and Wells, ref. 1, pp. 81–110.
3. See Kitchen, K.A., *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2003.
4. See Sowell, T., *Wealth, Poverty and Politics: An international perspective*, Basic Books, New York, 2015.
5. Stark R., *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity*, ISI Books, Wilmington, DE, 2014.
6. See Thomas, H., *The Slave Trade: The story of the Atlantic slave trade 1440–1870*, Touchstone, New York, 1997.
7. Rummel, R.J., *Death by Government*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, 1994.
8. Apart from the first few paragraphs, which assume an evolutionary origin of human beings, this work is an outstanding summary of world history.
9. See especially *The Rise of Christianity, The Triumph of Christianity, The Victory of Reason, and How the West Won*.