

Big History: Latest Intellectual Fad or Toxic Neoliberalist Ideology?

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Abstract

Recently, a new movement under the banner of “Big History” (BH)—a perspective that studies 13.8 billion years of the universe’s history—has built itself a home at several liberal arts colleges—not to mention garnering a sizeable investment on behalf of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This “transdisciplinary” field styles itself as managing to finally heal the rift between the humanities and the sciences famously noted by C. P. Snow in his 1959 *The Two Cultures*. Viewed through a postmodern lens, BH does anything but, as it perpetuates a profoundly modernist (in Bruno Latour’s sense) conception of history that is at odds with the BH scholar-stakeholders’ focus and emphasis on ecological and environmental concerns spawned by the Anthropocene. One of BH’s strongest selling points is a “materialist” view of history—no longer is history just the march of “great ideas” or “abstract concepts”; history must talk about and incorporate the work of scientists and climatologists, all of whom can help tell the “total” story of the universe’s history. Unfortunately, the key textbook of this movement marketed to undergraduate students—*Big History: Between Nothing and Everything*—perpetuates a history of capitalism in its later chapters that has no recourse to this materialist perspective. Capitalism is covered in the most ideological of terms—it is not described, following numerous current historians, as the rapacious and unquenchable search for cheap nature, cheap labor, cheap money; instead, capitalism’s triumph is the march of a great idea. The argument becomes that this glaring lack of critique is self-serving; why critique a capitalist market system propping-up the techno-scientific apparatus that is so heavily prized far and above any of the disciplines within the humanities? Such agendas are squeezing liberal arts colleges to death—so why big historicize at all if the most hegemonic of forces gets a free pass?

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1. Introduction

A popular quote by Fredric Jameson reads, “someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.”¹ This statement has particular relevance to David Christian’s *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything*, a textbook marketed to liberal arts universities interested in placing human history, and students’ lives, within the broader context of the universe at large. This so-called “narrative” begins at the Big Bang, progressing through major points in history such as the formation of stars, emergence of life, evolution of man, establishment of cities, the industrial revolution, etc.

What sets this “new history” apart from other accounts of history, at least according to Christian and his peers, is that it draws heavily upon empirical scientific data to fill in the gaps that other, less substantiated versions of history fail to eliminate. Interestingly, however, what also evidently sets Big History apart from its non-scientific counterparts is the fact that Christian uses the historical context he writes about to make certain assertions about the future. For example, Christian draws the conclusion that “[t]he climate is changing faster than any predictions made a decade ago. Climate change is now unavoidable; the only question is how much change there will be over the next 100 years.”²

This seems like a benign enough claim—after all, currently 97% of scientists believe that climate change has been grossly exacerbated by human activities.³

Where Big History gets really intriguing, however, comes only a few pages later where Christian goes on to claim that, “to prepare for the next 100 years, people everywhere can encourage positive trends and design or redesign their lives around the most promising current practices—conserving energy however possible, having fewer children, using more bicycles, and growing more gardens. However, personal lifestyle changes are not likely to be sufficient; citizens will need to be more engaged in political action for larger-scale changes.”⁴ This is what brings us back to Jameson’s quote—here Christian is quite literally contemplating the end of the world as we know it; yet, when it comes to locating the blame for our current ecological crisis, Christian turns to political, as opposed to economic, structure.

2. Capitalist Realism

This political scapegoating, it turns out, is nothing new. According to Mark Fisher, this behavior is inherent in our capitalist society, where “scapegoating an impotent government (running around to clean up the messes made by its business friends) arises from bad faith, from a continuing hostility to the Nanny State that nevertheless goes alongside a refusal to accept the consequences of sidelining of government in global capitalism ...”⁵ Before going further, however, it is important to define what we mean here when we use the term “capitalism.” For example, we are not referring to the same “capitalism” that Noam Chomsky does when he claims that “the concept of capitalism and markets has disappeared as fully as the concept of democracy.”⁶ We are not talking about a true free-market system where the economy stands on its own with minimal assistance from Washington—instead we are talking about what Chomsky calls “really existing free markets,”⁷ where the market relies on corporatism, veiled bureaucracy, and government bailouts. Fisher refers to this form of capitalism, the one that is at work in our society currently, as “post-Fordist capitalist realism.” This is what we mean when we speak of capitalism from this point onward.

With this established, the question becomes why Christian, an advocate for ecological conservation, is so quick to call for political, as opposed to economic, change. After all, as Fisher says, “The significance of Green critiques is that they suggest that, far from being the only viable political-economic system, capitalism is in fact primed to destroy the entire human environment.”⁸ Fisher is hardly alone in this sentiment, and his words are echoed by many other green authors as well.⁹ Besides, one does not have to think very hard to come up with several examples of the capitalist exploitation of the environment. The BP oil spill, the Pacific garbage patch, and deforestation of our planet’s rainforests are just a few, well known examples.

In fact, it is likely that our market system will continue to harm the environment even if the human race ceases to exist. According to author Alan Weisman in his book *The World Without Us*, all of the plastic in the Pacific garbage patch and beyond will remain in our oceans for centuries, maybe longer. Light will degrade this plastic, causing it to break into smaller and smaller pieces until it is undetectable. This may seem like a better alternative to large plastic objects that are often consumed by marine life, but these small plastic pieces are actually more dangerous because they absorb carcinogenic chemicals that are even more toxic to wildlife.

The mainland will also be affected by our extinction, as Weisman suggests. Without humans operating nuclear reactors and oil refineries, catastrophic meltdowns will inevitably occur, causing immense explosions and leakage of toxic materials. These toxins will remain in the environment for millennia, first contaminating the groundwater and later all bodies of water. The nuclear waste we are storing underneath Yucca mountain will degrade long after the containers it is stored in, leaching into the environment as well. While this waste is currently being disposed of in a remote location in the hopes that, should anything go wrong, little damage to wildlife is done, nuclear waste can have a half life of upwards of thousands of years. The ecosystems surrounding Yucca mountain might very well change in such a period of time, exposing more wildlife to this waste leakage in the future.

This leakage would not occur if not for capitalism, for it is capitalism that requires such energy to run. As István Mészáros claims, capital:

cannot separate advance from *destruction*, nor ‘progress’ from *waste*—however catastrophic the results. The more it unlocks the powers of productivity, the more it must unleash the powers of destruction; and the more it extends the volume of production, the more it must bury everything under mountains of suffocating waste. The concept of *economy* is radically incompatible with the ‘economy’ of capital production. It adds insult to injury by first using up with rapacious wastefulness the *limited resources* of our planet and then further aggravates the outcome by *polluting and poisoning* the human environment with its mass-produced waste and effluent.¹⁰

With a global population of 7.5 billion, it seems inevitable that there will be some kind of waste to dispose of, regardless of the economic systems that are in place. What seems entirely avoidable, however, is the use of gross over-packaging for marketing purposes and pollution from fossil fuels for which alternatives have already been found.

All these factors considered, it seems extremely strange that Christian's *Big History* text neglects to consider the role of capitalism in the ecological crises he warns against. Where Christian does acknowledge this issue, however, is in his much larger text *Maps of Time*. Here he claims that

They [business and political leaders] will be supported in their resistance to change by the affluent populations of the richer countries, for whom ecological crisis remains a distant and uncertain threat rather than the catastrophe it already is in many poor countries. Besides, capitalism itself seems to depend on continued growth for its existence. Does this mean that capitalism must be overthrown? Sadly, the Communist revolutions of the twentieth century suggest that overthrowing capitalism may be an extremely destructive project, and one that is not in any case likely to create societies that are notably egalitarian or ecologically sensitive.¹¹

Here Christian seems to briefly acknowledge the problem that capitalism poses to the environment, yet he quickly defends capitalism, arguing that another system, perhaps a communist one, would be worse. And on one level, what Christian says seems to hold some truth—it is true that all communist systems up until this point have been fascist, totalitarian regimes used to brainwash common people into subservience. The problem with what Christian says, however, is that it is an example of a classic logical fallacy. Christian's whole argument is based on predicting the future based on generalizations about the past, but there is nothing to say that attempts at an alternative economic system could not be successful in the future given the chance. It is true, we have been conditioned to believe that it would be harder to conceive of the end of capitalism than to conceive of the end of the world, but that does not mean that capitalism itself is particularly successful or just. Christian's mistake is that he acts as if the opposite of "our" system is "their" system, and this is a false dichotomy. Soviet-style communism and Western capitalism have much in common—both systems are inherently anti-labor and anti-democratic for extremely similar reasons. The improvement of both of these systems starts with democratization, and this is something Christian fails to realize in his treatment of capitalism.

However, what is truly important here is to attempt to understand how Christian, who seems to mean well about the future of humanity, who seems to be compassionate about our current crisis and calls for reasonable reform at the level of the individual, can uphold such a hegemonic system. After all, the purpose of *Big History* is to place us in the larger context of our society and the cosmos, and it is extremely difficult to do this without considering what type of society we actually live in.

The answer to this question may lie in Fisher's work. Fisher makes the argument that narratives that seem to parody or criticize capitalism and its negative effects are in fact often more in support of capitalism than against it. The specific example he uses to illustrate this is the children's movie *Wall-E*. In this movie, the Earth is consumed by trash, and the human race, now morbidly obese and consumed with mind-numbing electronics, has moved onward to space to start life anew. As Fisher explains, this movie seems to attack everything about our "really existing free markets," demonstrating how our planet will look if we continue to exploit the planet's limited resources and ignore our role in the universe. However, this film actually has the potential to *reinforce* the idea of capitalism.

How is this possible? Well, narratives such as this, though they point out serious problems inherent in our society, are often highly marketable. Therefore, they sell well, and their consumption generates a certain amount of revenue. This revenue, in turn, feeds back into the capitalist system, fueling the efforts of the multinational corporations responsible for destroying our planet. There is an element of absolution at work with these narratives as well. By going to see movies such as *Wall-E*, we may unconsciously feel that we have done our conservationist duty. By engaging in a film that forces our wastefulness and pollution before our eyes, our unconscious washes our hands of that responsibility, and we are free to go back out into the world ready to consume anew.

Despite the fact that *Big History* may initially seem like it would be against this type of consumption, it is actually highly likely that *Big History* functions in much the same way as the film *Wall-E*. By reading *Big History* books and teaching *Big History* courses, what we really do is give ourselves an outlet for our eco-capitalist *anomie*. We feel that by engaging in such calls for ecological conservation we are doing our part to help the situation simply by being aware that there is a problem. Once we do this, however, instead of being compelled to actually do something to address these problems, our guilt is absolved just enough that we feel comfortable going back to our extremely wasteful, overly indulgent lives.

In fact, Christian's claims about ecological conservation become truly absurd the more we look at how Big History is circulated in the first place. After all, a large part of the reason that Big History has become so popular is the fact that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has sponsored an online version of Christian's Big History course. The story supposedly goes that, one day, while Gates was running on his treadmill, he was watching one of Christian's DVDs about this new field of history.¹² He was so impressed by the interdisciplinary nature of this subject that he felt all students should have access to such a course—and thus, the Big History Project, a free, online Big History course, was born.

It is acts such as this that have prompted anti-capitalist thinkers, namely Slavoj Žižek, to label Gates as a “liberal communist.” In Žižek's words, liberal communists constitute those

who no longer accept the opposition between Davos (global capitalism) and Porto Alegre (the new social movements alternative to global capitalism). Their claim is that we can have the global capitalist cake, i.e., thrive as profitable entrepreneurs, and eat it too, i.e., endorse the anti-capitalist causes of social responsibility and ecological concern.¹³

This evaluation of liberal communism is also upheld by Fisher, who takes the description one step further—he claims that not only does global capitalism and ecological concern coexist in the liberal communist's mind, but that profit is ultimately generated by this call for conservation.¹⁴ This occurs, at least according to Fisher, because public relations in our really existing free market economy is more indicative of a company's success than the quality of the work that is actually done.¹⁵

This is essentially what Big History amounts to—just another form of liberal communism. And seeing as liberal communism, despite seeming like a form of counter capitalism, is in fact the dominant form of capitalism in this day and age,¹⁶ Big History really just ends up being a narrative that seeks to uphold our current economic system. This, to me, is inherently hypocritical, as one cannot call for global conservation while also upholding the systems responsible for the destruction in the first place. Something has to give. Either Big History is about turning a profit, or it is about education and ecological conservation, and, seeing as it is heavily funded and sponsored by perhaps the very archetype of capitalism, Bill Gates, it is very hard to see how ecological concern can possibly win out. That's not to say that Gates' famous charity and generosity are not admirable, but such acts merely attempt to make up for the destructiveness of capitalism as opposed to stopping the inherent problems from occurring in the first place.¹⁷

This is precisely what is observed in Bertolt Brecht's learning play, *The Measures Taken*, where the suffering of laborers, while troublesome to a budding capitalist, is not so troublesome as to warrant serious reform. Žižek summarizes this play well, noting that

the young humanist comrade is shocked by the suffering workers employed to pull the boats up river, their bare feet getting hurt on sharp stones; so he takes some flat stones, runs alongside the workers, and places the stones in their path to prevent their feet getting hurt—to the applause of the observing rich merchants employing the workers, who comment approvingly: “Good! You see, this is true compassion! This is how one should help the suffering workers!”¹⁸

In this play, the capitalist's solution is to prevent the laborers' feet from being cut as opposed to ending their back-breaking work in the first place. In this way, what capitalism really amounts to is a treatment for a symptom rather than the actual disease. Big History is just one way to try to address such symptoms, all the while ignoring the affliction as a whole.

3. Conclusion

This undoubtedly raises the question of an alternative system. Can capitalism possibly be overcome? Can we ever move away from a society where consumption is valued over production? The prospects seem quite grim, as Fisher, Chomsky, and Žižek all theorize against the capitalist machine, all the while acknowledging that, as long as the Nanny State remains involved, socialism, and any other system for that matter, will remain unsuccessful. As long as the government is willing to bail out big corporations, these irresponsible entities will continue to be “too big to fail.”

Unfortunately, the inevitability of global capitalism paints a bleak picture for democracy. Imagine a world where the 2008 housing market crash occurs annually, where pharmaceutical companies are allowed to continue to raise the prices on life-saving drugs, where automation and outsourcing continue to take jobs from US citizens, forcing us more and more to become a society of consumption. These things, as we have seen through the years, will surely cause

national—and global—strife if allowed to get worse than they already are. Inevitably, the chaos that will ensue will only be able to be assuaged by swift, strict, governmental control, leading us right into the fascist systems we try so hard to avoid. According to Chomsky, democracy today means to “deceive people into doing what the rich people want. And markets [mean] making sure ... the public subsidize[s] the rich.”¹⁹ While today’s democracy is not perfect, democracy in a world of unspeakable deficits, global exploitation, and ecological catastrophe will likely fall altogether. Capitalism is a luxury that can be enjoyed only when there is a balance between consumption and production, public relations, and quality. It is an impossibility in a world cast into complete and utter turmoil.

The alternative, then, is that there is no alternative. The stigma on alternative economic systems is simply too great, the public relations upholding our current post-Fordist capitalist realism too convincing. The most we can do to address this incredibly bleak situation is to try to break these perceptions, to see that our really existing free market is not only killing the environment but killing ourselves as well. Simple awareness is surely little consolation, but until the Nanny State begins to cater to the interests of the general public instead of those of the corporate sector and we refuse to continue consuming more than we produce, it will remain nearly impossible to imagine the end of capitalism before we imagine the end of the world.

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5. Endnotes

1. Frederic Jameson, “Future City,” *New Left Review* 21 (May & June 2003): 73.
2. David Christian, et al. *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014), 297.
3. John Cook et al., “Quantifying the consensus on anthropogenic global warming in the scientific literature,” *Environmental Research Letters* 8, no. 2 (2013): 1, <http://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/8/2/024024/pdf>
4. Christian, et al., 300.
5. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (New York: Zero Books, 2009): 63.
6. See Chomsky’s lecture “Free Market Fantasies: Capitalism in the Real World” (1996). The type of capitalism that Chomsky writes about is such that, “For those who are interested in the real world, a look at the actual history suggests some adjustment — a modification of free market theory, to what we might call ‘really existing free market theory.’ That is, the one that’s actually applied, not talked about. And the principle of really existing free market theory is: free markets are fine for you, but not for me. That’s, again, near a universal. So you—whoever you may be—you have to learn responsibility, and be subjected to market discipline, it’s good for your character, it’s tough love, and so on, and so forth. But me, I need the nanny State, to protect me from market discipline, so that I’ll be able to rant and rave about the marvels of the free market, while I’m getting properly subsidized and defended by everyone else, through the nanny State. And also, this has to be risk-free. So I’m perfectly willing to make profits, but I don’t want to take risks. If anything goes wrong, you bail me out.”
7. Ibid.
8. Fisher, 18.
9. See, for example, Naomi Klein’s book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* and Gary Leech’s *Capitalism: A Structural Genocide*, to name just a couple.
10. István Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010): 91.
11. David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (U of California P, 2011): 477-78.
12. Andrew Ross Sorkin, “So Bill Gates Has This Idea for a History Class ...,” *The New York Times*, September 05, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/magazine/so-bill-gates-has-this-idea-for-a-history-class.html?_r=0.&f=m.k
13. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York, NY: Picador, 2008): 16.

14. As Fisher suggests, “climate change and the threat of resource-depletion are not being repressed so much as incorporated into advertising and marketing” (18). Instead of attempting to cover up these ecological issues, the liberal communist turns them into a way to further their pursuits. The consumer incorrectly interprets this acknowledgement of the problem as being synonymous with actually solving the problem and continues buying into the system, making the problem even worse.

15. For more elaboration on this point, see Fisher’s chapter “All that is solid melts into PR: market Stalinism and bureaucratic anti-production.”

16. Fisher, 28.

17. Žižek may argue, however, that even Gates’ philanthropic aims are problematic at best, as “the cruel businessman destroys or buys out competitors, aims at virtual monopoly, employs all the tricks of the trade to achieve his goals. Meanwhile, the greatest philanthropist in the history of mankind quaintly asks: ‘What does it serve to have computers, if people do not have enough to eat and are dying of dysentery?’ In liberal communist ethics, the ruthless pursuit of profit is counteracted by charity. Charity is the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation” (22).

18. Slavoj Žižek, *Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT P, 2009): 260.

19. Chomsky, “Free Market Fantasies: Capitalism in the Real World” (1996).

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