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## The Aesthetics of Scale

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Today, leading historians are calling on colleagues to look up from their specialized agendas to write and think on a much grander scale. Such is the bracing message of Jo Guldi and David Armitage's *The History Manifesto* (2014), a work that has generated no small amount of controversy and which insists that historians have a world to win.<sup>1</sup> They will win it, evidently, by writing histories that will draw on the historian's special skills and knowledge to inform public policy. But that knowledge set needs to be increased, and directed at broad and important questions that span centuries. Most urgently, it should not be primarily employed in pursuit of the antiquarian micro-histories that have come to define the discipline in the last half century. In a less polemical vein, Daniel Lord Smail has similarly lamented the narrow nature of historical research and has argued that the era of written records can no longer be the historian's primary area of expertise, which must now extend into the terrain typically occupied by the historical sciences.<sup>2</sup> David Christian pushes this logic further still in his grand anthropocentric narrative, *Maps of Time* (2004), arguing that historians need to stop being so modest and embrace their true calling by providing the kind of grand secular origin story that modern society so desperately needs.<sup>3</sup> And both Christian's "Big History" and Smail's "deep history" were founded under the premise that we need to understand that the

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1 Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

2 D. L. Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008).

3 D. Christian: *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

present is shaped not only by intentional human agency but also by scientific processes that have been at work for millennia, if not time immemorial. While deep history focuses primarily on the way in which human history has been shaped by biological and neurological necessity, Big History extends even further back in time in its claim that understanding human history requires putting it in the context of the history of the cosmos as a whole.

Innovation is a resounding chord of this work. Yet this call to embrace the large scale also presents itself as a “return” to older ways of writing and thinking about the past. Indeed, Guldi and Armitage seek renewed currency for one of the central notions employed by the *Annales* School, namely Fernand Braudel’s *longue durée*, which for them refers to the interactions of humans and their physical, political, and social environments over the space of centuries rather than decades.<sup>4</sup> Christian’s Big History also represents a return, a “return to universal history,” which was a widespread practice of historical writing that was, according to Christian, eventually “expelled” from the discipline in the nineteenth century in favor of an empirical and nationalist historiography epitomized in the work of Leopold von Ranke.<sup>5</sup> Smail tells a similar story concerning the partitioning of the historical sciences in the nineteenth century, which resulted in historians colonizing the space of a paltry few thousand years that also happened to parallel the chronological space of the Judeo-Christian historical tradition, while anthropologists, archaeologists, biologists, and geologists embraced a much larger expanse of both time and space. Smail’s deep history in many ways seeks to return to the moment before there was such a thing as “prehistory,” when the division between natural and human history was much less well defined beyond the sphere of a religious worldview.<sup>6</sup>

According to many, a return to these previously rejected modes of historical thought has become not simply urgent but possible, now that we have the technological resources to pursue them in a less speculative manner. Guldi and Armitage are enthusiasts for the rise of “big data” and the ability to analyze accurately – or at least in a more fine-grained way – the social, political, and economic trends of human history such devices make possible.<sup>7</sup> Moreover,

4 Guldi and Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, 14–37. See also D. Armitage, “Horizons of History: Space, Time, and the Future of the Past,” *History Australia* 12 (2015), 207–225.

5 D. Christian, “The Return of Universal History,” *History and Theory* 49 (2010), 6–27, on 12.

6 Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*, 12ff. See also A. Shryock and D. L. Smail, “Introduction,” in Shryock and Smail (eds.), *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 5–8.

7 Guldi and Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, 88–116.

Christian often invokes the chronometric revolutions of the twentieth century, referring to the development of carbon and cosmic dating techniques that have allowed geologists, archaeologists, and astronomers to establish dates for events of the deep past “with the sort of precision previously confined to the study of human civilizations.”<sup>8</sup> Smail also points to the advances in the evolutionary and neuro- sciences that allow us to gain insight into those factors that have shaped our species as a whole.<sup>9</sup> While critics have pointed out that scientists are already doing much of this work, and that this “biological turn” in historical writing represents yet another chapter in what has been a long (and arguably misguided) fantasy to make history a science,<sup>10</sup> proponents argue that historians have a particular set of skills to bring to important problems that cannot be left to the scientists or politicians. And it is often insisted that the most pressing of these problems, namely human-caused climate change, can only be understood by thinking about human history within the framework of the *longue durée*, which combines heretofore discrepant timescales – be they evolutionary, geological, or even cosmic – as a matter of principle. There is a very clear moral impetus that is motivating this historiographical return to the large scale. There is likewise the undeniable fact of a rapidly expanding source base and a proliferation of modes of inquiry that challenge historical methods, conventionally understood. What has not yet been adequately addressed is how these two imperatives – the moral and the epistemic – link up with another, or ought to link up with one another, in historical thinking, research, and writing. An important philosophical tradition has long valorized the “aesthetic” as the sphere of experience in which the moral and the epistemic either intersect or find their common ground.

Hence the essays in this special issue of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, which seek to explore the aesthetics of scale in myriad ways. Some consider the contemporary debate in historiography; others focus on past thinkers for whom the question of scale was central to an account of human action and its relation to natural history and political conflict. All are motivated by the idea that today’s debates will only be advanced by considering

8 Christian, “The Return of Universal History,” 18. See also D. Christian, “The Evolutionary Epic and the Chronometric Revolution,” in C. Genet et al. (eds.), *The Evolutionary Epic: Science’s Story and Humanity’s Response* (Santa Margarita, CA: Collins Foundation Press, 2009), 91–99.

9 Smail, *Deep History*, 112–156.

10 See, for instance, S. Moyn, “Bonfire of the Humanities,” *The Nation* 300, no. 6 (2014), 27–32; and E. Kleinberg, “Just the Facts: The Fantasy of a Historical Science,” American Historical Association Conference, 2 January 2015.

their terms in a historical light and reflecting on them from a variety of theoretical points of view.

The issue begins with an article from Knox Peden, who considers what Hayden White's work might tell us about the effort to blur the distinction between naturalist and humanist accounts of the past. Focusing on the status of the archive in these developments, what he shows is that shifting the historian's evidentiary source base from a textual to a more broadly naturalized one does nothing to mitigate White's challenge to prevailing assumptions about the relationship between historical evidence and meaning. Historians still bring their aesthetic and moral preferences to bear on the evidence, whether that evidence is derived from the hard sciences or from the repositories of some dusty government archive. Ramping up the scale of historical analysis, in other words, does not allow the historian to avoid confronting the central quandary of generating knowledge claims out of the historical record, namely, its inherently ironic character. Peden does not rule out the necessity of thinking historically on a large scale but he argues that doing so requires the historian to reflect on the essential meaninglessness of the evidence in itself – whether “natural” or not – independent of its place in a historian's particular and contestable interpretation.

Whereas Peden's article focuses on the question of the archive, Ian Hesketh's article largely concerns the question of narrative, namely the kind of story that is typically produced when the attempt is made to write human history into the history of all life. Hesketh examines various recurrences of the “evolutionary epic” in several historical contexts, from its origins in early nineteenth-century Germany and Victorian Britain to the degeneration narratives of the *fin de siècle* and on to the sociobiology of Edward Wilson and the Big History of David Christian. What Hesketh finds in examining the genre's conceptual commonalities is the striking persistence of non-Darwinian forms of evolution that are utilized to situate the emergence of humanity in these epic narratives of life. The narrative that is ultimately produced is one that teaches readers that they are the collective authors of life's next chapter, a message that can only be supported by a selective appropriation of evolutionary science.

A central theme in the evolutionary epic is the notion that the present is a moment of immense transition that is conditioned by both the hopes and the fears of what will ultimately transpire in the future. The Anthropocene, a contested concept that is meant to designate the present geological era during which time humans began shaping the fate of the biosphere, has become the key referent for our current “threshold moment,” to use the terminology of Big History. Thomas Ford's article takes the concept seriously, but he argues

that we have not adequately understood how it transforms the relationship between the natural and the historical given that the Anthropocene has been articulated as both a geological epoch and as a historical phenomenon. Ford argues that the aesthetic tradition in Western philosophy, from Kant to Adorno, provides a way for us to think about how we can grasp human and nonhuman temporalities in the same frame by considering the age of the Anthropocene as a global artwork.

Dalia Nassar's article also concerns how we think about the relationship between human history and natural history. She tackles this problem by considering the foundational debate between Kant and Herder about the use of analogy. The analogy between humans and nature was central to Herder's *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, which set out to show that the providential designs of human history were inscribed into the history of all life going back to its origins in the nebular fire mist of the ancient cosmic past. While Kant's extensive critique of the *Ideas* rests primarily on Herder's supposedly mistaken analogy between human and nonhuman beings, what Nassar shows is that Kant himself relied extensively on the same sort of analogy in his later work, which indicates a fundamental tension between the mechanistic and idealistic tendencies in his philosophy. She ultimately argues that that tension helps explain why idealist and Romantic philosophies of nature became so dominant in the nineteenth century, an argument that very much informs the origins of the evolutionary epic discussed by Hesketh above.

If the Kantian inheritance has given reflection on history an aesthetic cast that privileges wholeness and narrative coherence, Alison Ross considers one of the twentieth century's most provocative challenges to a history considered in such terms – be they naturalist, Romantic, or both. In an extensive consideration of the relation between “word” and “image” in Walter Benjamin's thought, culminating in *The Arcades Project*, Ross forces us to confront a thinker who undermines many of historiography's cherished assumptions about the nature of historical citation and referential access to past events. Benjamin's reflection on the problem of political motivation and its relation to the inheritance and reality of past political failure reached agonizing levels in his fissiparous intellectual efforts. Ross explores Benjamin's endeavour and shows how any attempt to generate meaning out of past material in a direct or unmediated way will encounter the limits of its own moral perspective. The relation to the aesthetic is a thoroughly political question in light of Benjamin's work.

Pursuing political themes further, Leigh Penman's article on the “cosmopolitan” concept shows that its current usage as a figure for world community or common humanity differs from the way the concept was employed in the

early modern period. By focusing on a series of case studies of cosmopolitan thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Penman shows that while the concept was mobilized in a variety of different ways it was informed by Pauline notions of Heavenly citizenship and an eschatological teleology that promised the imminent triumph of Christianity. A “cosmopolite” referred, therefore, to someone who was a member of this saved community in the mundane world, not to a universal, worldly citizen. Penman’s article reveals the “hidden” Christian and exclusionary meanings that were central to the early modern concept of the cosmopolitan, thereby indicating an exclusivity that may be central to the modern notion as well. It is also a suggestive illustration of the kind of large-scale intellectual history that a robust historical method such as *Begriffsgeschichte* can help to produce.

Conceptual clarity is Allan Megill’s goal as well, in an article that thinks more broadly about different kinds of history at varying scales. He introduces an important distinction between what he calls “large scale history,” which would describe something like what is found in Penman’s essay, or narrower forms of world history, and “largest scale history,” which would more accurately describe the kind of grand narratives being proposed by Big History and deep history that both skew the boundaries between the natural and the human while extending their timeframes to include prehistory and the history of pre-human events. He argues, too, that even Guldi and Armitage’s appropriation of the *longue durée* is often meant to refer to a form of history on such a scale, even though Braudel’s own original employment of the method was limited to the space of about seventy years. In setting up this distinction, Megill shows that such “largest scale history” does indeed represent a return to universal history as David Christian has argued. But rather than transcending the limits of the older universal history, Megill argues that largest scale history relies just as much on incoherent theoretical conceptions of the past as did the Christian-based universal histories of the early modern period. Much like the concept of the “cosmopolitan,” the “universal” is actually quite exclusionary in its early modern usage, and even though the “largest scale histories” of the present claim to be so broad as to be about everyone, they end up privileging a narrative of the past that is “always already” known by its practitioners.

Megill concludes his assessment by suggesting that what is necessary is not “largest scale” histories that by definition remain closed to new discoveries and new knowledge but “large scale” histories that remain relatively modest in their horizons, such as comparative history, network and exchange history, thematic history, and history of modernization. These approaches may or may not make historians the vanguard, in Guldi and Armitage’s sense. What they do

suggest is that there are now, as ever, competing approaches to studying history on a large scale, some of which are more rigorous than others. Reflecting on what makes a method rigorous and what compromises it seems like a moral imperative most historians would agree to. What the payoff of such rigor could ultimately be is, of course, not for historians to decide.

