

WORLD HISTORY SYMPOSIUM AT WPI SEPTEMBER 26 - DETAILS AND REGISTRATION FORM INSIDE

Big History - A Quick Look

which cover the history of the universe, including human

by David Burzillo, The Rivers School

In his article "The Case for 'Big History,'" David Christian calls on historians to rethink their tendency to focus on limited slices of time in their writing and teaching and in the questions they pose. He contends that because historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came to view the historian's work as consisting chiefly in detailed research, they tended to neglect "the larger questions of meaning, significance, and wholeness that can alone give some point to the details."¹ Christian does not call on historians to embrace general questions at the expense of detail; rather, he concludes that historians need to provide a more balanced approach, as the appropriate degree of detail is determined by the scope of the question under consideration. Providing a more balanced approach in world history, according to Christian, means viewing human history within the wider contexts of the histories of the universe, galaxy, solar system, and earth, among others. "This is what I mean by 'big history'." Christian argues that only by showing a willingness to consider multiple time scales, and time scales greater than those typically considered in the study of human history, will historians ever be able to see the true significance of the details of human history. He concludes with an overview of his own "big history" course at Macquarie University in Sydney, which was two years old at the time he wrote the article.²

Fred Spier and Johan Goudsblom created a course on big history at the University of Amsterdam, modeled on David Christian's course.³ Spier's recent book, *The Structure of Big History*, is a work which fleshes out some of the assumptions underlying the focus articulated by Christian.⁴ Spier's intention is to "advance one single, all-encompassing, theoretical framework for big history." In undertaking the book, Spier's primary motivation was the belief that "If we wish to reach a comprehensive understanding of our big past, we must devise one single synthetic scheme that allows us to combine all existing theoretical and factual knowledge."

This motivation of Spier underscores the first important characteristic of the big history courses of Christian and Spier: their scope, both temporally and topically. Both Christian and Spier teach introductory history courses

history, in one semester. Their courses cover 15 billion years of history in the same time that many college world history courses cover the origins of human life to 1500 AD. In these big history courses humans do not make an appearance until at least five weeks, or a third of the way, into the semester. This temporal breadth is matched by the course's topical breadth, which, as mentioned earlier, calls for an integration of many histories from that of the universe to that of the earth.

Besides these differences in temporal and topical coverage, the human topics receiving the greatest emphasis also differ from those in a typical world history course. The course of human evolution, the issues related to the agricultural revolution and the shift from gathering and hunting, and the industrial revolution and its impact and spread receive generous coverage.⁵ Early state formation, the rise of empires, and the histories of civilizations are allotted much less time than in traditional world history courses.

In one example of how larger scale events have impacted human history, Spier discusses the precession of the earth's axis, an event measured in 100,000's of years. Scientists have related this to climate change, which in turn may have had an important impact on biological evolution, including the evolution of humans. Christian illustrates the varied results that the utilization of differing time scales can generate, using the issue of growth in human history as an example. Historians who have studied human growth typically view it on a small scale - since the beginning of civilization or since the neolithic revolution - and have generally concluded that growth is a characteristic trait of human history. But when viewed on a larger scale, Christian concludes that "human history consists of about 250,000 years of relative stasis followed by a mere 10,000 years of growth, most of which has been concentrated into the last few hundred years."

The types of questions and the variety of topics covered in a big history course pose potential problems for the teacher. A course which aspires to a "comprehensive understanding of our big past" necessarily involves ideas from many disciplines, and one person cannot be expected to have the requisite knowledge in each of those areas. An interdisciplinary approach lends itself more readily to the university, with its more flexible structure and academic schedule, than to the high school. Spier and Christian have learned a great deal about topics outside their areas of expertise, and bring different strengths and interests to the

table - Spier identifies himself as a biochemist, anthropologist, and historical sociologist, and Christian is an historian - but they both take advantage of the expertise of their colleagues in the presentation of their classes. At the University of Amsterdam, eighteen different guest lecturers contribute to Spier and Goudsblom's course, seven of whom do not teach at the university. At Macquarie, seven different guest lecturers make contributions, and all are from Macquarie.

The kind of collaborative course that Christian and Spier teach is very appealing for the collegiality it inspires. Although this type of interdisciplinary course would be fascinating at the high school level, it would be much more difficult to involve colleagues on a similar scale. Since the schedule at most high schools calls on all teachers to teach five periods a day, there would not be much time left for the teachers of physics and biology at a school to drop in on history classes and talk about the origins of the universe or human evolution. Radical schedule changes or course reductions for faculty would be necessary. Without these changes teaching big history at the high school level would require a single teacher to take responsibility for most aspects of the course. The support of colleagues would be important in clarifying one's own understanding of the material, but colleagues could not be relied on to present the material to students because of the constraints of the daily schedule and teaching loads.

The academic freedom that university level world history teachers enjoy is also an important factor in the course; high school history teachers are often not involved in the creation of curricula - often this is the job of a social studies coordinator - and this would clearly would make creating such a course difficult at the high school level. State frameworks will also create difficulties for those seeking to innovate. The new History and Social Science Curriculum Framework recently adopted in Massachusetts will make it hard for teachers to offer such a world history course at the high school level for the general population. Although the new curriculum framework does not mandate a particular course of study for each grade level, it does "recommend" a particular course of study.

Additionally, students will now be required to take an exam at the end of their sophomore year, testing their knowledge of "world geography, history, and related topics" from 500 AD to the present. Teachers will be under pressure from their administrators, school boards, and parents to prepare students well and earn high marks. Schools are not likely to devote large amounts of class time to history before 500 AD if that will ultimately result in less preparation time for students who will sit for an exam at the end of their sophomore year. Thus, a course such as big history, focusing primarily on events that occurred before 500 AD, would not be a practical choice for most schools. As a result, big history may be the kind of course which schools could offer to juniors or seniors on an elective basis, after they have completed their required courses and taken their assessment tests.

Certain topics critical to big history will also pose problems for some teachers. Evolution is an important topic in the big history courses of Christian and Spier,

whether it is the evolution of the universe, the galaxy, the earth, or humans. In some schools teachers might find it difficult, if not impossible, to treat the issue of human evolution. Leaving human evolution out of a big history course would create a significant gap in the course and radically alter its nature.

Finally, many school districts would probably be unwilling to adopt such a vision of history, given the many changes that have already been adopted in recent years. Many school districts have only recently replaced Western civilization courses with world history courses. Other schools have sought to reorient world history courses, which formerly consisted of a comparative history of civilizations, adopting a more integrated, global approach. At least thirty-seven states have adopted new curriculum frameworks for history, social studies, or the social sciences, and many schools and districts are still analyzing these and responding to them. How these reforms will affect the scope and coverage of world history courses remains to be seen.

So what, in the end, is the value of this conception of history for high school world history teachers? In the past few paragraphs the focus has been on the practical problems with implementing such a curriculum on the high school level, and there clearly are a number of these. But the study of big history has much to offer high school world history teachers. First, reading about the work of two pioneers in big history is inspiring. Christian and Spier have clearly gone out on a limb. When many world historians are getting comfortable with a global approach to human history, these authors are proposing a universal approach. Second, and more importantly, the idea of big history is provocative. Whether or not you agree with the approach or care to adopt it, the questions posed and the conclusions reached will force teachers to reevaluate how they present their survey of world history, and how they teach individual topics such as human origins and the industrial revolution. Christian and Spier have provided much food for thought.

¹Journal of World History 2 (1991), p. 238. Christian's article was recently reprinted in *Bring History Alive! A Sourcebook for Teaching World History*, eds. Ross Dunn and David Vigilante (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996).

²A study guide for the 1997-98 version of the course can be seen at: <http://iliad.lib.mq.edu.au:80/HPP/hist112.html>

³A syllabus for their course can be found on the Rocky Mountain World History Association web page at <http://www.woodrow.org/teachers/world-history/>

⁴*The Structure of Big History From Big Bang until Today* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996).

⁵In addition to the transformations brought about by agriculture and industrialization, Spier cites the domestication of fire as a third great transformation. His colleague Johan Goudsblom has written a number of books and articles on this transformation.

New England Regional World History
Association
World History Symposium
Worcester Polytechnic Institute
September 26, 1998

8:00 - 9:00 am, Salisbury Labs Lounge
Symposium Registration, Coffee and Pastry

9:00 - 10:30 am, Salisbury Labs Room 104
"State Standards, State Assessments, and their Impact on
the High School World History Curriculum"

Chair: David Burzillo, The Rivers School, Weston, MA
Panelists:

Stephen Armstrong, Manchester High School,
Manchester, CT
Michael Dwyer, Otter Valley High School, Brandon, VT
Deborah Quitt, Brookline High School, Brookline, MA

10:30 - 11:00 am, Salisbury Labs Lounge
Coffee break

11:00 am - 12:30 pm, Kinnicutt Hall
"A Discussion of the Role of Technology in World History"
Chair: Michelle Forman, Middlebury Union High School
Panelists:

Daniel R. Headrick, Roosevelt University
Peter Perdue, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

12:30 - 1:15 pm, Riley Commons
Luncheon

1:15 - 2:00 pm, Riley Commons
Keynote Address: Pamela Crossley, Dartmouth College,
"China' and Global Narrative"

2:30 - 4:00 pm
"Strategies and Problems in Teaching World History
Courses - A Workshop Session"

Moderator: Patrick Manning, Northeastern University

All symposium participants are invited to contribute
to this collective discussion by sending the syllabus of
a world history course you teach to conference chair
Bland Addison, along with your registration materials,
before September 14.

Please limit the syllabus to three pages and
accompany it with a cover sheet explaining the
objectives, strategies, and problems of the course.
Copies of syllabi and course descriptions will be made
available to all participants. The session will provide
an opportunity to raise questions about your course
and suggest solutions to pedagogical problems of
colleagues. If you have questions, please contact
Bland Addison (508-831-5190 or addison@wpi.edu).

SYMPOSIUM REGISTRATION FORM

Name _____

Affiliation _____

Mailing
Address _____

Phone _____

Email _____

[] Registration \$15 (lunch included) by mail before
September 14 (Registration \$20 at Conference)

[] Request for vegetarian lunch

[] Syllabus enclosed for workshop discussion of world
history courses.

Make checks payable to NER-WHA and return registration
(and syllabus) to:

Bland Addison, Humanities and Arts Department
Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Worcester, MA 01609-2280

This Symposium offers eight Professional Development
Points or equivalent for middle and high school teachers.
Registration for PDPs will take place on September 26.

1998 New England Regional World History Association
Symposium Committee

Bland Addison, Chair, Worcester Polytechnic Institute
David Burzillo, The Rivers School
Patrick Manning, Northeastern University

Directions to WPI

From the East. Take Mass. Turnpike (I-90) to Exit 11A (I-495). Proceed north to I-290, then west into Worcester. Take Exit 18, turn right at end of ramp, then an immediate right before next traffic light. At next light, proceed straight through, bearing to the right on Salisbury St. At the WPI sign, turn left onto Boynton St., then right onto Institute Rd., then right onto West St. Visitor parking is on the left after footbridge.

From the North. Take I-495 south to I-290. Follow directions as from east.

From the South and West. Take Mass. Turnpike (I-90) to Exit 10 (Auburn). Proceed east on I-290 into Worcester. Take Exit 17, turn left at end of ramp, follow Rte. 9 west through Lincoln Sq., straight onto Highland St., then right at light onto West St. and through first intersection. Visitor parking is on the left after footbridge.

Directions from Visitor Parking to Salisbury Labs. Turn left at parking lot entrance and walk fifty yards along brick path to fountain. Turn right at fountain. Salisbury Labs is on the left.

Note to Members:

If you know of anyone who would be interested in joining NER-WHA (membership remains free), please let us know and we can send them a newsletter. Also, if you have any questions, comments, or ideas for future articles for the newsletter, please feel free to get in touch. You can reach us at (617) 373-4060.

With the development of NER-WHA, we have decided to build a list of e-mail addresses of our members so that we can communicate with each other more efficiently. It will also allow us to hold on-line conferences of NER-WHA (see page 2). If you have an e-mail address already, please send it to Beimei Long at worldhistory@neu.edu.

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