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Action vs. Abstraction

Contribution to GTI Forum [Big History and Great Transition](#)

Richard Falk

My Skeptical Premise

I find myself fascinated by the explorations and exposition of Big History, helpful for a deeper, more vibrant metanarrative of self-understanding. And yet I also find it fundamentally irrelevant, and even delusional, when it comes to addressing meaningfully what is agreed to be a historical condition of unprecedented global crisis threatening near-term civilizational and ecological viability, imperiling even the survival of living species, including the human. Putting my skepticism in its simplest form, “we do not have time” to make Big History work in favor of a livable future, and it serves as an indulgent distraction as so presented. That is not to say that Big History may not have immediate pedagogic benefits by enriching education, allowing students and readers of all ages to grasp better how the profound predicaments of the present came about and what might be done to reach a more elevated stage of human evolution. The mistake of Big History advocates is to suppose that transformational thinking by a few people, even if situated on a geo-civilizational terrain, will have a sufficient impact to exert an emergent influence on a policy level within time horizons relevant to meeting the fundamental concerns associated with climate change, weaponry of mass destruction, corporate plunder, destructive forms of inequality, political extremism, mass alienation, conspiratorial myth-making, and transnational crime.

David Christian [attaches](#) great historical weight to the reaction of the astronauts who conveyed back home the images of Planet Earth as seen from the moon, regarding it as a Big History event in real time that imparted lasting meaning to how we act as humans on a shared planet and inspired a sense of oneness that will facilitate a transition from conflict to cooperation as the dominant pattern of collective behavior. In Christian’s words, “Whatever form it takes,

a more expansive and interdisciplinary perspective on today's world can galvanize the Great Transition by reorienting the thinking, attitudes, and motivations of billions of people." Perhaps it is doing so. It has been more than fifty years since Neil Armstrong sent his famous message from the moon: "One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." Putting to one side the discrediting reliance on patriarchal language, the dysfunctional behavior patterns of earthlings has gotten worse since that hopeful view was articulated. Due to the material structures of wealth and power, and state-centric world order, annual military expenditures (including of heavy investments in the militarization of space) exceed by multiples the devotion of resources to achieve a cooperative approach to global-scale problem-solving. Leadership in political and economic domains continues to be assessed by short-term performance seen as beneficial to distinct nations, while most corporate behavior continues to exhibit scant concern for the worsening threats directed at the future of humanity.

Transforming the War Mentality

Big History, by its focus on underlying patterns and deep structures of evolution, is turning away from the challenges of immediacy and overlooking the resilience of geopolitical ambitions that manifest themselves through conflictual behavior that continues to dominate the political imaginaries of those running the world, as well as supportive elites who benefit from existing circumstances and bureaucrats who manage the structures of governance at every level of social interaction. Big History esoterically marginalizes or renders as harmless geological, cosmic, or evolutionary abstraction the dismaying reality that the most impressive cooperative behaviors on the planet are taken against rivals or enemies, often framed as an alliance, and preoccupied with the preparation for and conduct of warfare. It is only after the carnage produced by the world wars of the past century that cooperation for peace by way of international law and institutionalized multilateralism (UN) gained prominence on the policy agenda of world leaders.

It may seem irreverent to conclude that science fiction writers are more relevant explorers of human nature and plausible alternative ways of living together as a species, than are the leading lights of Big History. Sci-fi imaginatively explores the idea that the most effective way to gain planetary unity and the ultra-cooperative problem-solving capabilities that are needed, would be to invent a belligerent planetary neighbor in the galaxy allegedly gearing up for an aggressive

war against Planet Earth. Putting in a good word for “conspiracy theorists,” even if such a scenario of a galactic neighbor intent on planetary aggression was entirely made up, if widely disseminated and believed by “the right people,” it could create a political atmosphere conducive to the emergence of a widespread willingness to cooperate against a common enemy perceived as a dire threat to the whole world. Such a fictitious account of reality draws on the competence and experience of the leading intelligence agencies in the world and the main media platforms to spread such a *great white lie*.

The Quest for Hope in a Dark Time

In the background of this speculation is the implicit recognition that the war template is so deeply embodied in the political and cultural psyche of humanity as itself to provide ironically the only ready-made exit from catastrophic future being generated by the unsustainable and abusive ways that humans were living on the earth. Unlike postwar escalations of cooperative behavior, looming ecological disasters may become irreversible tragedies long prior to their systemic damage.

In other words, even when we look at emergent signs of transformed modes of behavior that is indispensable if humanity is to act on behalf of Great Transition visions, the future looks bleak, but I would argue not as bleak as the future conceived from the perspective of Big History. These more entrenched, emergent liberating paths of behavior are more resonant with human experience, and can plausibly be converted into political projects with some traction if activist segments of civil society can be enlisted in this struggle for the material and spiritual future of humanity. Such action would still involve an epistemological humility about the future, allowing the realities of radical uncertainty to create space for what I have called “a politics of impossibility,” which rests on struggling for a cooperative and just future by confronting militarism and predatory economic behavior. Such a posture admits both that the prospect of achieving emancipatory goals cannot be discerned from the standpoint of the present, tempered by the awareness that the future is unknowable and hence uncertain, and yet there are instances throughout history where “impossible” goals were achieved. Recent examples include the struggle against South African apartheid that seemed hopeless until it wasn’t or the implosion of the Soviet Union that ended the Cold War. Both examples of essentially nonviolent

struggles that created unexpected opportunities for a brighter future.

My purpose in this brief essay is in no way to question the illuminations of Big History as exemplified by the stimulating contributions to this themed discussion. What I doubt is the usefulness of such inquiries for what I understand to be the mission of the GTI, which is to be taken seriously at the level of *policy* as well as *ideas*. To do this effectively, constructive thought and scholarly endeavor have to engage directly with the urgencies currently in evidence, and do so in the spirit of the Anthropocene, which provides a grand occasion for human responsibility and opportunity.

About the Author



Richard Falk is Albert G. Milbank Professor Emeritus of International Law at Princeton University, Fellow of the Orfalea Center of Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Associate Fellow at Tellus Institute. He directs the project on Global Climate Change, Human Security, and Democracy at UCSB and formerly served as director of the North American group of the World Order Models Project and the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Occupied Palestine. He is the author of such books as *Power Shift: On the New Global Order*; *(Re)Imagining Humane Global Governance*; *Religion and Humane Global Governance*; and *Explorations at the Edge of Time*. He holds an SJD from Harvard University.

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