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The Task of History

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

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After reading David Christian's [essay](#) for the Great Transition Initiative (GTI) and getting reintroduced to the Big History (BH) project at this historic moment in the struggle for planetary well-being, I realize that even if earthlings and fellow species were made extinct due to more severe climate change, pandemics, and nuclear wars, the Earth and the whole system of the universe would continue to exist. A couple of BH assumptions are worthy of reflection for the GTI: firstly, that the evolution of the cosmos from the Big Bang to the present is characterized by increasing complexity; and secondly, that while the human existence and our ecosystem are fragile, humanity is distinctive for our capacity for collective learning.¹ Based on the rich ideas discussed in GTI forums through the years, I reckon that the latter assumption is easily agreeable, but the former is problematic—especially its single metanarrative about the origin story.

The emphasis of BH on interdisciplinarity is compatible with my orientation as a generalist and with GTI's comprehensive exploration of theoretical and practical solutions toward alternative futures. Even though I grew up in a country heavily influenced by religion, I had the privilege to study at a uniquely secular university in the Philippines during my teens, which made me appreciate early on the principles of the now old-fashioned liberal arts education. I think that BH can enhance its epistemology from the thinkers and doers of GTI, which has a deeper and broader appreciation of the value of diversity and the synergy that comes with it. Successful organizations, prosperous economies, active individuals, and vibrant socio-ecologies thrive on diversity.

Dialectics of Ideas and Material Conditions

In pragmatic terms, GTI appears to have more potentials than BH to be a unifying framework for historical storytelling and sensemaking about the past, present, and future of human civilization,

the biosphere, nature, and life itself. BH is alienating to an overwhelming majority of the world's population affiliated with thousands of existing religions, on which most of them find their sense of meaning and purpose for believing in God, divinity, or the Creation story. Religion is compelling to believers because not only does it have an interesting story about Genesis, but more importantly it also has a theory of how to live as an individual and in relation to others in the community—many of these are written in scriptures as parables dealing with questions of ethics, values, and morality.

The nonbelievers may accuse the ordinary religious follower of escapism. But the prayers of the faithful may be personal wishes and general wishes for human dignity, a good life, justice, world peace, freedom from privation, and safety from the effects of natural disasters. This, to me, is the proper interpretation of Marx's structural-functionalist reading of religion applicable to the present-day neoliberal capitalist-accelerated Anthropocene: "Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions."

GTI is a counterhegemonic program against the dominant processes of capitalist marketization and barbarization. To this end, GTI has been mindful of Christian's caution that "changing how people see the world may prove easier than changing our material technologies of the social and economic structures within which we live." It is in this ideological endeavor where GTI seems to be more advanced than BH. GTI participants have taken a more nuanced view and recognized that there is a dialectical relationship between the ideational factor and material conditions in shaping the process of learning and consciousness formation of sentient social beings. From a cosmopolitan outlook, GTI problematizes the abstract and the concrete, the grassroots and the global, the long-term and the immediate—for instance, policies on basic incomes, education, resource allocation, and technology that influence our ability and opportunity for human flourishing, including the space and time needed to comprehend the rather esoteric concepts of Big History and Great Transition.

A variant of [Marx's historical-materialist perspective](#) is here again noteworthy to reinforce BH's relevance:

It is, therefore, the *task of history*, once the *other-world of truth* has vanished, to establish

the *truth of this world*. It is the immediate *task of philosophy*, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its *unholy forms* once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. Thus, the criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law*, and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*.²

By taking on this task as it continues its historical theorizing, BH can have—to borrow Christian’s concluding lines—“more global ways of seeing and thinking” for the Great Transition and thus be able “to tackle the more complex tasks of transforming global technologies and socioeconomic structures.” By observing the dialectics between ideas and material conditions in the process of historical change, BH can avoid being construed as an “escapist undertaking” like the foremost priority and preoccupation nowadays of Big Tech oligarchs in space travels, metaverse, parallel universe, computer games, digital surveillance, and cryptocurrency rather than in investing and innovating to solve the real threats to mass extinction and the enduring problems in the environment, health, human relationships, and day-to-day social needs.³

Pluriverse and Decolonization

In addition to supporting Christian’s call for “new perspectives on today’s world,” BH can draw insights from GTI discourses about the pluriverse and decoloniality (notably, the criticism against Eurocentrism) that consider the significance of agency and contingency in historical movement and interpretations.⁴ For example, the concept of the pluriverse has far-reaching implications for knowledge claims of BH to become a useful framework for the interdependent sustainability goals today. Historically, millions of indigenous, premodern peoples have thrived and sustained themselves for thousands of years despite being uninformed by BH’s cosmological theory, despite them believing in gods, spirits, mythology, or magic. So-called modernity’s period of enlightenment, which normalized the scientific order of humanism and individualism, had also been marked by the horrors and cruelties of genocides, slavery, and world wars that decimated human and nonhuman lives.

A dialogue and collaboration between BH and decolonial perspectives would create a critical self-reflection of power imbalances and inequalities (including the logic of imperialism, colonialism, and other forms of knowledge domination) that have systematically centered the “objective Western” methodology and marginalized “non-Western” sensibility about

the emergence and change processes of the universe and life on Earth. Decolonization, or decolonizing history, opens a sphere for intersubjective agreement, but this necessitates the virtue of tolerance for subjectivity of different cultures to nurture their own local ecologies and specific spatio-temporal conception of reality in relation to what they deem existentially meaningful.

GTI in Education

In sum, I see that the BH agenda further enriches the Great Transition Initiative. But if there is anything that the Great Transition Network can learn from the Big History Project, it is that the Great Transition should be proactively promoted as part of the curriculum of schools and universities.⁵ A viable strategy would be a coordinated and concerted effort of academics for BH, GTI, and other pro-interdisciplinary approaches to arrest the cult of specialism. Accordingly, the machineries and ideologies of academic capitalism and the neoliberal university will have to be dismantled. As the pressures of competitiveness permeate the everyday academia, captive by the multi-billion-dollar publishing industry, I sincerely hope that the humaneness of scholarship and learning relations would hold on and prevail over the dehumanizing forces of alienation, careerism, and opportunism around the profession.

Endnotes

1. David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
2. Karl Marx, "A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," 1843, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.
3. Carlota Perez, "A Long Delayed Golden Age or Why Has the ICT 'Installation Period' lasted so long?," UCL IIPP Blog, June 14, 2022, <https://medium.com/iipp-blog/a-long-delayed-golden-age-or-why-has-the-ict-installation-period-lasting-so-long-b3471a0aaeb>.
4. Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta, *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019).
5. Bonn Juego, "Justice in the Sustainability Curriculum," *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/pedagogy-transition-juego>.

About the Author



Bonn Juego teaches sustainability strategies at the Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics and chairs the Finnish Society for Development Research. He has published extensively on crises in capitalist development, authoritarian neoliberalism, populism, and resurgent nationalisms. He serves as an expert for the World Economic Survey of the Leibniz Institute for Economic Research and on the editorial boards of *Globalizations* and *Just Ecological Political Economy*. Previously, he worked in the Philippine government, social movements, and global civil society. He holds a PhD in development and international relations from Aalborg University.

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