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## Emerging Stories to Live By

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

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A worldview based on wide scales of time and space is essential for human survival and flourishing and, as David Christian [emphasizes](#), recent developments in science and technology “have revolutionized our understanding of the histories of Earth and the biosphere.” Moreover, our understanding of human history has developed. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century universal histories have given way to more recent attempts to overcome Eurocentrism by employing frameworks such as world-systems analysis and global history. Relatively new concepts such as emergence and complexity have also contributed to the integration of different fields of knowledge into a relatively unified and coherent narrative.

One of the aims of Big History is to develop a creation myth and origin story suitable to our globalized world characterized by global risks such as economic growth and consequent ecological deterioration as well as the existence of weapons of mass destruction. An origin story based on the currently prevailing Big Bang cosmology provides some sense of coherence and wholeness in the cosmos—indeed, a scientific creation myth; the metatheory of emergence and complexity fills in the rest of the story

The unified history of the cosmos, life, and humanity could become a standard part of school or university curricula.<sup>1</sup> In this vein, soon after having read Christian’s *Maps of Time* in summer 2005, it occurred to me that such an integrated perspective could also help to overcome the fragmentation of the university into countless technical specialisms. Thus, I proposed it as an obligatory entrance exam book in all fields across the university. Later, I have argued that theories of emergence and complexity show how it is possible to have a unified view of science and scholarship in the midst of all the diversity and pluralism.<sup>2</sup>

A difficulty with this project, however, is that modern science has been set against all myths. The standard modern meaning of myth has been that of a narrative that has no basis in reason and cannot be true. *Mythos* is seen as opposed to *logos*. This binary opposition is problematic. Giambattista Vico argued already in the eighteenth century that human civilization is based on the emergent capacity to imagine, through complex language, and thus to create something new.<sup>3</sup> Since humans transcended basic physical impulses with the help of language, we have been making our own cultural and social worlds. From a Vicoan perspective, consciousness, society, and history are mythopoetically constituted. If a myth is lived by people in their everyday practices and institutions, the resulting social order testifies to the truth of that myth. Hence, in order to know the reflectively conscious and meaningful human world, we must also know its constitutive myths.

The Vicoan viewpoint can be enriched by employing critical reason and epistemological, ethical, and political pluralism. For critical reason, any belief can turn out to be (partly) wrong even when based on science or serving as a constitutive myth of a society and its characteristic practices and institutions. Indeed, a closer look at the Big History narrative reveals ambiguities, contradictory interpretations, and various methodological and philosophical problems. In complex pluralist societies, there are hegemonic struggles over constitutive myths, shaping both our explanatory stories about the past and scenarios about possible futures. Each grand vision, such as that of Big History, may not be as well-grounded, complex, or realist as its advocates may think. The prevailing (or proposed) myths can be critically addressed in various ways (empirical, theoretical, methodological, philosophical, etc.) and at various levels of abstraction. The ultimate point is that to be rational, the stories we tell must be open to criticism and revisable in a systematic fashion. As a result, the stories can become more mature, comprehensive, and nuanced over time, through criticism, change, and learning.

I can only highlight a couple of essential aspects here.<sup>4</sup> First, at the heart of Big History is the common modern idea that with the development of science, God has been moved further and further away from the story of the origins of the cosmos (not to speak of causal interventions in it). Nonetheless, in the partly secularized world of the early twenty-first century, religion remains an important aspect of many ethical-political identities. Big History would thus benefit from a view on religion that is compatible with a rational and civilized dialogue about divinity, religion,

and religious practices. This requires epistemological relativism, yet relativism does not mean that we cannot have better or worse grounds for adopting some particular god-oriented beliefs or spiritual practices. Our claims to knowledge of god are fallible, like anything else. While any hypothesis about god or divinity can fail, it does not mean that they all must necessarily or ultimately fail. Globalization in the deeper sense, as a coming-together of humanity, requires an open-ended dialogue about the fundamentals, including in terms of religion (whatever forms it may assume). This dialogue has ethical-political implications, for giving a voice to others is not neutral. Dialogue entails recognition of equality and institutions that accord with such recognition; this means global democracy understood as a process of identity- and will-formation.

Second, there are different accounts of modern cosmology, life sciences, and human sciences compatible with established theories of science, including the theory of relativity and quantum theory. In its current form, Big History is ambiguous about its basic storyline. Many cosmopolitans have stressed coherence, wholeness, and even purpose, whereas the followers of philosophers such as Hume and Nietzsche seem convinced that the cosmos is purposeless and the processes of biological and cultural evolution arbitrary. The first account focuses on the emergence and development of life and sees some meaning or directionality in this process. The second revolves around meaninglessness and anticipations of death as some scale of time. The basic themes of the latter, or what I call the liberal-capitalist myth—cosmic meaninglessness if not philosophical desperation, Darwinist ideologies, and short-term comforts of life—provide underpinnings for the contemporary competitive society organized in terms of geopolitical states and world markets.

These are intricate debates, and science remains ignorant about many of the basic things about the cosmos. The current standard version of the Big Bang hypothesis is unlikely to be the last word. The Big Bang hypothesis is a plausible solution to the equations of general relativity and explains some important observations, but many key parts of the theory are conjectural and probably unfalsifiable, including hypotheses about the inflation field, dark matter, and dark energy. Much of the evidence concerning, for instance, redshifts and the expansion of the universe is theory- and technology-laden. Further, many “predictions” are achieved by imputing parameters to a model to make it accord with observations, so they are no predictions at all but

rather instances of circular reasoning. The universe also seems to have developed in the opposite direction than what the second law of thermodynamics claims, that is, toward more complex structures, and at least on Earth this has involved the development of ever more complex forms of life. Nonetheless, the assumption remains that the cosmos is a closed system.

The alternative storyline—revolving around life and learning in a manner that induces cosmic hopefulness—starts from the idea that time, space, causation, emergence, and change are real. I think it would be wise for Big History to side explicitly with this alternative storyline. A key point is that emergent cultural layers such as conscious experience, agency, will, and intentions are real and causally efficacious. This makes both scientific practices and transformative ethical-political activities possible. The rational tendential direction of world history is grounded in our collective human learning, making it possible to solve problems, absent ills, and overcome contradictions through collective actions and by building better common institutions.

## Endnotes

1. See <https://bhp-public.oerproject.com>.
2. The proposal was informal, made in a blog in the context of running for becoming the rector of the University of Helsinki in 2008. On the later argument, see Heikki Patomäki, “Repurposing the University in the 21st Century: Toward a Progressive Global Vision,” *Globalizations*, 16, no. 5 (2019): 751–762.
3. Vico’s *The New Science* was published in 1725. For a pertinent discussion, Joseph Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico’s “New Science”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
4. See Heikki Patomäki, “Mythopoetic Imagination as a Source of Critique and Reconstruction: Alternative Storylines about Our Place in Cosmos,” *Journal of Big History* 3, no. 4 (2019): 77–97. A longer and more nuanced version forms the basis of chapter 3 of my new book *World Statehood: The Future of World Politics* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer), forthcoming in August 2023.

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## About the Author



Heikki Patomäki is a social scientist, activist, and Professor of World Politics at the University of Helsinki. He has published over 20 books, 200 research papers, and hundreds of popular articles and blogs on such topics as the philosophy and methodology of social sciences, peace and futures studies, and global political economy, justice, and democracy. His books include *Disintegrative Tendencies in Global Political Economy: Exits and Conflicts* and *A Possible World: Democratic Transformation of Global Institutions* (with Teivo Teivainen). Patomäki is a full member of the Finnish Academy of Sciences and Letters and Life Member of Clare Hall at the University of Cambridge. He is a longtime activist of the international Attac movement and a member of the Steering Committee of EuroMemo and DiEM25. He holds a PhD from the University of Turku.

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