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Whither Agency?

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

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As I understand, Big History aims to produce a grand unifying narrative in which humans have a meaningful role—replacing, or at least supplementing, the fragmented, specialized understanding of much traditional historical inquiry, and dwarfing in timescale world-history textbooks that have existed in the United States since the 1940s. David Christian’s *Maps of Time* displays an impressive knowledge of the sweep of human history and our place in the universe.

Big History is not something entirely new under the sun. Grand theories of history were prominent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (e.g., G. W. F. Hegel, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee). Some philosophers (e.g., Herbert Spencer, C. Lloyd Morgan, Jan Smuts) explicitly embedded human history in the larger course of the natural world, with evolution producing ever more complex systems. But are such theories too big—pitched at too high a level of generalization—to say much to us in our present circumstances?

To attempt to find meaning by situating ourselves in nature does not overstep the bounds of science. Mary Midgley has argued that “[p]urpose-centred thinking is woven into all our serious attempts to understand anything, and above all into those of science.”¹ Such “teleological” thinking has to do with understanding what function something serves in a larger whole. The refusal to acknowledge that we are joined with non-human entities in something greater than ourselves, she maintains, promotes an attitude of contempt for, and the urge to dominate, what is perceived as other. To the extent that Big History teaches that we are integral to the processes of nature, it could help reinforce the message expounded so passionately a century and a half ago by William Morris that human well-being cannot be divorced from the well-being of the natural environment.²

Promises and Perils of the Big View: Diamat and GST

The twentieth century's two most theoretically developed evolutionary philosophies integrating human societies into the natural world are *dialectical materialism* ("Diamat") and *general systems theory* (GST), which I have elsewhere compared and evaluated in some detail.³ The former grew out of Friedrich Engels's interest in natural science, and is not to be conflated with Karl Marx's "historical materialism."

Despite significant differences, Diamat and GST share certain key features. Prominent among these is the concept of nature's exhibiting a hierarchy of systems processing energy and evolving according to laws of nature. Despite its nominal materialism, Diamat shares with GST the attempt to explain the nature and behavior of things according to the way they are organized. Both philosophies see the historical evolution of systems as involving an ongoing increase in *organizational complexity* and *information content*.

GST emphasizes the integration of systems into ever larger wholes. Especially important for Diamat is the concept of emergence: each higher level displays new qualities and its own irreducible laws. GST sees the evolutionary process as essentially gradual, while for Diamat gradual changes eventually lead to revolutionary changes and the emergence of new types of systems.

Some scholars have doubted that dialectical materialism is compatible with Marx's theory of history. Marx's theory does situate human history firmly within nature—Marx's crucial insight being that all societies integrate and sustain themselves on the basis of their essential "metabolism" with their environments. And so, on this theory, a society's particular mode of production—its set of technological powers and the economic structure used to harness those powers—is key to understanding its form and development. But any laws or principles general enough to encompass all natural systems, human societies included, are not fine-grained enough to take into account the specific properties of social systems and the role of human agency.

Philosophies of nature are almost bound to emphasize the structural regularities of nature and the way they impose themselves on human life, rather than the human capacity to alter the

conditions of life. This is what occurred in the Soviet Union, where dialectical materialism became ideology: a rationalization for the existing social order and the legitimacy of its ruling elite.

What must not be erased from the historical narrative are the struggles of people to change their lives. With his belief in the power of human agency, Karl Popper rejected what he called “historicism”—the idea that there is a predictable course to human history—and named Marx as a prime culprit. But Popper was mistakenly conflating Marx’s general theory of all types of societies, which recognizes the importance of agency, with his much more restricted structural model of the capitalist economy, in which Marx did discern powerful imperatives of development.

Focusing on the Task at Hand

To deal with the current perfect storm of overlapping crises engulfing the world, we must do more than just survey the grand sweep of cosmic and human history. Certainly we need the concepts of systems theorists: open systems, energy flows, positive and negative feedback, homeostasis, emergent properties, resilience, tipping points. But more than that, we need to understand the specific dynamics of social systems: the relationships among technology and economy and political institutions, and the role played by worldviews in shaping and entrenching social systems—those things addressed, with greater or lesser success, in Marx’s general theory.

And then with our lens we must zoom not out, but further in, to confront industrial capitalism as a self-expanding system marked by the radically inequitable distribution of wealth and power, and increasingly by ecosystem destruction. The structural imperatives that make capitalism so dynamic and productive also make breaking their grip in order to restructure society particularly difficult. State socialism failed in large measure because it proved to be a less efficient form of industrialism, as well as more vulnerable to political disruption in time of stress.

It has been said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Discovering whether capitalism must be entirely transcended or “only” drastically reformed is part of the task ahead, along with promoting values appropriate for a new civilization and mobilizing effective political action.

In his 1930 book *Last and First Men*, philosopher and science fiction author Olaf Stapledon envisioned the entire history of humanity, covering two billion years. Then, in his 1937 *Star Maker*, those two billion years became just a blip as Stapledon pulled his lens back to tell the history of life in our whole galaxy, and then in our whole universe, and beyond that in all universes (the multiverse)—endless cosmoses with endlessly varied laws of nature. Now that's Big History. But for us, the story we must now tell is ultimately not about the Big Bang and energy flows and complexity; it is a story about learning to live flourishing lives, together with all our fellow sentient inhabitants of this small planet.

Endnotes

1. Mary Midgley, *Science As Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1992), 9.
2. Angus Taylor, "Inhaling All the Forces of Nature: William Morris's Socialist Biophilia," *The Trumpeter* 14 (1997): 207–09, <https://bestfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Inhaling-All-the-Forces-of-Nature.pdf>.
3. Angus Taylor, "The Nature of History: Dialectical Materialism and General Systems Theory," <https://bestfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/The-Nature-of-History-2023-03-04.pdf>.

About the Author



Angus Taylor taught philosophy for many years at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. He is the author of *Animals and Ethics: An Overview of the Philosophical Debate*. He helps run the website BEST Futures, which works to support the emergence of a sustainable and just world through providing people and communities with new tools, perspectives, and knowledge.

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