

Book Reviews

Big History: Between Nothing and Everything

By David CHRISTIAN, Cynthia Stokes BROWN, and Craig BENJAMIN

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Several books on big history are available now (though not all use the term “big history”), and all follow the same general plan: a history of the known universe, starting from the big bang and tracing the steps of cosmic evolution to the present day. Since big history scholars seek an evidence-based narrative, it may seem that, aside from differences in emphasis and writing style, most of these cosmic histories must end up being essentially the same. However, for the instructor considering teaching a course on big history, there is really only one book designed for the classroom: *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* (2013) by David Christian, Cynthia Stokes Brown, and Craig Benjamin.

Although other recent books could be pressed into service in the classroom, *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* is unique in being conceived of and designed from its inception as

a textbook. Moreover, the pre-publication text has been field-tested in real university classes. Co-author Cynthia Brown is a professor emerita at Dominican University of California, where a two-semester sequence of big history courses is part of the general education requirements. Nearly three hundred Dominican freshmen used the pre-publication text during the 2012-2013 academic year. Brown collected copious feedback from students and faculty, feedback which she and her collaborators then used to further refine the text. The following academic year saw the launch of the first edition and its continuing use in Dominican courses, where it has been enthusiastically received by both faculty and students.

Among the many things this book gets right is its overall length and proportions. When the subject matter is literally all of time and space as we know it, there exists the potential for the length to grow out-of-control. The authors have made wise choices, telling a story of cosmic evolution that strikes the right balance of illustrative detail and large-scale connecting themes. A story of this scale also needs a visible structure: from the big bang to the present day, the narrative is divided into eight “thresholds.” The “thresholds” are not simply handy labels for dividing up the past, but represent an important assertion of the authors: at certain critical points in the past, something fundamentally new appeared in the universe. Because the thresholds mark genuine objective changes, not arbitrary divisions of time, students find the structure memorable and meaningful.

When it comes to human history, the authors have divided up the narrative more finely than other big history books have done. In their framework, threshold six is marked by the emergence of our species *Homo sapiens*, threshold seven by the emergence of intensive agriculture, and threshold eight by the industrial revolution. This three-part division of human history acknowledges the very real changes in how we have made our living on planet Earth, while maintaining the high-altitude viewpoint that big history requires. Students using this book can appreciate how humanity has changed on a global scale, and

gain a coherent intellectual framework for grappling with the particulars of individual cultures and civilizations.

Proportionately, the pre-human narrative makes up less than one-third of the text, with the remainder telling the human story. The final two-thirds give much more detailed attention to the emergence of agriculture, and the major civilizations around the globe that arose as a result. In such a grand-scale narrative, this might strike some as giving human beings too important a role in the universe. Certainly the space given to human beings contrasts with other recent big history books, many of which deal with the appearance of our species largely as a single event, discussing agriculture and industrialization as parts of general cultural and technological progression. However, the large proportion of this book devoted to humanity and the rise of civilization addresses the real needs of the instructors who could benefit from a textbook such as this. At many schools, instructors are currently teaching big history by enlarging the scope of existing courses under traditional titles such as “world history” or “global studies.” The flexible design of *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* accommodates this situation well, providing instructors with precisely what they need to incorporate a big history approach into an existing curriculum.

The full apparatus of a textbook is in place: pre-reading questions, clear sub-headings, a wealth of colorful maps and illustrations; graphs and tables; and end-of-chapter summaries and review questions. The book is written in a clear, brisk style that explains clearly and accurately, without oversimplifying, in language suitable for both high school and college students. *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* succeeds both as inspiring reading, and as a practical tool in the classroom.

Labour-Intensive Industrialization in Global History

By Gareth AUSTIN and Kaoru SUGIHARA
 New York: Routledge, 2013. xiv + 310 pp.
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