

# TEACHING HISTORY'S BIG PICTURES: INCLUDING CONTINUITY AS WELL AS CHANGE

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**Thinking long:** Human beings ‘think long’ – cogitating not just about the immediate present but also about the past and the future. That mental characteristic defines our species. Like all living creatures, we live in time, our internal clocks regulated by the pineal gland – a small sensory organ attached to the brain.

But, unlike other species, we think consciously about the process. It is true that time, with its unique mixture of sameness *and* motion, still remains technically undefined by scientists and much disputed by philosophers. There is no easy formula stating that  $T = .$  Nonetheless, despite its ultimate mystery, adults in all cultures can easily teach young children to ‘tell the time’;<sup>1</sup> and we all experience living within the matrix of time and space.

Of course, it is understood that events in time do not repeat themselves precisely. The future will therefore be different from the past. Yet, since time progresses onwards in one direction only and does not reverse itself, we reliably expect the future to unfold from the past. Hence when writing about today’s global financial crisis, the Liberal Democrat pundit Vincent Cable justifiably cites the old adage: ‘history is an

imperfect guide to the future but it is the only one we have'.<sup>2</sup> Put more substantively, the study of history provides access to the riches of human experience, including its pitfalls as well as promises, and the framing of its long-term development as well as its immediate details.

To access this through-time stock of experience, particular guidance in 'thinking long' is needed for young teenagers at Key Stages 3 and 4. They are just consolidating their first adult perspectives, among the torrential information that daily surrounds them. They also encounter a range of myths and stories about the past. The load can be overwhelming. It is right therefore that the schools' history syllabus is being encouraged to guide young teenagers to study not only in-depth topics but also 'big picture' interpretations – and, simultaneously, to debate their merits and defects.

This approach is known in the US and Australia as 'big history'. But it does not really need a special name. Instead, a historian of an earlier generation – like Arnold Toynbee, for example - would urge that long-span history is the only 'proper' history.

Fortunately, the tide is turning back to this perspective, which stresses the need to view and teach history within long-term frameworks. Otherwise, without some thread to link the details, students are left with scraps of uncoordinated information. In *Teaching History* (2007), Jonathan Howson has shown trenchantly how young teenagers find themselves confused and disorientated when invited to produce unaided a narrative account of British history.<sup>3</sup> And Ian Dawson in *Teaching History* (2008) makes the same important point, with an arresting diagram showing students holding chunks of undigested and unassimilated history from the current syllabus.<sup>4</sup>

**Why did ‘big pictures’ go out of fashion?** Before looking at some of the new approaches, it is worth establishing how accounts of history over the long term went out of fashion. In fact, big interpretations of history have always been in ‘deep’ cultural circulation, often in the guise of religious and/or national myths. Instead, it is intellectual fashions in accepting or denying the utility of such frameworks that vary over time.

In the 1990s long-term interpretations, known as ‘Grand Narratives’, were out of fashion. The Enlightenment story of History-as-Progress was undermined by the twentieth century’s abundant evidence of brutal wars and genocides. And the Marxist alternative of History-as-sequenced-economic-stages (from tribal communism to classical slavery to agrarian feudalism to industrial capitalism and ‘upwards’ to mass communism) was disproved by the collapse of the European Soviets in 1989-92. It is true that some defiant Marxists argued that Stalin had distorted the project, which still remained a valid and valuable ideal. Yet they had to admit that the historical pathway to reach the ideal was proving to have more scope for deviation than Marx had initially thought.

With the collapse of these Grand Narratives, there was some mood of postmodernist scepticism, especially in Western Europe. That disillusioned viewpoint envisaged time itself as ‘broken’, hence breaking the story-lines within it. And even analysts who rejected an abandonment of the long-term were uncertain as to how to reassemble the pieces. The mood in the USA in the 1990s was generally less sceptical. But even there, triumphalist politicians developed a complacent belief in the ‘End of History’, encouraged by Francis Fukuyama’s ebullient study with that title.<sup>5</sup> For him, history’s evolutionary outcome was the global achievement of American liberal democracy. Hence it could too easily be concluded that there was little point in studying history’s diversity.

Continuing conflict, however, returned dramatically to New York in September 2001, shattering any such complacency. History had not, after all, come to a full stop. The old Grand Narratives were no guide to the new conflicts and were not resurrected.

Nevertheless, the challenge to explain what had happened showed the importance of understanding events in their full historical context. The fall of the Twin Towers was long planned – and indeed it was rehearsed, unsuccessfully, in a failed attack with a car bomb on 26 February 1993. It was a good example of how a dramatic macro-event had historical roots – and the origins of the 1993 attack similarly reached back into earlier times.

We all need to understand the origins and development of such deeply-rooted conflicts, which occur *within* as well as *between* the world's array of nations and faiths. And it is equally important to study the growth of institutions and international mechanisms for resolving conflicts – and the problems that beset such international efforts.

Moreover, global warming provides a new challenge – a challenge that did not begin yesterday and won't be resolved tomorrow. For today's students, it means that they need to understand both the world's long-term fossil-fuel-based development *and* the long-established international divisions - which together are generating problems *and* making them hard to resolve.

A bold example of the new environmental history, putting human life into the context of the Earth's changing geography and geology, is provided by David Christian's *Maps of Time*. His narrative starts with the origins of Planet Earth and moves impressively through many varied economic/cultural/ecological states of development. And he ends by urging humans to learn the lesson of history, that the global environment must be tended with care. Otherwise entire ways-of-life are at risk of

disappearance or degradation through population pressure upon resources.

One chilling example comes from Rapa Nui (Easter Island), where the inhabitants once felled their last trees and suffered social and environmental collapse with the collapse of their traditional agriculture and way-of-life.<sup>6</sup> The majestic Easter Island statues remained, unmoved. But several hundred years later the highly impoverished local population had dwindled in numbers and lost all communal memory of how the statues were made and what they meant. The Islanders squandered their assets in the present – and, as a result, they also lost a significant element of their past: a sombre warning.

**Pitfalls and challenges:** Through-time ‘diachronic’ narratives are needed to make sense of the abundant historical ‘facts’ by framing them in an unfolding picture. And if the story is a rousing one, then it adds excitement. For teachers, that is helpful when covering impersonal themes which might otherwise degenerate into boring ‘outlines’.

However, there is a justified concern that history must not be reduced to simple pieties, however rousing - whether those be ideological, religious, imperialist, nationalist, sexist, racist, or classist. Indeed, Jeremy Black’s dramatically entitled *Curse of History* (2008) offers a sobering survey of history debates around the world that are now subject to rival ideological interpretations.<sup>7</sup> Historians are often under pressure to confirm mythical accounts – and they need the support of other historians in resisting such pressures.

Accordingly, the return to ‘big picture’ needs to be undertaken carefully and never uncritically. In a relatively short but ambitious study, David Lord Smail sketches a controversial model of the human brain’s biology. Firstly, the early Stone Age sees the almost static society

of the Palaeolithic wanderers. Then the bigger-brained populations of the Neolithic Era establish agriculture and, with that, class distinctions. And, thirdly, we constitute today's restless and jaded 'Moderns', living within the capitalistic marketplace and suffering from over-active brains, jangled by the endless stimulants (from coffee to drugs and other novelties) which keep consumption going.

Yet this interpretation offers a deceptively standardised and historically unspecific state of 'modernity'. Smail's global market-place, for example, allows for neither different states of economic development nor for different cultural traditions. Thus Buddhist calm has no place in Smail's world of neurosis. His narrative is clear but his stages are too rigid – and the final one too monolithic.

Conversely, a third 'big picture' history shows how the avoidance of narrative is also counter-productive. Theodore Zeldin's *Intimate History of Humanity* focuses upon human sexuality. He remarks that 'Humanity's most long-lasting purpose has been to produce more humanity'<sup>8</sup> and he takes his theme to be universal.

Working with that assumption, Zeldin then jumbles together his evidence from many different periods and cultures, without any chronological framing. In fact, however, he does observe various instances of social and cultural changes over time, within his stress upon the universal continuity of the human interest in reproducing its species. But, without an overarching narrative to place these changes into any coherent framework, Zeldin's fascinating details are impossible to assimilate. An opportunity has been lost.

**The three-dimensional approach:** So how can teachers present the big picture? There is not one big historical message which is universally agreed. That absence in itself makes an important point. It is not just a

question of finding and teaching one new Grand Narrative, or resurrecting and refurbishing one old one.

Nor is it helpful or plausible to divide the world into different cultural groups and propose a separate Grand Narrative for each different group. That denies common humanity and it also ignores the extent to which historic and current cultures overlap, people from all cultures intermarry, and the diversities *within* as well as between cultures.

Perhaps instead a generic global platitude might be advanced, such as ‘History incorporates elements of continuity and change’. But such a proposition, even if agreed, does not add much to the sum of human understanding.

The study of history relishes its complexity and variety, because human diversity is an integral part of the story. Indeed, historians often find simplified ‘universal’ concepts from other disciplines, which they then test and criticise against the experience of history, invariably finding that one single formula will not explain everything. Plurality and diversity do not negate a single human story – instead, these elements add to its plausibility.

History, as the study of the past, is not so chaotic and tangled that it defies all systematic probing. We can see instead that there are recurrent ways of looking at the past – and we can weigh these and assess how their messages can be combined. Various models have been proposed at different times. But none integrate all history’s features together: there are models of change that wrongly exclude continuity; or models of continuity that underplay change.

My study, entitled *Time and the Shape of History*, integrates not only different forms of change but also deep continuities (as identified by Zeldin). Having rejected the old and unproven assumption that there were different sorts of cosmic and historical time,<sup>9</sup> I start from the view that

everything is within time – or more properly, within time-space.

Within that capacious framework, there are perennial dimensions, linked integrally together. Just as space has its three dimensions of longitude, latitude, and altitude, so time – and history which is integrally within time - has three interlocking dimensions of continuity (persistence); micro-change (momentum); and macro-change (turbulence). These features interact in ever-varying permutations.

Continuity (or through-time persistence) provides ballast to the system and a benchmark against which change is assessed. This dimension has been under-studied and under-theorised. Zeldin salutes the importance of this theme, but also reveals how much it is entangled with change. The second dimension is micro-change, which refers to gradual, incremental adaptation. It adds a gentle, often almost imperceptible momentum to history and prevents the system from clogging. Meanwhile, the third dimension is that of radical transformation or revolutionary upheaval. This state contributes massive impetus and intense turmoil within the system. But even the greatest transformations are subtly assimilated over time by the forces of micro-change and continuity. History is not completely sundered. Hence each revolution can eventually settle into a new system and spawn a renewed continuity.

All these features of history can be spotted and debated with reference to all periods and themes, as explained in *Time and the Shape of History*. In a nutshell, I offer a non-prescriptive analysis. It does not advocate one singular outcome. Instead, it is the dynamic through-time interaction and interlocking of these core processes of continuity (persistence), micro-change (momentum) and macro-change (turbulent upheaval) which frame an ever-changing history.



**Long-span courses incorporating history's multiple dimensions:** An impressive exemplar is the course on 'Exploring Migration through the Lens of History' that is presented by R. Sheldrake and D. Banham.<sup>10</sup> They use the lively and personal evidence from the Ipswich Oral History Project, organised by the Ipswich Caribbean Association (ICA), to study immigration as a very human experience which is crucially set within a long-term context of variegated migration into Britain over many centuries.

Every young teenager in the country has a place in the narrative that explains the 'peopling of Britain'. Hence nothing can be more directly involving, yet simultaneously demanding a historical perspective. Western Europe's offshore islands have attracted waves of newcomers from the earliest known migrants, now thought to be from the Basque Country, through to the Celts, the Teutons, the Latins, the Scandinavians, the Normans, the Walloons, the Huguenots, the Jews, the Irish, the central Europeans, the Indians, the Pakistanis, the West Indians, the Africans and South Africans, the Australians, the New Zealanders, the Chinese, through to the Poles in the early twenty-first century.

This story contains movement, welcome, cultural interchange, and intermarriage, as well as inertia, conflict, cultural misunderstandings, and quasi-segregation. My approach to the theme would present the story in a narrative framework, which offers an understanding of chronology. But the questions for discussion should also focus explicitly on the complexities of history's different dimensions.

For example, *continuities* are often ignored or under-studied. One basic feature is the human species' propensity to travel, to settle, and to reproduce, ever since our long-distant ancestors first came 'out of Africa'. And there have been repetitious social mixtures of resistance and/or welcome to incoming populations, as earlier established peoples respond

to newcomers. It is useful to study the contrasting conditions that produce conflict as well as those that produce cooperation. In that way, students can understand that the meetings of migrating peoples contain a continuing potential for a range of responses, which allows policy-makers to identify what promotes concord and what promotes conflict.

Another impressive feature of continuity is the human capacity of both host and migrant groups to sustain their community traditions through time - despite upheavals. This question encourages student awareness of the harm that is done when cultural continuities are abruptly broken – as happened to slave populations taken without warning from their homes.

At the same time, students can examine *gradual changes* in the form of the long-span story of British population recruitment and growth; as well as the timing and scale of the waves of migrations; and the eventual cultural impact of newcomers, including many contributions to slow changes in the hybrid English language. One project is to search for the borrowing of words from many different languages which have been incorporated into people's daily speech.

Lastly, there are striking moments of *macro-change*, when rapid population movements generate strong confrontations and overt conflict. Invasions are one obvious example; and riots within communities are explosive on a smaller scale. Specific case-histories can be selected for study, whether the Norman invasion in 1066 or the very different experience of the invasion by the Dutch William of Orange in 1688 (without battles in England but with subsequent battles in both Scotland and Ireland). It is instructive to compare and contrast the causes, nature and outcomes of these contests – and to analyse how, over very different spans of time, the change of kingship at the top ushered in a new political order which eventually fostered a new social and economic way-of-life –

becoming in turn a new framework of continuity for later events to disrupt.

There are also potential sources of macro-change within the UK today such as demands from some in Wales and Scotland for devolution or separation. These issues are good subjects for debate, in the light of questions of continuity or change. Again, conflicts do not form the whole story. These are intertwined with the powerful rival forces of continuity and micro-change. All three dimensions mutually pull and tug at one another – together forming, amending and shaping history.

By looking at the complex ways in which a nation's population recruits, grows and then re-recruits, teenagers gain a sense of the long term. They themselves are located in history, as they study their own origins and those of their friends, families, neighbours, and fellow-countrymen within the intricate process of peopling the world – a long, long history that still continues.

## Select Reading List:

- J. Black, *The Curse of History* (Social Affairs Unit, London, 2008)
- V. Cable, *The Storm: The World Economic Crisis and What it Means* (Atlantic Books, London, 2009)
- D. Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2004)
- P.J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (Yale University Press, London, 2007)
- I. Dawson, 'Thinking across time: planning and teaching the story of power and democracy at Key Stage 3', *Teaching History*, 130 (2008) pp. 14-21.
- F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, New York, 1992), - expanding on his 1989 essay, first published in the international affairs journal, *The National Interest*.
- J. Howson, 'Is it the Tuarts and then the Studors or the Other Way Round?' *Teaching History*, 127 (June 2007), pp. 40-7.
- J.R. McNeill and W.H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of World History* (Norton, New York, 2003)
- D.L. Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2008)
- T. Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (Sinclair Stevenson, London, 1994)

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> P.J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (2007), pp. 2-3, 185-6.
- <sup>2</sup> V. Cable, *The Storm: The World Economic Crisis and What it Means* (Atlantic Books, London, 2009), p. 124.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Howson, 'Is it the Tuarts and then the Studors or the Other Way Round?' *Teaching History*, 127 (June 2007), pp. 40-7.
- <sup>4</sup> I. Dawson, 'Thinking across time: planning and teaching the story of power and democracy at Key Stage 3', *Teaching History*, 130 (2008) pp. 14-21, esp. Fig. 1 on p. 15.
- <sup>5</sup> F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, New York, 1992); and subsequent debates, as discussed in H.L. Williams, D. Sullivan and E.G. Matthews, *Francis Fukuyama and the End of History* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1997) and C. Bertram and A. Chitty, *Has History Ended? Fukuyama, Marx, Modernity* (Avebury Press, Aldershot, 1994).
- <sup>6</sup> D. Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004), pp. 472-5.
- <sup>7</sup> J. Black, *The Curse of History* (Social Affairs Unit, London, 2008).
- <sup>8</sup> T. Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (Sinclair Stevenson, London, 1994), p. 465.
- <sup>9</sup> P.J. Corfield, 'History's Big Picture in Three Dimensions', *The Historian: Journal of the Historical Association* (Winter 2007), pp. 26-30.
- <sup>10</sup> R. Sheldrake and D. Banham, 'Seeing a Different Picture: Exploring Migration through the Lens of History', *Teaching History*, 129 (Dec. 2007), pp. 39-47.