

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: ON THE VALUE OF SMALL HISTORIES

The chapters of this book have been written and reworked over a period of more than two decades. I started writing them at a time when area studies were facing new challenges, and when civilisational theories and Marxian stage theories were subject to critiques from post-structural and postcolonial perspectives: critiques that questioned the possibility of historical grand narratives, and indeed sometimes of empirical historical ‘truth’ as a whole. Since then, though, we have seen a resurgence of grand narratives of history – on a more sweeping scale than ever – with the growing interest in the teaching of world or global history, and with the rise of the very large-scale approach known as ‘big history’ (discussed briefly in Chapter 4).

‘Big history’ places the human past in the – spatially and temporally – much vaster context of the history of the universe, thus encouraging awareness of the inseparable interconnection between human history and the long-term dynamics of geological, climatic and environmental change. It induces a sense of modesty and of wonder by making us realise how small the histories of human communities, nations or civilisations seem when we view them within the vast spatial and temporal unfolding of the universe. In the process, big history takes us beyond the limits of narrowly national or ethnocentric stories of the past and makes us think about the past of humanity as a whole. It is also driven by a passion to use understanding of past patterns of change as a tool for elucidating possible future changes, particularly those driven by current environmental crises. Its contributions to historical knowledge have therefore been very great.

This book, though, is by contrast a plea for *small* histories: a call to appreciate the value of looking at the world from the standpoint of small societies and language groups, particularly those that live in the borderlands between nations and empires. Viewing the past in this way does not mean abandoning the big questions of history; but it does involve looking at them from a different point of view, and may make us aware of questions that are sometimes obscured by grand totalising narratives.

What comes into focus when we look at the past and present from this viewpoint – from the ground-up perspective of places (for example) like Tomarioro or Otasu or Abashiri? First, I would argue, we are able to appreciate the astonishing variety of social and cultural forms that human beings have created in different environments over time; and second, we start to see the complex ‘imbricated’ ways in which multiple social forms have interacted. Third, it enables us to question some of the relatively rigid spatial and temporal frameworks that have conventionally been imposed upon the past by area studies. It helps us to see unexpected connections created by migration routes, trading networks and the transmission and adaptation of cultural traditions. Fourthly, these small stories also make us look more closely at the fundamental questions that are posed by grand historical narratives, and that are being posed today by big history: for a defining characteristic of big history is not only its vast temporal and spatial timescale, but also the specific set of historical questions that it seeks to answer.

The quest at the heart of big history is to find a continuous narrative thread that takes us from the beginning of time to our present-day high-population, energy-dense global society. This narrative therefore comes to be structured around populations and energy flows, and around a series of thresholds or transformations that bring about fundamental changes in the flows of energy through matter. These thresholds are (to simplify) the Big Bang; the emergence of stars; the appearance of new chemical elements; the appearance of the solar system (including the earth); the emergence of life on earth; the development of human life; the discovery of agriculture; and the ‘modern revolution’, which saw the formation of a globalised system, industrialisation and the transition to the Anthropocene.¹ As a result, although this perspective extends the origins of history much further back than any previous model, it also draws quite

1 For a synoptic view, see the Big History Project website – www.bighistoryproject.com/home.

extensively on older civilisational models (in the works of Arnold Toynbee, Vere Gordon Childe and others), which saw the ‘agricultural revolution’ and the ‘industrial revolution’ as the key defining events of human history.

A history that centres around ‘the agricultural revolution’ and ‘the modern/industrial revolution’ as the defining events of the human past tends to direct the gaze to the imperial heartlands: the places that had so-called ‘Goldilocks circumstances’ – ecological and geographical conditions that were ‘just right’ for the early emergence of agricultural or industrial civilisation.² When we focus on these areas, we tend to see the past as an ineluctable march towards societies of greater size and energy intensity. The regions and societies with very different environmental conditions, which were not central to that march, may easily come to be regarded either as frozen remnants of the ancient past or at least as irrelevant to the core narrative of history. This in turn makes us less aware of the immense diversity of the human past, and of the multiple ways in which societies have developed and shared knowledge over time. This book, therefore, chooses to consider the past from a place where circumstances for agriculture, dense human populations and large-scale industry were almost as far removed as could be from a ‘Goldilocks’ state.

In Chapter 4, I argued that the many decentralised knowledge systems of the past – the many ways in which small language or cultural groups have created an intimate understanding of very specific environments, while networking with other neighbouring societies – may contain important lessons for humanity as a whole as we confront the environmental and social challenges of the future. Large centralised knowledge systems have tended to be the ones that created great cities, enduring physical monuments and military might. In the past 200 years, these centralised systems have extended their power across the globe, destroying or subsuming small societies like those of Okhotsk region. These large systems, therefore, have also come to occupy a dominant and sometimes domineering place in grand narratives of the past.

But the small societies continue to have a profound and enduring value. Their decentralised knowledge systems are founded on the intimate ecological ‘niche’ knowledge that enabled people to survive in harsh and changing environments. Far from being frozen in timeless tradition, their

2 See, for example, Fred Spier, *Big History and the Future of Humanity* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 36–40.

history demonstrates innovation, adaptation and the capacity to learn from others and to adjust to changing social and ecological conditions. They are, thus, part of the extraordinarily rich diversity of human history, and therefore also reminders of the richness of human potential. By deepening our knowledge of small societies – not only those of Northeast Asia but those of all parts of the world – we can come to appreciate that history is not a single road from past to future, but a multitude of diverging and intertwining paths. Ways of life that seem triumphant and successful sometimes reach an impasse. Empires grow and collapse, and minor ways of life acquire new significance as new systems take shape among the ruins of the old.

Small histories teach us to question reifying generalisations about national and civilisational pasts. They help us appreciate the capacity of human beings to flourish in seemingly inhospitable conditions and to adapt to changing environmental and political circumstances. Just as the preservation of biological diversity is crucial to the survival of humans and other species, so preserving and deepening knowledge of the cultural diversity and dynamism embodied by the small societies of the frontier is, surely, essential to the future of our world. I hope, then, that the ideas offered here can provide some pointers for further learning, both from the remarkable histories of the Okhotsk Sea and surrounding regions, and from the stories of small frontier societies worldwide.

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