

Title—Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History
Author—David Christian
Year—2004

Categories: Big History, World History

Place: The World

Time: The Big Bang-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Big History is the approach that places human history within the context of biological, geographical, and astrophysical history and attempts to summarize the contemporary knowledge of how everything has become the way it is now. Christian emphasizes that every society has stories of how they and everything came into being. About a third of *Maps of Time* is devoted to the history of the universe, the earth, and life, while the rest of the book focuses on human history. He claims that big history as a methodology can work because all of the included disciplines (biology, history, physics, etc.) deal, on a very general level, with entities that are born, evolve, and eventually perish.

The book's narrative begins at the beginning of time and space, with Christian highlighting a simple rule—the simpler the structure, the better its survival chances, which is why stars live so much longer than humans. In a general sense, we need a certain amount of energy to flow through matter for any type of complexity to form. He points to humanity's ability to learn collectively in part to explain this substantial growth. Christian posits that humans are able to learn collectively because of their ability to use symbols, which would only be useful to a species that had the body, hands, and feet to make efficient use of collective learning by harvesting growing energy flows as a result. Christian reveals that when the number of participants in a network grows, the links between them increase more rapidly leading to an acceleration of cultural knowledge.

Similar to Diamond's argument in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Christian emphasizes the importance of plant and animal life in determining the success of various regions. He claims that Eurasia and Africa had most of the suitable wild species, allowing them to become technically and socially the most skilled and powerful. All of these animals also formed a formidable disease pool, making them more resilient to epidemics than their neighbors in Australia and the Americas. Around 5,000 years ago, humans began to live in cities, characterized by unequal access to power and resources. Christian argues that state formation is a mix of two factors. First, the need for people living in ever larger communities to grant authority to those considered competent to solve the many problems of organization. Second, the chances this offered to some people to set up themselves and their progeny as lords or priests, ruling with some degree of coercion. He even draws a parallel between star formation as the result of gravity and city formation as the result of social gravity. The advent of the modern era is characterized by sudden population growth, rapid innovation, skyrocketing energy use, and a huge range of incisive changes in ways of life. Although the transition to modernity could have happened anywhere, it happened in Europe first. s

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Big history is all about origin stories, though it is hard to truly identify the 'beginning'
- Human history is characterized by both the enormous increase in numbers and the ability to harvest energy flows better than any other life form
- Extensification—the increase in the area settled without any increase in the density of the settlements