

# Civilization, Big History, and Human Survival

*by Barry H. Rodrigue*

A problem that history teachers in the United States face is that we lack an appropriate reference point from which to address many of today's global issues. The source of this problem is an antiquated model of society, still taught in our universities, that largely reflects the society that existed a century ago. I'm a geographer and archeologist working as a professor at the University of Southern Maine (USM), where I teach North American and World Studies. For the last decade, I've been struggling to address this problem, but it is only recently that I have achieved some success, primarily through the introduction of a new course of study called Big History.

When I began work at USM in 2000, I was asked to teach Western Civilization, one of the most widespread and fundamental history courses in American higher education. Created as an academic study about a century ago, Western Civilization embodied the concerns of the elites of that time: to provide cultural and historical legitimacy for the young nation by showing that it was derived from Greek democracy, Roman administration, the Protestant Reformation, and English property rights, all of which had been carried to the Americas by colonial expansion.<sup>1</sup> The central message of Western Civilization was that 2000 years of western European institutions were brought to perfection in the United States.

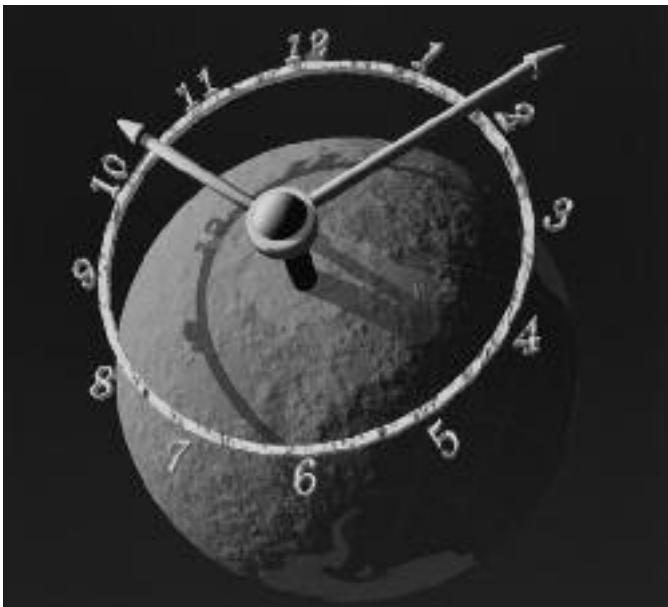
By teaching the superiority of western European society and its colonial offshoots, educators expected that everyday American citizens could be convinced to support the nation's elite institutions. In other words, Western Civilization developed into a tool of acculturation and assimilation, as well as the academic base for U.S. History.<sup>2</sup> As the 20th century progressed, instruction in Western Civilization became required at almost every college and university in the country, while its themes trickled into elementary schools, high schools, and popular culture.<sup>3</sup>

Even though I enjoy teaching Western Civilization, and although it has been liberalized over the years, I see it as an inappropriate basic history course for a modern university, especially since our nation has become much more diverse than it was a century ago. So I made a deal with my dean: I would teach Western Civilization for two years, but then would replace it with World History and Geography.<sup>4</sup>

World History and Geography is now an established series of courses at our college, but this is not a necessarily accepted trend, even in the other colleges of our own university.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, there is a campaign to make it a more general requirement in the United States, such as through the work of the World History Association.<sup>6</sup> Just as I was promoting World History and Geography, I came to appreciate that a larger conceptual shift was needed.

**I**n the last decade, we have become more aware that entire species of life are vanishing, along with fresh water supplies. Pollution makes parts of the world uninhabitable. Nonrenewable resources are being exhausted. Climate change is impacting the entire planet, from the melting of the world's ice sheets and permafrost, to related rise in sea levels and changing storm patterns. Local agriculture and business are destroyed by competition from multinational industry, resulting in the vast concentration of people in urban areas, as more and more residents are dropped to the lowest rungs of society. Unlike past crises, the scale of this situation could lead to the end of civilization as we know it.

I realized that World History and Geography does not sufficiently address these challenges because of its human-centered and nation-based



approach. At the same time, I discovered a movement in the United States towards a more humanistic and ecological globalism that is similar to what many French activists distinguish as “mondialisation”—in contrast to globalization.<sup>7</sup> Professors are offering new courses that use the entire globe as their basic reference point. In addition, academics are creating new global networks and are winning over university administrators to such reform.<sup>8</sup> As part of my search for new pedagogies, I came across an article by Professor Fred Spier of the University of Amsterdam about his work in Big

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History. This was soon followed by the good fortune of meeting him and other Big Historians at a 2004 conference on the Maine coast.<sup>9</sup>

Although the basic concepts used in Big History can be dated to ancient times, from pre-Socratic Greece to the Zhou Dynasty in China, its modern configuration is the result of the rise of interdisciplinary studies, the space race, the ending of the Cold War, globalization, and other converging events at the end of the 20th century. Known by various terms around the world, such as “Cosmic Evolution” or “Universal History,” the term “Big History” was whimsically coined by Professor David Christian in 1991, and the name stuck.<sup>10</sup>

There are variations on how Big History is researched and taught, but it is concisely defined as: “the attempt to understand, in a unified and interdisciplinary way, the history of the Cosmos, Earth, Life and Humanity.”<sup>11</sup> At present, there are perhaps fifty professors teaching courses in Big History at universities around the world, from the United States and the Netherlands to Australia, Russia and India. There has been a dramatic surge in Big History activity in the last two years. A global network of scholars recently founded the International Big History Association. Bill Gates has endorsed Big History, while members of his team are involved in promoting Big History initiatives, including a high school curriculum. And plans are underway to begin a journal, website, and conference series.<sup>12</sup>

As I teach it at the University of Southern Maine, Big History is a holistic and scientific survey of existence from our origins in the Big Bang to the present and beyond. Our students consider how humans fit into the

vast expanse of the universe, instead of orienting the universe around humans. They get exposure to quantum mechanics, plate tectonics, evolutionary biology and social development—the message is that these disciplines are linked together. The students also consider the challenges of modern globalization, with an important theme being the quest to develop sustainable lifestyles. The overall focus is on what such knowledge might mean in our everyday lives and how we should—as responsible individuals and a responsible species—conduct ourselves on this planet and off of it as we venture further into space.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, macro-studies are not new, either in academia or in popular society. Indeed, Western Civilization itself is a macro-study, but one loaded with ethnocentric bias. The difference with Big History is that it: 1) uses Earth and the entire universe as reference points, and 2) uses the scientific process. The motto for my course comes from the writer, Philip K. Dick: “Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.”<sup>14</sup>

Our students and administrators have embraced these transformations. The introductory Big History course has been made part of our general education (core curriculum). Students have created Facebook sites to promote worldwide networking among students of Big History.<sup>15</sup> The course has been so successful that I made it “hyperflexible” so that students may sign up to take it in the classroom or online. As a result, our online students have participated from as far away as Germany and Korea, and many students report that it has been an eye-opening experience. In the words of one:

When I was first asked to consider my role in the universe four months ago...I do not think I fully realized there was even a living community around me, never mind an Earth full of other humans and an entire universe beyond...But after this long, incredible voyage of exploration...I have a newfound sense of what the universe is. I have learned...that we are all part of the Global Future, and I can make a difference in my life as well as the lives of others. I feel honored to have been a part of the big history movement...I know that I am a better, more wholesome being because of this experience. My role is now to change my ways and respect this beautiful planet that granted us life, and to get others to join me.<sup>16</sup>

Big History has been the high point of my academic career. I feel as if I am doing something that changes lives and changes society. I believe that this approach transcends national boundaries, political and religious disputes, and economic systems. It serves as a new, unifying reference point for the way we understand our world and our place in it. 

## ENDNOTES

1. Courses in Western Civilization do not commonly exist elsewhere in the “western” world. However, there has recently been movement toward something similar to it in Europe, reflecting the development of the European Union. A course of study called the “Dutch Canon” was submitted to the Netherlands’ Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in 2007. It is essentially Dutch History couched in a European context, along with overseas colonial history (Indonesia). Fred Spier, personal communication, 2009. *De canon van Nederland*, 2009. Also, four universities in Greece, France and Italy joined together to offer a two-year graduate program in European Civilization in 2008. Makki Marseilles, “Greece: Four-university postgraduate programme,” 2008.
2. The course description for Western Civilization I at the University of Southern Maine reads: “A basic survey and introduction to the heritage of Western society from ancient to early-modern times. Particular attention is given to the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece and Rome. Medieval civilization is explored with a focus on the institutions it bequeathed to the modern world. The Renaissance and Reformation and the rise of the great nation-states are studied. Throughout the course important individuals are considered such as Alexander the Great, Caesar, Charlemagne, Michelangelo, and Elizabeth I.” That for Western Civilization II reads: “A basic survey and introduction to the heritage of Western society from early modern times to the atomic age. Particular attention is given to the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the rise of the industrial era, the growth of nationalism, and the World Wars. Personalities such as those of Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin are studied.” University of Southern Maine, *Undergraduate Catalogue*, 2008, p. 167.
3. The spread of the concepts of Western Civilization in the United States was furthered by schooling being made increasingly mandatory for children in the early 20th century. Although Western Civilization was a course of study primarily for universities, its message filtered into parallel and lower venues of education, such as government-run Indian Schools for Native Americans, settlement houses for immigrants and adult education programs for workers, as well as into courses in elementary and high schools. In this way, concepts of “the West” became pervasive long before the Cold War popularized them. Certainly, the content of Western Civilization has been liberalized over the years, as many of its negative aspects began to be discussed, from the Inquisition to the Holocaust, while its perimeters were expanded beyond just western Europe to include Russia, North Africa, Greenland and other “fringe” areas.
4. Debate about Western Civilization as a core study in the United States is active and open. Stearns, *Western Civilization in World History*, 2003. Broad-ranging assessments of history courses in the United States indicate that the use of Western Civilization or World History as a base course of study is about equal in today’s universities. Townsend, “Latest Figures Show Sizable Increases in History Majors and Bachelor Degrees,” 2004. Stearns, personal communication, 2009. Keough and Townsend, personal communication, 2009. However, courses in World History can easily become Western Civilization in disguise—with content largely drawn from western European cultural areas. Selma Botman, a scholar of modern Egypt and President of the University of Southern Maine, notes: “We may all take this [the acceptance of a global context] for granted now, but it has taken a whole generation for western historians to appreciate the significance of placing the west in a context that respects and acknowledges the contributions of others.” Botman, personal communication, 2009.
5. My two-course sequence in World History and Geography is a requirement for our major in Arts and Humanities at the University of Southern Maine’s Lewiston-Auburn College. The course description reads: [These courses are] “designed to not only develop an understanding of and an appreciation for world history and geography, but also to help students become more knowledgeable participants on today’s rapidly changing planet. The goal is to provide students with a humanistic background from which to better comprehend global complexities, as well as to make links between historical events and current events. In other words, it is a primer in ‘global citizenship.’” The first course covers the period from Prehistory to the Age of Modern

Expansion—from about 250,000 to 500 years ago; the second course covers the period from the Age of World Exploration (1500 C.E.) to the present. University of Southern Maine, *Undergraduate Catalogue*, 2008, p. 361.

6. Ironically, although many high schools teach World History and Geography, many colleges and universities still require Western Civilization and feel that World History and Geography is exotic. The World History Association ([www.thewha.org/](http://www.thewha.org/)) was founded in 1982 and is presently based at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. A hindrance to the establishment of World History and Geography or any macro-study as a base in our colleges and universities is that many of our students are driven by the desire of professional certification in a targeted career, which often precludes non-required electives.
7. Feminists, particularly eco-feminists, have also strongly criticized the human-centric vision of course offerings in the university. Diane Wood, personal communication, 2009. Professor Eric Waddell, a geographer from Laval University (Québec), eloquently described the mondialisation movement as it developed in the Causes region of interior France, especially in the area of Larzac. Waddell, personal communication, 2002. One of the intellectual sources of this movement came from the French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who used the horticultural metaphor of a rhizome to describe horizontal and multifaceted links within and between societies. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 2004. Waddell, personal communication, 2009.
8. There are a number of good examples of the new movement towards a truly “globalized” view in higher education in the United States. These are reflected in geographer Denis Wood’s *Five Billion Years of Global Change* (2004) and historian Michael Cook’s *A Brief History of the Human Race* (2003).
9. Spier, “The Small History of the Big History Course at the University of Amsterdam,” 2005. My meeting with Fred Spier and other Big Historians took place at the fourth conference of *The Historical Society: Reflections on the Current State of Historical Inquiry*, Boothbay Harbor, Maine, June 2004. Formative works include Eric Chaisson’s *Cosmic Dawn* (1981) and *Epic of Evolution* (2006); Fred Spier’s *The Structure of Big History* (1996) and *Big History and the Future of Humanity* (2010); David Christian’s “The Case for ‘Big History’” (1991) and *Maps of Time* (2004), and Cynthia Brown’s *Big History* (2007).
10. Akop Nazaretyan, personal communication, 2009. Christian, “The Case for ‘Big History,’” 1991. Rodrigue and Stasko, “Changing the Future with the Past,” 2010.
11. The definition of Big History was assembled by the members of the International Big History Association, which was founded at the Geological Observatory in Coldigioco (Italy) on 20 August 2010. The Big History web-pages at the University of Southern Maine are at ([www.usm.maine.edu/lac/global/bighistory/](http://www.usm.maine.edu/lac/global/bighistory/)) and contain a collection of international articles, syllabi, an updated directory and bibliography, web links, and other material pertaining to Big History.
12. David Christian, Craig Benjamin and Cynthia Brown are developing a high school curriculum on Big History with assistance from Microsoft chairman Bill Gates and his colleagues. Christian, personal communication, 2010. Several other scholars and teachers are also engaged in developing programs in Big History for the pre-university levels of education. Rodrigue and Stasko, “A Big History Directory,” 2010; Duncan, Hendrickson. An example of a textbook on Big History that is oriented towards the K-12 students is Christopher Lloyd’s *What on Earth Happened?* (2008). It is only recently that efforts have begun to assemble information about the pedagogy and historiography of Big History. Rodrigue and Stasko, “A Big History Directory,” 2009, 2010; “Changing the Future with the Past,” 2010; “A Preliminary Look at Big History Today,” 2010; “Courses of Big History in the Universities of the World,” 2010. Gates and Rose, “Bill Gates about ‘Big History’ course,” 2009.
13. Surprisingly, my students say that they get little exposure to the very serious problems facing the world in their other university courses, which seems to reflect problems associated with a professional career track and does not bode well for the public awareness of serious issues.

14. Dick, "How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later," 1995. Phillip K. Dick was author of scientific and philosophical fiction that was also produced as popular films, such as *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall* and *Minority Report*.
15. The Facebook Club for Big History is located at ([www.facebook.com/pages/Big-History/99185533648?ref=ts](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Big-History/99185533648?ref=ts)). It was founded and is administered by Jonathan Kimball, a Big History student at the University of Southern Maine.
16. Munroe, Final essay, 2009.

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