PREFACE TO THE 2011 EDITION

Maps of Time was published in 2004. To my delight it was treated very kindly. I was surprised, because I expected historians in particular to reject the very idea of a sort of “universal history,” a history of all of time. Skepticism there certainly was about the idea of big history, and plenty of quibbles about particular parts of the text, but most reviewers seemed convinced that the project was not absurd and could indeed yield interesting insights. Some were more enthusiastic, seeing big history as an exciting new area of historical scholarship. World historians were particularly generous in their support, a generosity reflected in the awarding to *Maps of Time* of the WHA prize for the best book in world history published in 2004. *Maps of Time* has also gone international, with translations into Spanish and Mandarin, which means it is now available in the world’s three most widely spoken languages. A Korean translation is in preparation.

Since 2004, interest in big history has grown, and now big history can realistically be thought of as a rapidly emerging field of teaching and scholarship. Some idea of this boom can be gleaned from the bibliography compiled by Barry Rodrigue, Fred Spier, and Daniel Stasko and available from the International Big History Association web site at www.ibhbanet.org. Recent works include a major survey of big history by Cynthia Brown, and Fred Spier’s rich theorization of big history, *Big History and the Future of Humanity*.¹ In 2007 I recorded a set of lectures on big history published by the Teaching Company, and the college-level text in big history that I have written with Cynthia Brown and Craig Benjamin will be available in 2012.

I remain happy with the basic arguments of *Maps of Time*, though my own ideas have continued to evolve since 2004. Definitions of what big history is

are acquiring a sharper focus. For example, it is clear that what distinguishes big history most decisively from world history is its interdisciplinary nature and its search for an underlying unity beneath the various accounts of the past told in different historically oriented disciplines. Big history studies the past across physics, astronomy, geology, biology, and human history. As it does so, it seeks common themes, paradigms, and methods, as well as a clearer understanding of differences in the subject matter, the methods, and the paradigms of different fields of historical scholarship.

Some ideas that were present but undeveloped in *Maps of Time* have since acquired sharper definition, both in my own mind and in the work of colleagues in the field. For example:

- In *Big History and the Future of Humanity*, Fred Spier has built on an earlier work of his and on the work of Eric Chaisson to produce what is currently by far the most sophisticated attempt to construct a thematic scaffolding for big history. He carefully links the idea of increasing complexity with the associated themes of energy flows and the idea of goldilocks conditions—the notion that complexity can increase only under very special conditions and within quite exacting “boundary conditions.” Here are broad theoretical ideas that can help give greater depth and coherence to the story told within big history.
- I have explored the idea that the chronometric revolution—that is to say, the evolution of new ways of providing absolute dates for past events—was a crucial step toward big history.² Before the middle of the twentieth century (as H.G. Wells admitted ruefully in the 1920s), it was impossible to write a rigorous, scientific history of the entire universe, because absolute dates still had to be based on written texts, so they could reach back no further than a few thousand years. That may help explain the powerful convention that “history” really meant no more than the history of literate human societies. Only with the appearance of carbon 14 dating and related dating techniques in the 1950s did big history become possible.
- There has also been considerable discussion of the historiography of big history and of how the field fits into the evolution of historical thinking as a whole. My own attempt to think this through can be found in “The Return of Universal History.”³ Craig Benjamin has written a fine account of the evolution of big history in the introduction to a series of articles on the subject.⁴

One of the most exciting features of big history is its inherently global nature. Within big history, human beings are encountered first as a single species, and only very late in such a survey do national or civilizational perspectives acquire salience. As a result, big history holds out the prospect of creating a genuinely global account of the past of humanity, one not bound to national perspectives, an account that, like good science, should work as well in Seoul or Delhi or Buenos Aires as in London or New York.

New concepts are also emerging that capture well the distinctive perspective of big history. One of the most powerful is the idea proposed by the Nobel Prize-winning climatologist Paul Crutzen that today we have entered a new geological era, the “Anthropocene,” the first era in the history of the planet in which a single species, our own, has become the dominant force in shaping the biosphere.⁵ That vision of the contemporary world fits very well with big history’s inherently ecological account of human history.

Since 2004 there have been major organizational developments in the field. The number of college-level courses in big history has increased rapidly, and there may be at least fifty such courses being taught throughout the world today. With the encouragement and support of Cynthia Brown, Dominican University of California in San Rafael (near San Francisco) has become the first university to introduce big history as a foundation course for first-year students. In April 2011, a scholarly organization was founded to develop big history as a research and teaching field: the International Big History Association. Barry Rodrigue and Daniel Stasko have traced the rapid expansion of teaching and scholarship in big history in essays available on the IBHA web site, and in August 2012 the IBHA will host the first major international big history conference in Michigan.⁶ In March 2011 the “Big History Project” was launched to build a free online high school syllabus in big history.⁷ There are many indirect signs that big history is finding its way to a wide audience. In Amsterdam, big history has been the subject of public debate for well over a decade, in response both to the University of Amsterdam’s introduction of a big history course and to the granting to William McNeill of an Erasmus Prize in 1996. Fred Spier and Barry Rodrigue have tracked teachers and scholars interested in the field and have shown that a remarkable number of people are undertaking courses or research projects closely aligned with the goals of big history.

But despite these signs of growth, the field still has a long way to travel. The conventional borders between disciplines remain well policed and are sometimes defended with surprising aggression. This may help explain why, though there now exists a substantial body of big history scholarship, and big history promises to open up exciting new research agendas (includ-

ing the meaning of complexity and energy flows, and the role of information across many disciplines), there are still no large interdisciplinary research projects in the field. At the time of writing, there is only one formal university appointment in big history (Fred Spier at the University of Amsterdam), and there exists only a tiny cohort of graduate students engaged in big history projects (three of them currently at Macquarie University in Sydney). A start has been made on teaching big history in high schools. But it remains to be seen how many schools and education departments will decide that teaching big history can help students understand the underlying unity and coherence of modern knowledge and appreciate the powerful intellectual synergies to be found in genuinely interdisciplinary thinking and teaching.

I am confident that big history will flourish, partly because it evidently has the ability, like a gestalt switch, to help students and scholars see familiar things in new ways. The other reason for my confidence is the energy, intelligence, generosity, and adventurousness of the small group of scholars who have helped build the field over the past two decades. Building big history has truly been an exercise in collective learning.

I would like to end by thanking William McNeill for lending his great authority to a field of historical scholarship that, even a decade ago, seemed extremely marginal. His support of big history has done a huge amount to persuade historians that the project is interesting, illuminating, and important, and that they may have much to gain by expanding their vision of what "history" means.

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NOTES

1. Cynthia Brown, *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present* (New York: New Press, 2007); Fred Spier, *Big History and the Future of Humanity* (Malden, Mass., and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
2. David Christian, "Historia, complejidad y revolución cronométrica" [History, complexity and the chronometric revolution], *Revista de Occidente* 323 (April 2008): 27–57; Christian, "The Evolutionary Epic and the Chronometric Revolution," in *The Evolutionary Epic: Science's Story and Humanity's Response*, ed. Cheryl Genet, Brian Swimme, Russell Genet, and Linda Palmer (Santa Margarita, Calif.: Collins Foundation Press, 2009), pp. 43–50; Christian, "History and Science after the Chronometric Revolution," in *Cosmos and Culture: Cultural Evolution in a Cosmic Context*, ed. Steven J. Dick and Mark L. Lupisella (Washington, D.C.: NASA, 2009), pp. 441–62.
3. David Christian, "The Return of Universal History," theme issue, *History and Theory* 49 (December 2010): 5–26.
4. Available at <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/6.3/index.html>.
5. For short introductions, see David Christian, "The Anthropocene," *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History*, 2nd ed. (Great Barrington, Mass.: Berkshire Publishing, 2010); and S. Will, P. J. Crutzen, and J. R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?," *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (December 2007): 614–21.
6. The web site of the IBHA can be found at www.ibhanet.org.
7. The "Big History Project" web site can be found at www.bighistoryproject.com.