

World History, Global History, Big History

Some remarks on terminology and concepts in relation to history curricula and textbooks

SUSANNE POPP*

Faculty of Philology and History, University of Augsburg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

The international situation of history didactics as an academic discipline is characterized by the fact that many basic disciplinary concepts often differ considerably: The same or similar terms denote different concepts or vice versa comparable concepts not only have various names but also hold different positions in the respective disciplinary framework. The best example of this is history didactics, which is understood as the practical methodology of history teaching in the Anglophone community and an academic subdiscipline of historical science in Germany. This is a considerable obstacle to international research. Since the school subject of World History is taught in many countries, an international comparison of curricula and textbooks deserves great scholarly interest. Therefore, this article tries to deal with the terminological clarification of the concepts of World History, Global History and Big History for the discipline of history didactics. The four most important reasons behind the need for world history teaching are connected to transnational, anti-Eurocentric, decolonisation- and anthropogenic-focused history teaching. The paper discusses different approaches and relationships between world history and national historical viewpoints with the method of curricula comparison. The study programs assigned to national history are usually not explicitly referred to as ‘national history’, but simply as ‘History’. Tacitly equating the respective national history with ‘history’ as such indirectly makes ‘world history’ appear as the history of the ‘others’ rather than as a comprehensive or integrative concept.

KEYWORDS

history didactics, history education, global history, curricula analysis, Anthropocene

* Corresponding author. E-mail: susanne.popp@philhist.uni-augsburg.de

INTRODUCTION

The international situation of history didactics¹ as an academic discipline is characterized by the fact that while there are many common research questions, the basic disciplinary concepts often differ considerably. This is the case when the same or similar terms denote different concepts and comparable concepts not only have different names but also hold different positions in the respective disciplinary framework.

This inhomogeneity has many causes. For instance, it makes a difference whether the discipline of history didactics is positioned academically as a part of educational sciences and focuses primarily on school teaching (like in many anglophone countries), or whether it is understood as part of the historical sciences, like in Germany.² Here, the disciplinary concept of history didactics does not exclusively refer to school teaching and teacher training but integrates them with more general questions of the representation, and mediation of history in the society. This is reflected, for example, in the two guiding categories of German history didactics, 'historical consciousness' and 'history culture' (including memory culture resp. cultures of remembrance, and public use of history).³ These two major categories, or concepts, serve not only as theoretical instruments for school-related research. They also function as tools for the study of society's general approach to past and history, which forms the lively environment for history teaching at schools that influences the historical thinking of teachers and students.

Besides the disciplinary allocation, of course, the national traditions of academic disciplines, with their respective historical and/or pedagogical terminologies, theories, and methods, play an important role, too.

Needless to say, this kind of terminological inconsistency, which also applies to the use of the concept of world history, is a serious obstacle to any academic scholarship and especially to international comparative research in this field. The task of international clarification and alignment of relevant subject concepts, starting with the comparison of national or regional basic terms, has not yet been systematically addressed.⁴ Therefore, this chapter is explicitly intended as a contribution to the clarification of history didactic terminology, and in this case for the term "world history" as it is used in curricula and textbooks in many countries around the world. Therefore, in this introduction I will present some preliminary remarks on the subject of world history as a school subject.

At first glance, world history curricula obviously have one thing in common: the intention to transcend the boundaries of nationally centered history teaching by focusing on transregional or global horizons in relation to the history of regions, nations, and cultures. Often, world history curricula are linked to specific contemporary political and social challenges to which standard

¹This term seems very unwieldy in the Anglophone discussion. It is derived from the German term 'Geschichtsdidaktik' which refers to a long scholarly tradition dating back to the Enlightenment.

²In other countries, universities and colleges are engaged in history teacher education but do not have a dedicated discipline of history didactics.

³See e.g., Rösen, J. (2004). Historical consciousness: Narrative structure, moral function, and ontogenetic development. In P. Seixas (Ed.), *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (pp. 63–85). University of Toronto Press. Thünemann, H. (2018). Geschichtskultur revisited. Versuch einer Bilanz nach drei Jahrzehnten. In T. Sandkühler & H. W. Blanke (Eds.), *Historisierung der Historik. Jörn Rösen zum 80. Geburtstag* (pp. 127–149). Böhlau Verlag.

⁴In 2020, there was an international conference on this topic. See <https://grazconference2020.uni-graz.at/de/>.



national narratives cannot respond in the same way. For example, the dynamics of globalization processes since the 1990s have strengthened the introduction of world history within the national history curricula in some countries. Another example that promotes interest in world history teaching is the goal of combatting Eurocentrism. This goal has an important place in the UNESCO program of the Sustainable Development Goals.⁵ Finally, there is the example of a comprehensive history of humankind (cf. the term ‘Anthropocene’), which many advocates of this world history approach see as a necessary component of education for global solidarity in the face of the current anthropogenically caused climate crisis.

Often, the plea for world and global history curricula is linked to the desire and hope to decenter national narratives and combat their immanent tendency to create misconceptions about the ‘others’ (e.g., prejudices, national and/or cultural hubris, blind spots) through a broader perspective on the history of Humankind. However, this must be said clearly, the pursuit of peaceful and cosmopolitan understanding and tolerance is not always the driving force behind the introduction of world history as a school subject. There are other motives as well. For example, the legacy of imperialism and colonialism can lead to a global framework to the respective national history and to the establishment of ‘world history’ – as well on the part of the former metropolises as of the postcolonial nations. Additionally, there are also past and present world history curricula that are precisely not associated with overcoming the nationally centered perspective, but with an explicit striving for national supremacy at the global level. In this case, the goal is to provide students with knowledge about the ‘world’ on which the ‘own’ nation or empire wants to exert influence.

Not only the intentions, but also the structures of international curricula for world history can differ significantly. In one case, World History can be anchored as a separate subject in the curriculum – at least in some grades – next to the subject History (= national history). This is a structure, that can often be found in the USA. In other cases, however, world history is integrated into a single history subject. In that case, the individual period chapters present firstly the national history, followed by world history.

Finally, international world history curricula differ with regard on the ideas of ‘global history’, which has experienced a major international upswing as a historical sub-discipline since the 1990s.

In the ensuing sections, this chapter turns to the different curriculum and textbook concepts that are called ‘world history’, with the following issues: (1) First, it discusses whether and to what extent the curricular understanding of ‘world history’ corresponds to the respective concepts of historical sciences. (2) Second, the relationship between ‘world history’ and ‘national history’ in the curricula is examined. (3) Third, the concept and concerns of ‘global history’ are considered in relation to ‘world history’ curricula. (4) Finally, Big History – which is present on the Internet with many didactic offers for school lessons⁶ – will be discussed with regard to its relation to world history, but also to the so-called Planetary History.⁷ Even if the latter concept is

⁵See SD 4: Quality Education in UNESCO and Sustainable Development Goals (2021) <https://en.unesco.org/sustainabledevelopmentgoals>.

⁶This is particularly true for Christian, D. (2018). *Origin story: a big history of everything*. Allen Lane. See also the website of the Big History Project: <https://www.bighistoryproject.com/home>.

⁷Chakrabarty, D. (2021). *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. The Chicago University Press.



very new and (still) little received in history didactics, it can – in comparison – highlight important aspects of Big History.

In general, the following considerations are far from being exhaustive. Rather, they proceed in a quite woodcut-like manner. Their aim is to provide a basis for further international discussion and research on different concepts of ‘world history’ in curricula by pointing out essential questions for this. It should be added, however, that the considerations presented here are based on German or German-speaking and Anglophone discourses.

THE TERM ‘WORLD HISTORY’ IN HISTORY DIDACTICS AND THE HISTORICAL SCIENCES

This section begins with some remarks on the concept of ‘world history’ in historiography and the historical sciences.⁸ However, a fundamental discussion of this issue would go beyond the scope of this chapter. For world history has a tradition that goes back to Greek antiquity and has therefore undergone many conceptual changes up to the present day. As an important historical variant of world history, however, the History of Humankind that emerged in the European Enlightenment should be mentioned, because in some respects it can be understood as a precursor of the Big History. In definitive opposition to dogmatic-theological world histories, enlightened History of Humankind understood humanity as a unity and conceived its history as a secular process of human interaction with the environment that can be rationally known through interdisciplinary research. This kind of enlightened universal history is often criticized today as Eurocentric and sometimes even racist. Here is not the place to discuss these questions. However, it should be sufficiently considered that the Enlightenment was a multi-layered epoch which saw its ‘battlefields’ more in Europe than in the colonies and the non-European world. For example, witch hunts were still taking place in Europe (in the year 1782 one of the last ‘witches’ was executed in Europe⁹) and, on the other hand, Carl von Linnæus’ ‘Systema naturae’ systematically assigned the species *Homo sapiens* to the ‘mammals’ (order: primates)¹⁰ – for the first time since antiquity. The Enlightenment thinkers’ sense of superiority was by no means directed only against script-less and other supposedly ‘backward’ civilizations in other regions of the world, but primarily against irrationalism, illiteracy, and (religious) superstition in European societies. Without any doubt, however, the leading representatives of Enlightenment considered the path of European ‘reason’ and ‘progress’ they had in mind to be the universal path that the whole of humanity had to follow.

In systematic terms, the world history as an academic discipline aims at globally comprehensive spatial and temporal scope of historical approach, which does not exclude any macro-region considered as being historically relevant. However, the overview of research publications that are entitled ‘World History’ clearly show that the scope of the geographical

⁸See also Bentley, Jerry H. (Ed.) (2011). *The Oxford Handbook of World History*. Oxford University Press.

⁹See the contemporaneous document: Schlözer, A. L. von (1783). Abermaliger JustizMord in der Schweiz, 1782. A. L. Schlözer’s *Stats-Anzeigen*, 3(7), 273–277. http://ds.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/viewer/image/1944381_003/1/LOG_0003/.

¹⁰Cf. e.g., Ereshefsky, M. (1997). The Evolution of the Linnaean Hierarchy. *Biology and Philosophy*, 12, 493–519, doi:10.1023/A:1006556627052.



and chronological dimension is by no means always universal. The majority of those works specializes spatial, and/or temporal, and/or thematic segments.¹¹

Equally diverse is the spectrum of compositional structures. There are publications that present chronological data for all major world regions, strung together as ‘containers’ of the history of states, world regions, continents – without paying attention to interregional relations and exchanges between them.¹² A completely different type of our category uses the term “world history” in a purely emphatic sense, ascribing ‘outstanding significance’ to individual historical phenomena for the entire history of humankind.¹³

Another kind of ‘world history’, very different from those variants, looks at the history of humankind (or planet Earth) from a bird’s eye view (= macro perspective) to explore basic principles of historical development that are supposed to explain the trajectory of the history of humankind and to shed light on the challenges of the present. Such ‘big pictures’ of history have become very popular in recent years, such as Jared Diamond’s ‘Rich and Poor. The Fates of Human Societies’,¹⁴ Yuval Noah Harari’s ‘Sapiens. A Brief History of Mankind’,¹⁵ or David Christian’s ‘Big History’.¹⁶ Finally, a current world-historical approach is to be mentioned, which in fact has a global scope. It does not focus exclusively on transregional systems of interaction, but always includes them and thus differs fundamentally from the principle of merely stringing together epochs that are divided into isolated spatial units.¹⁷

Turning from historiography to the academically established discipline of World History, the international comparison shows once again that there are different variants here as well. In many cases, the academic subject ‘World History’ refers to the ‘world’ *outside* one’s own nation and civilization, with numerous sub-disciplines of chronological, geographical, and/or cultural specializations coming into play internally. In other countries – such as Germany – however, the subject is not (any longer) established at university. Here as in comparable cases, the universities offer regionally specialized ‘area studies’ and recently also the academic discipline of global history.

Global history is a new sub-discipline of historical studies that has emerged in the narrower context of the accelerated processes of globalization since the 1990s. It is far from aiming for a ‘universal’ view of history. Rather, it is a scholarly approach that focuses on specific questions and uses specified methods (e.g., comparison). The topics usually deal with (transregional or global) processes of interaction and entanglement that – this the characteristic feature – transcend the boundaries of nation states, empires, or civilizations. Even if global history research focuses on

¹¹ As a single example among numerous comparable ones, here is: Headrick, D. R. (2009). *Technology. A World History*. Oxford University Press. – See also the series of ‘The New Oxford World History’ <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/n/new-oxford-world-history-nowh/?cc=de&lang=en&>.

¹² Kinder, H., & Hilgemann, W. (1977–1978). *The Penguin atlas of world history* (2 vol.). Penguin Books.

¹³ For example: Williams, H. (2008). *Days that changed the world: the defining moments of world history*. Quercus.

¹⁴ Diamond, J. M. (2005). *Guns, germs, and steel: the fates of human societies* (with a new chapter on Japan). Norton.

¹⁵ Harari, Y. N. (2014). *Sapiens: a brief history of Humankind*. Harvill Secker.

¹⁶ Christian, D. (2018). *Origin story: a big history of everything*. Allen Lane.

¹⁷ See e.g., the six-volume work *A History of the World*, edited since 2013 by A. Iriye and J. Osterhammel, <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/collection.php?cpk=1493>

Cf. also Northrop, D. (Ed.). (2012). *A Companion to World History*. Wiley-Blackwell.



individual (world) regions, the 'global' always plays a constitutive role: the local-regional, national, or cultural phenomena are considered in a particular awareness of global horizons, placed in global contexts, and/or explored for possible 'intersections' of global processes and their 'local' manifestations. Of course, traditional national narratives can also be re-constructed in a global-historical perspective, whereby the respective narratives change considerably.

There have been discussions about the concept of world history as an academic discipline for a long time and in the present. More recently, the distinction between global history and world history has received much attention. However, this differentiation does not play the same role everywhere. In Germany, for example, there are rather strong reservations about the scientific dignity of world history. Here, global history is considered the research 'project' that is much more precise in terms of theory and research methodology. In the USA, however, the situation is different. There, both world history and global history are established as academic subjects and the differentiation between the terms 'world history' and 'global history' is much less pronounced than in Germany. Thus, the World History Association (WHA)¹⁸ includes many historians doing research in the field of global history, and the Journal of World History¹⁹ publishes numerous articles on global history.

Finally, as far as school curricula and textbooks are concerned, internationally only the term 'world history' is used, regardless of whether a curriculum includes aspects of global history or not. World history' is defined by national history, because it is understood as including historical topics that are *not* part of the respective national history ('our history').

ame structure: Chronology is the guiding principle. The individual epochs cover geographically different areas (world regions, "major civilizations"), which are placed side by side. Differences are found only in the classification and labeling of historical epochs and socio-geographical units. However, the selection of historical content differs, depending on the content of the respective national curriculum and the national interpretation of world history.

Thus, when history didactics does comparative research on international World History curricula and textbooks, it must be kept in mind that those curricula are always a matter of *nationally* shaped ideas of world history. Therefore, to achieve a sustainable basis for international comparison, the World History curricula and textbooks must be additionally examined in their relationship to the national history curricula and textbooks.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CURRICULA FOR WORLD HISTORY AND NATIONAL HISTORY

At the beginning of this section, a characteristic semantic feature of the relationship between the curricula for national history and world history should be highlighted. As already indicated before, the study programs assigned to national history are usually not explicitly referred to as '*national history*', but simply as 'History'. By tacitly equating the respective national history with 'history' as such indirectly makes 'world history' appear as the history of the 'others' rather than as a comprehensive or integrative concept.

¹⁸See World History Assióciation: <https://www.thewha.org/>.

¹⁹See Journal of World History: <https://uhpress.hawaii.edu/title/jwh/>.



This typical characteristic is reflected in the prevailing modes of relating the curricula of (national) history and world history. Let us look at countries which teach – at least for some grades – (national) History and World History side by side as school subjects. In most cases, the world history curricula *exclude* the respective national history – instead of relating the two. This structure indirectly illustrates that the national world history curriculum is dominated by a nation-centered perspective, as it presents the history of the ‘world’ as the history of global ‘others’. While this concept of world history may – which is certainly desirable – increase young people’s knowledge about the history of foreign world regions, it does not support the learners’ understanding of the ‘own’ national history being an integral part of world history. The exclusion of national history from world history is also found in those curricula that teach national and world history in a single school subject. Under the umbrella of common epoch chapters, they present first topics of national history and then of world history without mutual references.

But there is an obvious and very promising, but nevertheless little practiced alternative to avoid the educationally questionable semantic opposition between ‘us’ (national history) and ‘the others’ (world history). It is provided by another type of world history curriculum, which consciously and purposefully integrates the respective national history into the world history as ‘nation among nations’.²⁰ This structure offers the inspiring intellectual experience to the learners to face two different readings of their ‘own’ (national) history: the (national) History curriculum provides the perspective of the national ‘we-group’, while the World History curriculum offers a partially decentered and ‘provincialized’ view of the ‘own’ national narrative. By comparing the two different historical representations of one and the same historical topic, the students can grasp the constructional nature of narratives depending on framework and site-bound perspectivity.

A famous example of this concept, which will be dealt with in the next chapter, too, is the world history curriculum of the University of California, Los Angeles, which was developed about thirty years ago as World History Content Standards.²¹ At that time it sparked fierce public criticism for his allegedly unpatriotic portrayal of national history.²² From a conventional point of view, the approach of this World History curriculum – to depict national history as the history of a ‘nation among nations’ – is at odds with the idea of American ‘exceptionalism’. Although this idea is particularly pronounced in the United States, similar tendencies exist elsewhere. This is because the concept of ‘exceptionalism’ can be seen, albeit to varying degrees, as an integral part of any ideas of national history in general. That type of world history curriculum that excludes the respective national history avoids such ideological challenges, but has the didactic disadvantages described mentioned above (‘we and the others’).

In addition, this section should also include some reflections on national history curricula. This is not so much because there are many national education systems that do not teach world

²⁰Cf. Bender, T. (2006). *A nation among nations: America’s place in world history*. Hill and Wang.

²¹National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles, CA (Ed.) (1996). *Contents of National Standards in World History for Grades 5–12*. NCHS.

See also *Contents of National Standards in World History for Grades 5–12*, <https://phi.history.ucla.edu/nchs/world-history-content-standards/>.

²²Cf. Nash, G., Crabtree, C., & Dunn, R. (1997). *History on trial: culture wars and the teaching of the past*. Knopf. However, the content of the national history curriculum was also criticized: *United States History Content Standards for Grades 5–12*, <https://phi.history.ucla.edu/nchs/united-states-history-content-standards/>.



history at all – neither as a separate subject nor as part of an integrated concept. However, a conceptual clarification seems much more important.

Many representatives of history didactics understand national history and world history as strictly opposing concepts. This is correct in principle but requires differentiated consideration. The main reason for that is that all school curricula on national history contain a variety of historical topics that cannot be considered as national history in a strict sense. German curricula cover, for example, Egyptian, Greek and Roman antiquity, Columbus' voyages of discovery, the French Revolution, and so on. These topics are not directly part of national German history. However, one must keep in mind, that a national narrative never can be told solely with such content that is, so to say, 'puristically' limited to the specific territorial, political or economic internal space of the respective nation (or state or empire). Rather, it must include the trans-regional and international contexts relevant to its narrative – which, however, is always done in an explicitly national perspective. The effects of this national perspectivity on non-national topics become very apparent, for example, through internationally comparative textbook studies on common topics such as the French Revolution.²³ The results always clearly demonstrate the differences between the national perspectives on one and the same historical topic.

Incidentally, the same applies to world history curricula and textbooks, which always mirror the perspectives of the respective national history. Although, to my knowledge, there is no relevant research yet, it can be assumed that an international comparison of the representation of common topics in 'world history' curricula and textbooks from different countries will reveal maybe other, but no fewer national differences as they are visible in the field of national history textbooks.

This section tried to show that the relationship between national history and world history – in terms of curricula and textbooks – is more complex than it is often portrayed. Of course, there is an obvious difference of spatial scope. But every national history curriculum also includes parts of the 'world history' beyond the nation. And accounts of world history curricula can vary widely in terms of national history. They can be highly influenced by the respective national perspective on the 'world' or attempt to decenter the national narrative in a global-historical approach.

CURRICULA FOR WORLD HISTORY AND GLOBAL HISTORY

To my knowledge, there is no school subject called 'global history' at the international level. However, it can be observed that many World History curricula and textbooks are on their way to integrate aspects of global history approaches. This can be seen in the increasing presence of topics that explicitly address processes of transregional interaction (in a very broad sense), e.g., voyages and migration, long-distance trade routes and networks of exchange, land-based empires, transoceanic interconnections, communication networks, spread of belief system religions, encounter of civilizations, cultural transfers and exchange. They thus go beyond a conventional

²³Cf. e.g., Riemenschneider, R. (Ed.) (1994). *Bilder einer Revolution. Die Französische Revolution in den Geschichtsschulbüchern der Welt/Images d'une révolution. La Révolution française dans les manuels scolaires d'histoire du monde entier*. Diesterweg, Hachette.



structure that juxtaposed individual ‘major’ civilizations or world regions without paying much attention to transregional interactions.

The curriculum of the ‘World History Content Standards’,²⁴ mentioned above, is worth being revisited here. It has two special features, both of which can be considered very innovative. On the one hand, it integrates the history domain of the respective nation into the world history narrative. On the other hand, it bases the structure of the subject World History on explicitly global-historical structures. Therefore, one speaks of a new type of ‘globally conceptualized world history’. Its narrative structure connects the most important epochs from the early history of mankind to the present with the central idea of the increasing interdependence between civilizations – first within and then between the different world regions up to the global interaction systems of the digital age. This results in a narrative that is oriented towards the history of globalization and thereby – regardless of the discussion within global history about the beginning of global history²⁵ – integrates the ‘prehistory’ of the history of the ‘interaction of world-spanning systems’.²⁶ Even though this concept represents more or less a history of linear progression, regional inequalities, shifts, and regressions in the transregional or global development of interaction are not neglected.

This curriculum is worth mentioning because its core idea of telling world history as a story of globalization has been a lasting inspiration for many other world history curricula and textbooks.²⁷ Even if these do not adopt the basic narrative structure of ‘increasing transregional and global interconnectedness’, they enrich the conventional curriculum with inspiring ideas of global history.

In summary, the following should be emphasized at the end of this short section: When comparing world history curricula internationally, attention should be paid to whether and to what extent a curriculum is structured by global history concepts or at least integrates global history aspects - or not. This is because the terminology of school textbooks and curricula makes no distinction between world and global history, whereas history didactics as a discipline makes a clear differentiation between the concepts ‘global history’ and ‘world history’.

BIG HISTORY AND PLANETARY HISTORY

The historical sub-discipline Big History²⁸ integrates studies on the history of the cosmos, the earth, the biosphere (life) and humanity and searches for general patterns by examining long

²⁴National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles, CA (Ed.) (1996). *Contents of National Standards in World History for Grades 5–12*. NCHS.

²⁵Cf. e.g., Conrad, S. (2017). *What is global history?* Princeton University Press. – Beckert, S., & Sachsenmaier, D. (Eds.) (2018). *Global history, globally: research and practice around the world*. Bloomsbury Academic. – Jürgen Osterhammel (see footnote 26), for example, argues for global history to begin not before 1500 with the start of earth-spanning systems of interaction.

²⁶Osterhammel, J. (2011). Globalizations. In J. H. Bentley (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of World History* (pp. 89–104, here: p. 96). Oxford University Press.

²⁷See as examples for globally conceptualized world history textbooks: Bentley, J. H. et al. (Ed.) (2020). *Traditions & encounters: a global perspective on the past* (7th ed.). McGraw-Hill. – Dunn, R. E. (Ed.) (2000). *The new World History: a teacher's companion*. Bedford/St. Martin's.

²⁸Cf. Spier, F. (2011). *Big History and the future of humanity*. Wiley-Blackwell. – Christian, D. (2005). *Maps of time: an introduction to Big History*. University of California Press. – Christian, D., Stokes Brown, C., & Benjamin, C. (2013). *Big History: between nothing and everything*. McGraw-Hill.



time frames. It developed about 20 years ago from world history, especially in the USA and Australia. Its essential foundation is the close interdisciplinary collaboration of the historical sciences and archaeology with the natural sciences, which have made great strides in the last century in the areas relevant here. A prominent example is the pioneering invention of radiometric dating technology in the 1950s.

Big History is a universal history approach that has in common with world history and global history that it fundamentally transcends the framework of national history. The essential difference, however, is that Big History does not place the history of humanity at the center of its narrative. Rather, it replaces it with the much broader history of the species *Homo sapiens* as integral part of the planetary biosphere into the comprehensive framework of an evolutionary development from the Big Bang to the present.

The reference point of Big History and Planetary History is the so-called ‘Anthropocene.’²⁹ This term denotes a new geological epoch, and stands for the significantly changed role of the species *Homo sapiens* in the Earth system. Whether one sees the beginning of the Anthropocene in the heavily fossil fuel-dependent industrialization of the 19th century, or in the era of the so-called Great Acceleration³⁰ – referring to the unprecedented leap in world population numbers, energy and water consumption, human control over the environment, and human interconnectedness since the 1950s – makes no difference in its core: The *Homo sapiens* has become in a very short time, a ‘[...] *geophysical* force capable of changing [...] the climate system of the planet *as a whole*’³¹ – by bringing about global warming, climate change and species extinction on the entire planet, with fearsome consequences for human life on Earth. To ‘see’ the Anthropocene, however, requires large time and space scales and a comprehensive ‘big picture’ to adequately map human history in it. Both Big History and Planetary History respond to the coincidence of highly different time scales in the present – the geological times, the history of the biosphere and the *Homo sapiens*, and the living experience in the present.

For proponents of Big History and Planetary History the study of the past is the key to understand the specific challenges of the contemporaneous world we live in. This includes not only the ability to think in multiple time scales, but also the ability to switch between the different perspectives of an anthropocentric ‘humanistic’ history and of Big or Planetary History which decenters humankind in historical thinking in favor of the interdisciplinary study of a system of natural and human coevolution. Even if it is impossible for humans to abandon the anthropocentric view, one can become aware of its impact on historical thinking. Big History and Planetary History, therefore, call for a new understanding of the ‘figure’ of the ‘human’. Besides the familiar ‘human’ of ‘humanistic’ history, who pursues goals and interacts with his

²⁹At the beginning of this century, Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen (1933–2021) proposed to create a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene. Steffen, W., Crutzen, P. W., & McNeill, J. R. (2007). The Anthropocene: are humans now overwhelming the great forces of nature? *A Journal of the Human Environment*, 36(8), 614–621.

³⁰McNeill, J. R., & Engelke, P. (2016). *The great acceleration: An environmental history of the Anthropocene since 1945*. Harvard University Press.

³¹Chakrabarty, D. (2021). Introduction: Intimations of the Planetary. In D. Chakrabarty, *The climate of history in a planetary age* (pp. 1–20, here p. 3). The University of Chicago Press. Italics in the original text.



environment, there is, as Chakrabarty says, another ‘human’, ‘[...] the human as a geological agent, whose history cannot be recounted from within purely humanocentric views (as most narratives of capitalism and globalization are).’³² However, this kind of change of perspective by no means intends to replace the familiar ‘humanistic’ history – neither in historical research and scholarship nor in teaching at schools and universities. However, it requires that in pedagogical contexts, especially in history lessons, both images of the human are brought to the attention of the students on order to serve as mutual critical reference points.

The Australian historian David Christian, one of the leading exponents of Big History, consciously emphasizes its narrative character.³³ He understands Big History as an ‘origin story’ for the people of our time who have a need for a meaningful narrative that encompasses the history of humanity as a whole. This is backed by his hope that this narrative could generate just that sense of a unified humanity that seems to be necessary ‘[...] to navigate through the global challenges of the next few decades’.³⁴

Since 2015, several study programs for Big History in schools and universities are introduced in many countries³⁵ like Australia, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, or the United States, accompanied by a broad spectrum of explanatory videos and web-based interactive presentations on the internet. Internationally, the probably most prominent curriculum, the ‘Big History Project’, supported by the Gates Foundation, and based on the work of the David Christian,³⁶ is structured by the principle of ‘increasing complexity’, that, according to him, links the history of the species *Homo sapiens* as well as the evolution of the biosphere and the history of planet Earth.³⁷ Within human history, Christian identifies ‘collective learning’ and intergenerational accumulation of knowledge as that characteristic that distinguishes the species *Homo sapiens* from all other known species of the biosphere. ‘Human history is driven by collective learning just as the history of living organisms is driven by natural selection.’³⁸

The curriculum of the Big History Project is chronologically divided into different ‘threshold stages’ within the framework of the three ‘phases’ of physical, biological, and cultural evolution. Apart from the emergence and evolution of life on Earth (approx. 4.2 billion years ago) and of *Homo sapiens* (approx. 250,000 years ago), the following ‘threshold stages’ are of considered

³²Chakrabarty, D. (2021). Introduction: Intimations of the Planetary. In D. Chakrabarty, *The climate of history in a planetary age* (pp. 1–20, here p. 3).

³³With E. H. Carr David Christian differentiates between ‘history as truth’ (based on evidence) and ‘history as story’ (based on ‘history as truth’). The latter cannot offer an objective historical truth. Big History, according to Christian, is both ‘history as truth’ and ‘history as story’. Cf. Christian, D. (2018). *Origin story: a big history of everything*. Allen Lane, p. 19.

³⁴Christian, D. (2018). *Origin story: a big history of everything*. Allen Lane, p. 31.

³⁵Cf. the chapters on Australia, Korea, and United States in: Benjamin, C., Quaedackers, E. & Baker, D. (Eds.) (2020): *The Routledge companion to big history*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 337–393.

³⁶For an overview over the so called ‘Big History Project’ study program see David Christian’s TED Talk: Christian, D. (2011, March). *The history of our world in 18 minutes* [Video]. Ted Conferences. Online: https://www.ted.com/talks/david_christian_the_history_of_our_world_in_18_minutes.

³⁷Other proponents of Big History prefer other basic principles. Cf. the http://www.ted.com/talks/david_christian_big_history.html#oldilocks principle in the work of Fred Spier or the idea of ‘energy rate density’ in the work of Eric Chaisson. Cf. Chaisson (2004). Complexity: An Energetics Agenda. Energy as a Motor of Evolution. *Complexity*, 9(3), 14–21. Online: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/cplx.20009>.

³⁸Christian, D. (2018). *Origin story: a big history of everything*. Allen Lane, p. 27.



having outstanding historical relevance for the Anthropocene: (a) the emergence of agriculture (approx. 11,000 years ago) which brought about much larger and more complex societies than before, and (b) the beginning of the industrialization and technologization, culminating in the dynamics of the 'Great Acceleration' since the 1950s.

The core skills that the Big History Project aims to teach are the following: (a) interdisciplinary thinking, which can look at the same subject from different disciplinary perspectives and combine the results; (b) a kind of historical thinking, which uses and connects multiple time scales; (c) the so-called 'claim testing', in which students reflect on which 'metacognitive tools' they use when examining statements and formulating their own arguments (e.g., intuition, authority, logic, evidence).³⁹

As this article focuses on terminological clarification, I will not discuss the didactic quality of Big History in terms of its promises and limitations. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized once again that Big History is not intended as a substitute for traditional 'humanistic' history at school. This aspect, it seems, is often neglected when Big History is criticized, for example, for the lack of discipline-specific methods (such as the analysis of historical sources) or for the extreme abstraction of historical processes (told from a bird's eye view), which makes history look 'inhuman' because individuals and their personal freedom disappear from the 'big picture', as does the diversity of societies or – another objection – the factor of contingency.

Dispech Chakrabarty's concept of Planetary History is informed by his approach to the Anthropocene against the background of his engagement with postcolonial theory and Marxist perspectives. Unlike Christian David and other 'Big Historians', Chakrabarty is not interested to produce a grand narrative from the Big Bang to the Anthropocene. Rather, he is mainly concerned with the consequences of the transformation of humankind into a geophysical force for historical thinking and historiography.⁴⁰ For with this change, the traditional separation between 'natural history' and 'human history' has become at least partially obsolete, while the grand narratives of nationalism, capitalism, postcolonialism and globalization are anchored deeply in 'human history'. One of Chakrabarty's main questions is: 'How should we conceive of our times as we add to the postcolonial, postimperial, and global concerns of the last century issues such as anthropogenic climate change and the Anthropocene? [...] We are simultaneously a divided humanity as well as a dominant partner.'⁴¹

For him, there is no question that it is global capitalism that has essentially caused the Anthropocene. The 'divided humankind' bears very unequal responsibility for this development, but the consequences affect everyone and especially the poor. Chakrabarty acknowledges the ethical requirement of social justice in dealing with the Anthropocene and raises troubling questions about the highly energy-intensive material well-being of the 'Western' lifestyle, which he considers, on the one hand, the basis for individual freedom and democracy, and, on the other, a central factor of the Anthropocene.

³⁹Sullivan, T. (2020). The 'Big History Project' in Australia. In C. Benjamin, E. Quaedackers, & D. Baker (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to big history* (pp. 339–360). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

⁴⁰Chakrabarty first outlined this issue in 2009 in a much-cited but also much-criticized essay. Chakrabarty, D. (2009). The climate of history: four theses. *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2), 197–222.

⁴¹Chakrabarty, D. (2021). Introduction: Intimations of the Planetary. In D. Chakrabarty, *The climate of history in a planetary age* (pp. 1–20, here p. 10). The University of Chicago Press.



The previous remarks have shown that the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty approaches the topic of the Anthropocene in a completely different way than Christian's Big History. He reflects on its challenges both for 'anthropocentric' historical thinking itself and for historiography dealing with a new historical problems with dimensions that extend beyond the familiar categories of political, social and economic inequality.

For this article, which is concerned with clarifying terminological issues, Chakrabarty's explanations of the terms 'global' and 'world' are particularly useful. On the one hand, they explain the use of the term 'planetary', on the other hand, they can be understood as a first contribution to counter the deeply rooted anthropocentrism of historical thinking on a conceptual level. For Chakrabarty distinguishes the term 'globe' from that of 'planet' because the adjective 'global' means something different speaking, for example, of 'global economy' on the one hand and of 'global warming' on the other. In his eyes the terms 'globe' and 'global' are not suitable to *accurately* characterize the changes of the Earth as a 'planet' respective as 'Earth system'. 'The globe [...] is a humancentric construction; the planet, or the Earth system, decenters the human'.⁴² The two concepts of 'globe' and 'planet' represent very different narratives that are, however, closely intertwined, as the dynamics of globalization are an essential factor in the unfolding of the 'planetary' Anthropocene.

In the same vein, Chakrabarty distinguishes between the concepts of the 'planet' and the 'world'. The latter he regards as an anthropocentric concept insofar as it primarily denotes what people understand as the totality of their own specific reality and what they naturally regard as the 'home' of humankind.

In summary, Big History and Planetary History can be understood as new types of universalistic world history that are based on the Anthropocene as a recently introduced historical concept and reference point. They differ from traditional world history or global history in that they no longer understand the history of humankind as the self-evident center of historical thought. They reflect a change of perspective between a 'humanistic' history to another that is critically aware of the anthropocentrism of traditional historical thought. Finally, compared to the 'grand narrative' of Big History, Planetary History deals much more concretely with the theoretical challenges for historiography that are associated with historical thinking in the era of the Anthropocene. At least in parts, these considerations are quite relevant for the future development of the discipline of history didactics.

CONCLUSION

This article is intended as a limited contribution to international comparative research on world history curricula and textbooks. The field of world history certainly has its specific challenges for terminological and theoretical clarifications but can serve as an example for the necessity of such efforts in many other areas of history didactics, too.

In a first step it was shown that the terminologies of historical sciences and history didactics differ considerably from each other. Second, it has been argued that world history curricula are not strictly opposed to national history curricula, but that the two are linked in a common national perspective that needs to be examined in its specific manifestation. Furthermore, it is

⁴²Chakrabarty, D. (2021). Introduction: Intimations of the Planetary. In D. Chakrabarty, *The climate of history in a planetary age* (pp. 1–20, here p. 4). The University of Chicago Press.



indispensable, especially for international comparative research projects, to clarify the relationship of world history curricula to the guiding ideas of global history.

The terminological distinction between Big History and world history curricula does not pose much of a challenge. Nevertheless, that new approach deserves attention. For it focuses on the concept of the Anthropocene, which is still hardly anchored in world history curricula, and – especially in Chakrabarty's Planetary History – not only makes important conceptual distinctions, but also asks questions that are very significant for the discussion of international history didactics add history education.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Susanne Popp is a professor at the Faculty of Philology and History of University of Augsburg, Germany, and the president of the International Society of History Didactics. Her main research interests include European and global perspectives in national history teaching and history museums, visual literacy, popular history magazines in Europe, international comparison of textbooks.

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