

1 Big Optimism: have we reached the end of history?

Big History is a field that concerns itself with a grand perspective on history and how to inform the future with the past.

1. Inleiding - Fred Spier

1.1 Big history as of now

In the beginning there was nothing, which exploded. From nothingness a sudden flash of matter and energy emerged, after which matter[s] began to get steadily more complicated. The universe started out innocent and free of problems.

At least in one part of the universe, on the outskirts of the Milky Way, a blue planet was formed. This planet became the busy stage of a dynamic and volatile phenomenon: life. All of its life evolved to exploit any and all of the resources present, with species going extinct and new ones taking over in succession. Life adapted to and shaped the conditions of its environment, leading to a buildup of oxygen and various cycles and feedback systems. There was no design, purpose or direction to be found.

This state of affairs did not last, however, because a species appeared which could adapt itself to new conditions and exploit its surroundings in ever more sophisticated ways. This cerebral, upright walking primate is known as *Homo Sapiens*. Since nature had a hard time keeping their numbers in check these humans started to turn on each other in the newfound struggle for survival and control.

After having developed agriculture, food became abundant enough to direct cognitive surplus at finding new means of control and destruction. This culminated in the invention of the ultimate doomsday device, the hydrogen bomb, capable of destroying the world many times over. ²

The history of the universe until now has been one of steadily rising complexity, to the point where one might wonder if we will continue to be able to handle the complexity. Perhaps the burden will become too great to handle and society will collapse. Societies of humans have become ever more hungry for and dependent on energy – but instead of organizing society around managing this scarce resource, the dominant organization is one around the free exchange of goods using common currency.

With so many ways in which things could go finally, ultimately and apocalyptically wrong, it would appear to be hard to be optimistic about the future. This is no cause of concern to most people, who go about their lives unperturbed and blissfully ignorant of such matters. Another class of people present explicit arguments to support their optimism. This essay focuses on one such apologist.

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²It is tragic to note that the process which makes the hydrogen bomb possible, nuclear fusion, is potentially an abundant source of energy, but unfortunately it is easier to use for destructive purposes due to the overwhelming energy it releases. What use is destruction without reconstruction?

2. Oorsprong en Evolutie van het Heelal - Ralph Wijers
3. Ons Zonnestelsel - Carsten Dominik
5. Aarde en Leven - Harry Priem
7. Leven als Geologische Kracht - Peter Westbroek
13. Evolutie van de mens - John de Vos
15. Ontstaan landbouw en veeteelt - Fred Spier

1.2 Liberalism

Since classical liberalism (Smith, 1776) the free exchange of goods has been the central dogma of world affairs, ie., laissez-faire economics. Modern liberalism (Rawls, 1992) differs substantially by offering positive freedom as well, through the redistribution of wealth. What has remained constant is a minimal and simplistic narrative of success and stability through free enterprise. Liberalism explicitly opposes comprehensive doctrines, unless they are compatible and can be assimilated to form a pluralistic society.

The danger of this minimal narrative is that there are no constraints or common goals to shepherd the masses toward progress. All individuals are to maximize profits and other self-interests, with the sole condition of respecting individual rights. This has the potential of biasing individuals toward short-term personal gain over long-term visions that may require unanimous participation.

1.3 Fukuyama's thesis

“Have we in fact reached the end of history? Are there, in other words, any fundamental “contradictions” in human life that cannot be resolved in the context of modern liberalism, that would be resolvable by an alternative political-economic structure?” – Fukuyama (1989)

Fukuyama (1989) argues that in a Hegelian sense, history has come to an end. History, seen as the development of ideas in the consciousness of humanity, has reached its endpoint with western liberalism, having defeated fascism with World War II, and communism with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Liberalism is posited as the ultimate ideology, able to assimilate and emulate all former and future narratives. This thesis has inspired the neoconservative movement, resulting in such disasters as “Operation: Iraqi Freedom” and an attempt to bring democracy to Afghanistan.

Aside from the *prima facie* preposterousness of the phrase “the end of history,” there appear to be a number of problems for its declaration of liberalism as the optimal organization of society: terrorism, environmental issues, overpopulation and the question of technology.

1.4 Overpopulation and growth

In a classic paper, Hardin (1968) describes the parable of the tragedy of the commons, which belongs to a class of problems that cannot be solved by technical means. The commons is a shared resource which is inevitably destroyed by its users if they are allowed to follow their own self-interest unscrupulously. The original example is one of a pasture for grazing animals. Each herdsman is best served by maximizing his number of livestock, at the expense of others. Ultimately the pasture will become overgrazed, utilized beyond its carrying capacity. The crucial point is that the positive effects of increasing livestock are fully reaped by its owner, whereas the negative effects are shared by everyone.

This parable is then used as an argument for restricting reproduction, because if we view the world as our pasture, with our ever more numerous descendants as livestock, it becomes obvious that it is a matter of time before unbridled reproduction and resource use will eclipse the world's carrying capacity.

Hardin stresses that an appeal to conscience will not help, because it is not within a person's self-interest to mind the planet's resources. Appealing to conscience is self-defeating because it favours selfish individuals who will ignore the appeal, at the expense of the moral majority. The real solution involves regulation, which unfortunately, *pace* liberalism, involves coercion.

The problem is not limited to overpopulation, though. Economic thought has instilled us with a simplistic measure of prosperity in the form of the Gross National Product. If production is not on the rise, there has to be some kind of problem. The result is an unquestioned insistence on monetary growth that dominates all political decisions. It is ominous and unsettling to realize that such unfettered growth is not unlike the infamous biological menace known as cancer . . .

These problems can be summed up as the failing of Adam Smith's 'Invisible Hand.' This hand is not only invisible, it appears to be non-existent.

1.5 The question of technology

What is progress? The industrial revolution has allowed population to grow unchecked and exponentially, and its peoples to consume and rely on increasing amounts of fossil fuel and other hopelessly finite resources. The only way this can be construed as progress is if there is something intrinsically good about larger populations and increasing production. But this is by no means obvious.

There is indication that hunter-gatherer societies were more peaceful and much less labor intensive than modern society. Division of labor has introduced hierarchy and poverty to the world. Technology requires for its continuing growth and existence an increasingly dedicated population, alienated from its connection to nature, and subjugated using a master-slave morality. First humans domesticated fellow animals, but now we in turn have been domesticated by the iron hand of technology.

Kaczynski has been the most vocal proponent of such views. Also known as the Unabomber (UNiversity and Airline bomber), he carried out a decades long campaign of mail bombs. He successfully dodged the FBI until finally he demanded for his manifesto (1995) to be published, through which his brother was able to identify and report him. His manifesto argues that technological society has increasingly limited individual freedom, and that it is ultimately unsustainable. Reforming the system will not work, as its dogmas are too ingrained in socialization. Through a process called 'oversocialization,' 'the left,' he argues, focuses on narrow issues such as women's and immigrants' rights, acting as a surrogate for an authentically meaningful life as defined by the individual himself. Because of society's expectations and these surrogates, people have lost their view of the big picture: the destruction of our natural habitat, and the erosion of human freedom. In order to resolve this situation it is necessary, according to Kaczynski, to destroy the system from within. Philosopher John Zerzan (1995) agrees with the goals but differs on the means, which he describes as unacceptable. He argues that foragers lived in community with their environment, which has been replaced by alienation for man in industrial society. Ultimately he blames symbolic language for this alienation. In between these stages was the agricultural revolution, which, paradoxically, has introduced famine to humanity (Christian 2004).

While this primitivism seems radical, questioning technology is a well known

22. Industri-
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Wilterdink

23. Fysieke
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literary theme, with examples such as that of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Huxley's³ *Brave New World* and D.H. Lawrence's ambivalence towards the industrial revolution. It is also at the core of Heidegger's philosophy, where it is expressed as *Dasein's* desire for authentic life. The challenge to liberalism is whether real freedom is more than the negative freedom of *laissez-faire* economics, or whether it should safeguard a connection and harmony with nature for individuals to flourish. The darker side is that primitivism has led to terrorism, which is still threatening the world today in the form of radical Islam, incidentally not without its own sense of antagonism towards technology. It would be a subterfuge to claim that such terrorism is an attack on 'our' freedom, rather, it appears to be resentment towards the oppressive decadence of the West.

1.6 Competition or cooperation?

"The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history." – Fukuyama (1989)

This passage epitomizes the cynical mindset that pervades liberalism, portraying each and every exchange as a struggle, man for himself; be a victor or be a victim. I submit that the success of *Homo Sapiens* is better explained as due to cooperation and coordination, survival of the best nurtured instead of the fittest. Art and philosophy are very much social phenomena, and social endeavors seem to be intrinsically rewarding rather than driven purely by such abstract things as market forces. It appears that the accounts of the death of history have been greatly exaggerated!

1.7 Conclusion

I conclude that there is not enough evidence to support the thesis that history has come to an end. Rather, humanity is faced with immense problems and questions. First there is the question of whether the environment will continue to be able to sustain us. Second one can and should wonder whether we want to continue on our current path of alienation.

Whether mankind could converge towards a liberal utopia or head towards inevitable doom is a contingent matter. Most likely mankind will continue plodding along so long as it can as it always has been. This may sound anticlimactic, but as long as mankind is around there will be trouble ahead. No to worry, though; aside from being the supreme troublemakers, we are also the supreme troubleshooters.

³Technological progress has merely provided us with more efficient means for going backwards. – Aldous Huxley

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