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Studying Long-Term Processes in Human History

Johan Heilbron & Nico Wilterdink *

Abstract: *»Die Erforschung von langfristigen Prozessen in der Menschheitsgeschichte«.* Studying long-term processes in human history has over the past decades become a broad and multidisciplinary affair, which draws on various intellectual traditions. The work of sociologist Johan Goudsblom, to whom this special issue is dedicated, was an effort to transgress disciplinary boundaries and to synthesise different perspectives in this field. In this introduction we distinguish four important scholarly lineages: social evolutionism, Darwinian theory, historical sociology, and world history with its extensions into environmental history and big history. We characterise in broad outlines each of these traditions and specify how Goudsblom combined parts of them in his own work on long-term social processes, extending in particular the sociology of Norbert Elias. The final section of this introduction gives a summary overview of the content of this HSR Special Issue.

Keywords: Long-term processes in human history, Johan Goudsblom, social evolutionism, developmental theories, Darwinian evolutionary theory, historical sociology, world history, environmental history, big history, civilising processes, Norbert Elias.

1. Introduction

Examining long-term processes in human history has a peculiar, somewhat paradoxical history. Being a central component of the emerging social sciences in the 18th and 19th centuries, long-term processes were marginalized in the course of the 20th century when the social sciences became ever more specialized academic disciplines that increasingly focused on the present (Elias 2009b). In their study of the past, historians also tended to adopt a short-term view, equally favouring precision over depth and scope. During the past decades, however, the topic of long-term processes has unmistakably returned to the scholarly agenda. In *The History Manifesto* (2014), to give just one example, historians Jo Guldi and David Armitrage

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criticised the short-termism of their discipline and pleaded for a reorientation towards larger societal questions to be taken up from a *longue durée* perspective (Guldi and Armitrage 2014). The reviving interest is not a return to speculative questions or "philosophical history," as it was once called. Nor is it a disguised revival of Western-centric doctrines and beliefs. Quite the contrary. Current scholarship builds on advances of research in multiple disciplines and research areas, questioning central tenets of older notions of development and evolutionary change, and rejecting several of their assumptions and theoretical models. Widely shared ecological concerns and geopolitical tensions in a global age, furthermore, represent an underlying sensibility that differs markedly from the prevailing issues in the expanding European empires of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Scrutinising long-term processes in human history today is a broad and multidisciplinary affair. It is undertaken by historians, archeologists, anthropologists, sociologists, paleontologists, and evolutionary biologists. And their work overlaps with work by physicists and chemists about "non-linear dynamics" and "complex systems," problems with which social scientists were for a long time more familiar than researchers in the physical sciences. Current research is thus entangled in broad constellation of interdisciplinary relations, of exchange and cooperation, but also of conflicts and controversies among and within disciplines.

The work of the Amsterdam-based sociologist Johan Goudsblom (1932–2020) represents a pioneering effort to reintroduce and rethink the study of long-term social processes. Goudsblom's work was an effort to transgress disciplinary boundaries and bring together insights from different scholarly traditions and fields of investigation. In this introduction to this HSR Special Issue, we sketch how his work on long-term processes in human history is related to the most significant intellectual lineages that may be distinguished, and how it synthesises insights derived from these different traditions.

In March 2022, two years after his death, a conference was held in Goudsblom's honour about long-term processes in human history, the theme on which he worked throughout his scholarly life.[1] This special issue of *Historical Social Research* contains a selection of papers presented at this conference, expanded and revised for publication. Dealing with a variety of topics and adopting different time scales, all the papers share a common long-term perspective.

[1] The conference was held in Amsterdam in the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) on 17-19 March 2022 under the title "Long-Term Processes in Human History: A Tribute to Johan Goudsblom." It was organised by Johan Heilbron, Arjan Post, Nico Wilterdink, and Stephen Mennell, with the assistance of Wieger Fransen, Emma van der Marel, and Kobe de Keere, and supported by the Norbert Elias Foundation, the KNAW, and the University of Amsterdam.

2. Conceptualising Societal Development and Evolutionary Processes

From times immemorial, humans have developed and communicated ideas about their common past, about where they came from, and what had led to their present condition. These ideas were usually enveloped in mythical representations of how human beings related to the gods, the cosmos, and living nature. They were couched in cyclical narratives, similar to natural cycles of growth and decay, or they were stories of decline, a downfall after a Golden Age, an expulsion from paradise, as in the book of Genesis.

The emergence of the social sciences from the late 18th century in Europe was inextricably bound up with more secular and progressivist representations of the history of mankind. Enlightenment thinkers, in Scotland and France in particular, elaborated accounts of the progressive change of human societies. Scottish scholars – David Hume, Adam Smith, and Adam Ferguson among them – proposed a four-stage framework of human history (Meek 1976). Humankind, according to this conception, passes through four stages, each of which is based on a particular mode of subsistence: hunting, pastoralism, agriculture, and commerce. In the process societies grow in size, the division of labour develops, and human needs multiply and differentiate. The French tradition centred more on the progress of knowledge and human perfectibility (Dagen 1977). The notion of progress had obtained its meaning in the 17th century battle between the Ancients and Moderns. While progress may not be observable in politics or art, the Moderns argued that it was indisputable in science and technology. This view was broadened by Turgot in the latter half of the 18th century and further elaborated by Condorcet in his famous *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795).

Condorcet's posthumously published outline of ten successive epochs was a narrative of irresistible progress and a tribute to human perfectibility through the advancement of knowledge. Widely read as a heroic testament of the Enlightenment, it was the basic reference for Auguste Comte's view that human knowledge passes from "theological" (religious, animistic) via "metaphysical" (philosophical, essentialist) to "positive" (scientific, empirical) thinking. This "law of the three stages" formed the core of Comte's design for the new science of sociology. Condorcet's *Esquisse* was significant in another sense as well: it provoked Malthus's strongly anti-utopian *Essay on the Principles of Population* (1798), which was a negative version of the developmental view of human society. As populations tend to grow at a faster rate than food supplies, starvation and poverty are natural phenomena and an inescapable feature of the human condition. The Malthusian law of population was a recurrent issue in 19th-century debates; it provided Darwin with the clue for his theory of natural selection.

An even more encompassing view of historical development was Herbert Spencer's evolutionary theory, which contended that nonliving nature, biological organisms, and human societies were all subject to the same laws of evolution – from small to large, from homogeneous to heterogeneous, from simple to complex (Spencer 1890; Andreski 1971). Like Comte and Spencer, early anthropologists such as Edward B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan argued that humankind follows a path from lower to higher stages, distinguishing "savagery," "barbarism," and "civilisation" as the three successive main stages in the evolution of human societies.

These theories of social evolution generally shared the idea that the overall development of humankind was one of material, scientific, and moral progress, that different human societies at a given moment in history represented different stages on this path of progressive development, and that contemporary Western societies were the most advanced (Trigger 1998; Sanderson 2007, 12-34). Marx and Engels basically shared these assumptions, even though their notion of an "Asiatic mode of production" did not fit well into their evolutionary scheme, and progress was "dialectically" conceived as driven by class struggle and as profoundly discontinuous, marked by deep crises and revolutions (Marx 1904; Engels 1908; cf. Knöbl 2022).

In the 20th century, developmental schemes and evolutionary theories became strongly criticised as deterministic, teleological, Western-centric, overoptimistic, and empirically ill-founded. While there were sound scientific reasons for these criticisms, they had also to do with a reaction among writers and philosophers to the newly established social sciences in the university (Lepenies 1988; Pinto 1995), and with dramatic events that shook the Western belief in progress – two World Wars, the formation of Fascist and Communist regimes, the Great Depression. Under the impression of such experiences, philosopher Karl Popper (1957) even went so far as to condemn any kind of social evolutionism (or "historicism" as he called it) as opening the door to totalitarianism, since it suggested an inevitable, pre-determined future that left its adherents no choice.

In anthropology and sociology theories of evolution and, more broadly, long-term development were increasingly abandoned in favour of empirical research on contemporary societies and static models of social reality. Thus, in Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism, which became the dominant sociological theory after 1945, human societies were conceived as "social systems" in which each part serves to contribute to the maintenance of the whole, and any deviation from prevailing norms sets in motion a counter-response to restore conformity (Parsons 1951). Yet sociological functionalism paid due attention to one type of social change, called modernisation, the transition from a "traditional" to a "modern" (more differentiated, technologically and economically more advanced, more rationally organised) society. Functionalist modernisation theory was not far removed from old social

evolutionism, repeating several of its weaknesses: Western-centrism, unwarranted belief in progress, poor empirical underpinnings (Wertheim 1974; Gilman 2004).

A more explicit and at the same time more critical continuation of classical social evolutionism was undertaken by some scholars outside mainstream social science, such as the anthropologists Leslie White (1959) and Marvin Harris (1977, 1979), and sociologist Gerhard Lenski (Lenski, Nolan, and Lenski 1995; Lenski 2005). These neo-evolutionists avoided the pitfalls of teleology, Western-centrism, and crude determinism, did not automatically equate evolution with progress, gave more room to developmental variations, and made use of a much larger amount of empirical data to support their theories. Most of these theories had a "materialist" flavour, giving causal priority to changes in technology and production. It became standard to regard the transition from gathering and hunting to agriculture and pasture, and, much later, the transition from handicraft production to mechanized industrial production as crucial transformations in human history, which accelerated the long-term trends of accumulation of technological knowledge, intensification of the exploitation of natural resources, and growth of total production and energy use (Sanderson 2007, 105-31, 154-222).

In certain respects, Goudsblom followed this approach. He, too, considered the transitions to agriculture and mechanical industry as crucially important. In addition, however, he drew attention to another, equally important "ecological transformation," which preceded and conditioned the other two: the human use of fire starting hundreds of thousands years ago. By pointing out the significance of the "fire revolution" as the first of three fundamental "ecological transformations," Goudsblom (1992) stretched human history far beyond the usual time-scales.

At the same time, he remained wary to use the term "evolution" for such a very long-term development. One reason was that he – like Norbert Elias – preferred to reserve this word for biological-genetic changes, which should not be confused with socio-cultural processes (see below). Another reason was, presumably, that he associated "evolution" with a conception of social science which defines as its ultimate goal the formulation of universal laws or propositions. Goudsblom, instead, spoke of processes, trends, or developments – terms that also indicate regularities in social change, but do not suggest that these regularities reflect immutable laws. Typically, Goudsblom almost always used the past tense when writing about social processes, even if they were of widest possible scope and on the highest level of generality, thus expressing that these were *historical* processes, developments that really had taken place rather than elements of a timeless theoretical model.

3. Biological Evolution and Darwinian Theory

When Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* (1859) in which he advanced his theory of natural selection, it was not immediately apparent that this theory would become the most influential strand of evolutionary thinking. From the late Enlightenment until the later part of the 19th century, there had been multiple interactions between the historical and social sciences and various forms of natural history (geology among them), and evolutionary thinking in the life sciences was probably more indebted to the human sciences than the other way around. Darwin had derived the term evolution from Herbert Spencer, who in turn welcomed Darwin's work as a confirmation and elaboration of a part of his own, much broader evolutionary theory.

Yet Darwin's theory came to dominate evolutionary thinking to such an extent that the concept of evolution became largely identified with it. This had to do with both the theory's success in the life sciences and the growing criticism of all kinds of evolutionism in the social sciences. Particularly since its integration with genetics around 1930, Darwinism, or neo-Darwinism as it was now often called, was established as the leading paradigm in biology. On the other hand, the resistance among social scientists to evolutionary thinking grew. This pertained not only to the theories of social evolution discussed above, but also to the conglomerate of ideas that became known as Social Darwinism, in which Darwinian notions of "struggle for life" and "survival of the fittest" (an expression from Spencer) were applied to human societies. Differences in power, wealth, and social status were reduced to, and confused with, differences in biological fitness, which in turn were seen as the outcome of natural selection. Gaining wide popularity around 1900, Social Darwinism served to legitimate unrestricted capitalist competition, wide social inequalities, imperialism, colonialism, and racism, as well as proposals and measures for eugenics (cf. Hofstadter 1960; Hawkins 1997; Trigger 1998, 63-73, 86-7). Mainstream social science took increasing distance from this way of thinking, particularly after the defeat of Nazism, which had manifested some of its ugliest potential consequences. In sharp response, it became standard among postwar social scientists to define their field as fully separate from biology and, by implication, Darwinian evolutionary theory.

From the 1970s, however, the interest in, and openness toward, Darwinism and biology at large among social scientists grew again. This was stimulated by spectacular findings and advances in several branches of biology; in particular genetics, which brought a renewed interest in inborn hereditary traits (or genes, as they were called now) as possible determinants of human behaviour, ethology, or behavioural biology, which suggested intriguing similarities in behaviour and social life between humans and other animals (Wilterdink 1976), and paleontology, which vastly extended the knowledge

about long evolutionary developments that had resulted in *Homo sapiens*. Drawing on such scientific advances, best sellers speculated about the basic characteristics of human nature and how these were rooted in our evolutionary past (such as, already, Morris 1967). In 1975, zoologist Edward O. Wilson launched his ambitious programme of "sociobiology," defined as "the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behaviour" (Wilson 1975, 4). While evoking much controversy, his proposals left a lasting mark on the human sciences. They were at the basis of a new branch of psychology, "evolutionary psychology," which seeks the explanatory basis of human behaviour patterns in genetically given characteristics of the human species that have been formed in long evolutionary processes of natural selection (Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby 1992). A group of American sociologists advanced a somewhat similar, though less reductionist approach under the name of "evolutionary sociology," which advocates the integration of sociology with biology by investigating the evolutionary basis of patterns of human social behaviour and social structures (Holzhauer and Eggert 2021). Objections raised against sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and, to a lesser extent, evolutionary sociology[2] are that they overstate the degree to which patterns of human behaviour are genetically programmed and "hardwired" in the brain, that they contain a lot of speculation about our ancestors' "environment of evolutionary adaptedness" and its supposed impact on human psychology and social behaviour, and that they pay hardly attention to, let alone explain, variations and changes among human groups after that faraway past.

While sociobiology and evolutionary psychology do not offer any explanation for socio-cultural change, another Darwinian perspective that came to the fore in recent years focuses precisely on this topic. According to this approach, called Cultural Darwinism, the mechanisms that explain genetic-biological change – variation, selection, retention, reproduction, adaptation – are also at the basis of socio-cultural change (Richerson and Boyd 2005; Mesoudi 2011). Whereas in biological evolution genes are selected that maximise their own reproductive success, in socio-cultural evolution a similar mechanism is at work: selection takes place in favour of cultural variants (or "memes," in Richard Dawkins's terminology; Dawkins 1976) that induce their bearers – individuals or groups – to behaviour by which these variants are maintained, reproduced, and spread. Cultural Darwinism thus broadens the Darwinian evolutionary model from the realm of living nature to another, relatively autonomous level of reality that is distinctly human.

[2] Publications presented under the label of "evolutionary sociology" are quite variegated; they often deal with both biological-genetic and socio-cultural evolutionary processes and take explicit distance from sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. See, for example, Turner and Abrutyn (2017).

Goudsblom made selective use of these ideas without embracing them fully. He recognised analogies between processes of biological and socio-cultural change but also pointed out important differences. Thus, socio-cultural change is predicated upon the human capacities of learning and symbolic communication, and the selection of cultural variants depends on changing power relations among human groups. Competitive power struggles in combination with the human capacity for cumulative learning, Goudsblom (2000, 20-5) suggests, result in a long-term trend of accumulation of power resources in the course of human history.

Darwinian evolutionary theory was more important for Goudsblom in another way: it provides a framework that illuminates how human socio-cultural development is an outgrowth of biological evolution. Through evolutionary changes in their genetic make-up, humans increasingly acquired the capacities that enabled them to bring about social and cultural changes that cannot be reduced to genetic changes. Social and cultural changes in turn had an impact on genetic changes by modifying selective pressures. Thus, the control of fire by humans enhanced their power in relation to other animals – in particular other large mammals – thus making competition within and between human groups relatively more important, which changed the conditions of biological evolution.[3] Or, to take another example, there are indications that the growth of human brains and the concomitant development of the capacity for language went hand in hand with the social development of increasing group size and extending bonds of cooperation (Goudsblom 2000, 19). In a long process of hominisation, genetic-biological and socio-cultural changes interacted – a "gene-culture co-evolution" in E.O. Wilson's (1998) words. In the course of human history, socio-cultural change increasingly took the upper hand, occurring at a much faster speed than genetic evolution and acquiring greater autonomy with respect to this biological substrate.

Darwinian evolutionary theory is also important for understanding the changing relations between humans and the rest of living nature. The long-term human accumulation of power resources through knowledge, technology, and organisation changed the conditions of biological evolution not only for humans themselves, but also, and even more dramatically, for other organisms. The shift in power relations between species in favour of humans is one of the central long-term developments in human history, Goudsblom (1988, 10-1; 2000, 21; 2002) insisted. It is part of what he called "the expansion of the anthroposphere within the biosphere." By domesticating plants and animals and intensifying the exploitation of natural resources, people

[3] However, Goudsblom (1992) did not specify what kind of biological changes in the human species had been, or could have been, impacted by the control of fire. Only in an addendum to the fifth Dutch edition of the book he wrote briefly about this topic (Goudsblom 2015, 254-5), referring to, among others, primatologist Richard Wrangham (2009).

enhanced their control of non-human nature while remaining fundamentally dependent on it. We will return to this topic in section 5.

4. Historical Sociology

As virtually all classical figures in 19th-century sociology (Comte, Tocqueville, Spencer, Marx, Tönnies) were preoccupied with major historical transformations, in particular with the genesis and development of modern industrial society, qualifying sociology as historical would have been a pleonasm. Sociologists were, obviously, intrinsically concerned with historical change and social transformation. When sociology entered the university from the end of the 19th century, however, broadly conceived developmental and evolutionary visions lost their appeal. Sociologists now had to situate their work with regard to a host of other human science disciplines, while occupying positions in national university systems in which academic and other boundaries were more strictly drawn. The era of generalities is over, declared Émile Durkheim in 1887: sociology was in need of more clearly defined methods, a higher degree of specialisation, and more effective collaboration (Durkheim 1970 [1887]; Heilbron 2015).

It was no longer possible, Durkheim argued, to assume that human evolution was everywhere identical and that societies were merely different versions of one and the same type. Comte's law of the three stages had condemned him to "vague generalities" that erroneously assumed that in the social realm knowledge of the whole has an absolute priority over knowledge of its parts. When observed with the required precision, social phenomena are differentiated in economic, moral, juridical, religious, and political orders of facts. Social differentiation was not merely the topic of Durkheim's doctoral dissertation on *The Division of Labour in Society*, it also suggested the thematic classification of his journal, the *Année sociologique*, defining the main areas of specialisation among its collaborators. Historical developments were examined within each of these research domains, rather than as a general evolutionary process or a separate area of inquiry. Contrary to Durkheim's later reputation as an ahistorical functionalist, much of this group effort was both historical and comparative. For the historical orientation, certain evolutionary tendencies were used, not as unilinear processes or invariable laws, but heuristically to identify patterns of change and propose explanatory principles. Modernity was but one among several historical periods that were investigated. As for geographical scope, regions well beyond the French Empire and the European continent were covered, ranging from Australian Aboriginals to the ancient civilizations of Egypt, India, and China. Durkheim and Mauss eventually proposed civilizations as a central object of

sociological study, not civilization in the singular, they explained, but civilizations in their diversity.

During the interwar years, this collective research effort was taken up and continued in a wide array of disciplines, least perhaps in sociology, where new generations were attracted to alternative theoretical programmes. For historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, however, the *Année sociologique* was the prime model for their journal, the *Annales*. Their successor and inheritor, Fernand Braudel, who consistently referred to Durkheimians (Halbwachs, Hubert, Mauss, Simiand) as exemplary scholars, launched the well-known call for interdisciplinary collaboration around the study of the *longue durée* (Braudel 1958).

And yet among the first generation of academic sociologists, it was Max Weber, rather than Durkheim or any other sociologist, who redefined the historical orientation of the discipline. Weber's work meant a more explicit break with social evolutionism. Shifting the focus from universal evolutionary schemes to *differences* between developments in various world regions and attempting to describe and explain the unique features of Western culture and society, Weber developed a historical-sociological programme that centres on specific periods and societies, and that proposes conceptualisations on the basis of systematic comparisons (Bendix 1960; Collins 1986). It was after the First World War, when historical studies among sociologists continued but evolutionary frameworks came to be seen as outdated, that the expression "historical sociology" emerged. Alfred Weber seems to have coined the term; while occasionally used elsewhere as well, *Geschichtssoziologie* was most developed in Weimar Germany (Steinmetz 2010). Since many of its practitioners were forced into exile after 1933, their work was dispersed, failed to attract much attention in their new countries of residence, especially in the increasingly dominant US; historical sociology as a consequence suffered a dramatic decline.

A new wave of historical sociological studies had to await the 1970s, when expanded universities were challenged by social movements and shaken by the student rebellion (Calhoun 2003; Bucholc and Mennell 2022). Universities were attacked for being an "ivory tower" with an outdated professorial system, and leading paradigms and disciplinary boundaries in various disciplines were called into question. The demise of sociological functionalism gave way to a plurality of new approaches, critical and often politically committed (Marxism, critical theory, feminist theory) or more detached; historical sociology among them. This new wave of historical sociology was associated with the work of primarily Anglo-American authors like Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly, Immanuel Wallerstein, Randall Collins, Theda Skocpol, Jack Goldstone, Janet Abu-Lughod, John Hall, and Michael Mann, among others. Unlike previous waves, it gave rise to an institutionalised subfield. Journals such as *Social Science History* (1976) and the *Journal of Historical Sociology*

(1988) were created, some in close association with professional societies like the Social Science History Association (1976) and research committees such as the section for Comparative and Historical Sociology (1984) of the American Sociological Association. Similar initiatives emerged in other countries: *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* (1976) in Germany, *Genèses: sciences sociales et histoire* (1990) in France, but they were less visible outside their own countries. Programmatic statements, debates, and overviews of the new sub-discipline accompanied the process (Burke 1980; Abrams 1982; Skocpol 1984), later followed by other publishing genres such as introductory texts (Lachmann 2013) and handbooks (Delanty and Isin 2003) that are indicative of an established subfield.

Much of the initial work was centred on large topics such as revolutions, state formation, class relations, and capitalism. Opposing functionalist modernisation theories and constructively engaging with Marxism, the time frame usually adopted was that of the early modern and modern period, although some authors, Perry Anderson and Michael Mann in particular, took a longer view. Members of the next generation perceived the predominantly macro-structural analyses to be too restrictive and "hyperstructuralist" (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005, 22). Shifting their attention to agents of change and repertoires of action, as well as to the actual sequences of events and process dynamics, historical sociology became more diversified. Not only broader thematically, more fragmented, and methodologically pluralist (Mayrl and Wilson 2020, 1346), scholarly exchanges also became internationalised and the scope of interest became more global (Go and Lawson 2017).

Norbert Elias, who was of primary importance for Goudsblom, is one of the historical sociologists who wrote his main work in a period when sociology largely lost its historical orientation. A student of Alfred Weber in Heidelberg in the 1920s, assistant of Karl Mannheim in Frankfurt in the early 1930s, Elias went into exile in 1933 without having been able to finish *The Court Society,* which he was about to defend as his *Habilitationsschrift* (Jitschin 2021). *On the Process of Civilisation* (2012a, original German edition 1939) was written in London and published in Switzerland. After the war, the author worked in adult education before obtaining a university position in Leicester (1954–1962) and a guest professorship in Ghana (1962–1964). Elias's magnum opus on the civilising process was written outside of mainstream sociology and was at odds with the disciplinary division between history, psychology, and sociology. Concerned with "changes in the behaviour of the secular upper classes in the West," as the first volume announces, changing behavioural standards over several centuries were related to the pacification of social life, which was in turn explained by the formation of states as monopolies of violence and taxation, and by the lengthening of the chains of interdependence among their inhabitants. The final part of the second volume proposes a "design" for a more general "theory of civilising processes."

The belated discovery of Elias's work and his growing reputation since the 1970s – in which Goudsblom, among others, played an important stimulating role – can be regarded as part of the general revival of historical sociology since then, though the reception of this work was initially mainly confined to Western Europe. A notable step in the widening of his reputation was an international conference on "Civilisations and civilising processes" in 1984 in Bielefeld. Besides Elias, participants included Keith Hopkins, William McNeill, Immanuel Wallerstein, and other renowned scholars in macro-history and historical sociology. The recently published papers and transcripts of the discussions (Bogner and Mennell 2022) provide an interesting comparison with the volume edited by Theda Skocpol, *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (1984), published in the very year that the Bielefeld conference took place. While Skocpol's volume focuses on the modern period, Elias and most other participants in the Bielefeld conference addressed issues of the longer and very long-term. Elias pleaded to take up the question of "period-transcending processes," which are structured yet unplanned, and have a cumulative character or directionality over multiple centuries and even millennia. Goudsblom's contribution exemplified the objective; his paper was on the "the domestication of fire as a civilising process."

In that same year, Goudsblom published an essay in which he distinguished three different levels at which civilising processes occur: the level of individuals in their specific life course, the level of societies in certain phases of their development, and the level of the multifaceted development that comprises the history of humankind (Goudsblom 1984a; also 1984b, 142-4). While Elias in his main work had focused on the first two levels, Goudsblom argued for extension of research to the third level, humanity as a whole and history in the very long run. In this endeavour, he engaged more explicitly with evolutionary theories (see above) as well as with "world history" that was emerging around the work of William McNeill and others.

5. World History, Environmental History, Big History

Studying long-term processes in human history is primarily a historians' enterprise, one might expect. However, only a small minority of historians was and is involved in it. When history was established as an academic field in the 19th century, its practitioners defined as their main task to derive facts from written records, and to describe important historical events on that basis. Working in an era of growing nationalism, their framework was usually the national state; most of them aimed at contributing to the history of their own nation.

The historians' focus on chains of particular events rather than social structures and long-term developments received theoretical legitimation from a

number of German philosophers at the end of the 19th century – notably, Wilhelm Dilthey, Wilhelm Windelband, and Heinrich Rickert – who defended the autonomy and characteristic properties of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the humanities or "sciences of the mind," against the expanding *Naturwissenschaften*, the natural sciences (Hughes 1958, 183-200; Beiser 2011). While the latter were, in Windelband's words, "nomothetic," aimed at capturing the regularities of nature in general laws, the first were "idiographic," aimed at describing the endless variety and specificities of human actions, cultural phenomena, and historical events. In this field of investigation there was no place for theories of evolution or long-term development.

This stance, whether explicitly formulated or implicitly assumed, is still characteristic of much historical study, though in the 20th century many historians took efforts to bring their discipline nearer to the social sciences. Thus, as noted, the French *Annales* School, which from the start of their journal in 1929 undertook the study of middle-range and long-term changes in demographic and economic conditions, social relations, and "mentalities," was developed in a close relationship with the social sciences, Durkheimian sociology in particular. In the 1960s, a group of American scholars developed the programme of "cliometrics" or "new economic history," which aspired to create a rigorously scientific history based on economic theory, mathematical modelling, and quantitative methods. A similar but broader approach has been developed in recent years under the name of "cliodynamics" (see for example Turchin 2016).

A counter-response to such attempts at integrating history with the social sciences became manifest in the 1970s and 1980s. Lawrence Stone observed in 1979 a revival of narrative history and a concomitant decline of "structural" or "scientific" history (Stone 1979). This shift, theoretically explicated with the label "narrativism," re-affirmed the old self-definition of history as a "humanistic" enterprise, distinguished from the (natural) sciences. Narrativism insists that historians, like fiction writers, tell stories which, even if they are non-fiction, cannot be claimed to reflect a given reality or to add up to some general objective truth (see for instance Fay, Pomper, and Vann 1998). History is too variegated, too complex, too whimsical, too much dependent on coincidences to be captured in generalisations about long-term developments. This kind of scepticism is still widespread among historians and other scholars in the humanities, even when they do not define themselves as narrativists. It was recently expressed in *The Dawn of Everything* (2021), the widely-read and highly praised book by anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow, who claimed to present a completely "new history of humanity" by attacking all kinds of evolutionary or developmental

thinking, which they simplified into one "conventional narrative of human history."[4]

This book with its sharply polemical tenor paradoxically affirms the success and impact of the field of world history or global history, which expanded in recent decades and is now firmly established. An early pioneer in this area was Arnold Toynbee, who in the twelve volumes of his *A Study of History* (1934–1961) dealt with the emergence, development, flourishing, and downfall of a number of civilisations spread over the globe. With this worldwide scope he differed from *Annales* scholars like Braudel, who also went far beyond national borders (and thereby inspired Wallerstein's work on "the modern world-system") but remained focused on Europe and the Mediterranean. Yet, according to later critics, Toynbee did not go far enough. He did not cover the whole of humanity nor the whole of human history, but only the history of "civilisations," that is, agrarian societies with cities, literacy, stratification, and a state structure. Moreover, by viewing civilisations as distinct, separate wholes with cyclical histories of birth, growth, decay, and death, he neglected the interconnections and interpenetrations between these entities. This was the basic criticism by the pioneer of world history of the next generation, William H. McNeill, who in *The Rise of the West* (1963) described how Western civilisation emerged out of interactions between various civilisations throughout the Eurasian continent, and how it came to dominate the history of humankind since the 16th century. In later work, McNeill increasingly stressed the growing significance of long-distance interconnections between human groups spread over the world. It culminated in the masterful overview that he wrote with his son John R. McNeill, *The Human Web* (2003).

McNeill also differed from Toynbee in that he paid much more attention – akin to the neo-evolutionists discussed above in section 2 – to "material" factors: production and trade, technology, and ecological conditions. The latter do not only provide the resources necessary for human survival, but also contain harmful elements, such as disease-bringing micro-organisms. In his ground-breaking *Plagues and Peoples* (1976), McNeill analysed the hidden interactions between these organisms and humans throughout history, highlighting their increasingly global scope, the emergence of pandemics, and their dramatic impact on large-scale events.

Whereas Toynbee's work and McNeill's early studies had been individual undertakings, world history emerged as a scholarly subfield during the 1970s and 1980s, first and foremost in the United States. Instructors and lecturers involved in courses about Western Civilisation, eager to renew their field, started to emphasize cross-cultural connections, raised comparative questions, and developed more global approaches. They founded the US-based World History Foundation (1982) that launched the *Journal of World History* in

[4] See for critical commentaries a special issue of *Cliodynamics*, Vol. 13, SI 2022.

1990. Courses on world history spread rapidly in American high schools, colleges, and universities, gradually replacing the curriculum of Western Civilisation, and redefining national and regional specialisations (Curtis and Bentley 2014). Parallel to the steady stream of course material, scholarly monographs, and reference works, the movement became more differentiated, thematically as well as theoretically. It expanded from North America to Europe and other regions; a world-wide Network of World and Global History Organizations (NOGWHISTO) was founded in 2008.

In the slipstream of world history, another new branch of history was formed: ecological or environmental history, exemplified by the work of Alfred Crosby (1986) and John R. McNeill (2000; McNeill and Engelke 2014), among others. Investigating interactions between human groups and ecological conditions over large distances, environmental history overlaps with world history, broadening and enriching it.

In environmental history, human history meets biology, and, by implication, Darwinian evolution theory (as discussed in section 3). The same can be said about the extension of human history to developments over hundreds of thousands of years from proto-humans or hominids to *Homo sapiens*. Such very broad views, in which the human species is regarded as evolving in interaction with other species, did not remain confined to specialists. They became popular through best sellers such as Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997) and Yuval Harari's *Sapiens* (2014), which not only summarised existing knowledge but proposed original ideas of their own. This kind of work reflects both a heightened "global consciousness," a growing awareness that people all over the world are interconnected, and a heightened "ecological consciousness," a growing awareness that people are fundamentally dependent on their natural environment, and that current social developments threaten to destroy the ecological conditions on which their lives depend. The "expansion of the anthroposphere within the biosphere," to use Goudsblom's expression again, has become highly problematic in view of current and expected problems of environmental degradation, pollution, and global warming.

An even broader framework is offered by the programme of Big History. It was launched by the Sydney-based historian David Christian in 1989 as a university course that presents an overall history of the whole known universe, from the Big Bang to the present, which is specified into the shorter history of life on Earth and the much shorter history of humanity. As Christian argues extensively in *Maps of Time* (2004), these three historical levels are intertwined and show structural similarities (see also Christian 2018; Spier 1996, 2010). Big History developed into both a successful teaching programme, which now offers courses at several universities in different countries, and a thriving research programme, which provides a framework for interdisciplinary investigations. An International Big History Asssociation (IBHA) was

founded in 2010, the *Journal of Big History* launched in 2017. The movement expresses and reinforces what Goudsblom (2001, 15) called the "ruthless historicisation of our world view." The Newtonian view of a static cosmos with the endless repetition of movements according to immutable natural laws has been radically superseded by the view of an expanding cosmos in which everything changes, including the categories of space and time and the laws of physics. The notion of evolution or development does not only apply to human societies and living nature, but also to the inanimate universe. All sciences, all fields of investigation are historical.

Goudsblom saw himself as part of this intellectual and scientific revolution. He was among the first in the Netherlands to recognise the importance of William McNeill's work, making it well-known among sociologists, historians, and a wider public. And after having met David Christian in Sydney in 1992, who had started his course on Big History a few years earlier, Goudsblom took the initiative to organise with others a similar course at the University of Amsterdam, which was launched in 1995 and turned out to be very successful (Goudsblom 2001, 31-44). It still exists, attracting dozens of students from various disciplines every year, and has extended to other universities in the Netherlands as well.

In all this work, Goudsblom moved far beyond the conventional borders of sociology. Yet he remained a sociologist through-and-through, who explicitly built upon the sociological tradition that had taken shape in the 19th century and was set forth in the work of, above all, Norbert Elias in the 20th century. A primary aim of this sociology is to uncover the structure of long-term social processes, to detect directionality, sequences of stages or phases, and underlying mechanisms. At the same time, Goudsblom was well aware of the potential pitfalls of this endeavour. He tended to share the historian's scepticism toward grand theories and abstract models and acknowledged the importance of precise description and chronological ordering of historical facts. As he pointed out in a chapter of the book *The Course of Human History* (Goudsblom, Jones, and Mennell 1996), the terms "chronology" and "phaseology" can be taken to stand for two European traditions of thinking about the past, which go back to Graeco-Roman Antiquity and in the 19th century crystallised into the academic disciplines of history or historiography on the one hand, sociology and anthropology on the other. While there are continuous tensions between the two traditions, they are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the study of long-term processes can only profit from combining the two. A synthesis of "chronology" and "phaseology" is possible, Goudsblom (1996) argues, when we focus not on separate human societies but on the world figuration of interrelated societies that comprise humanity as a whole.

6. The Elias-Goudsblom Perspective on Human History

While Goudsblom's perspective on human history synthesises different disciplinary and theoretical traditions, it has also distinctive traits, which are largely based on the work of Norbert Elias. The Elias-Goudsblom perspective on human history, as it may be called, can be summarised with the adjectives figurational, processual, developmental, and civilisational. "Figurational" and "processual" are common names for the sociological approach developed by Elias and elaborated by Goudsblom and others since the 1970s (see for example Gleichmann, Goudsblom, and Korte 1977); "developmental" and "civilisational" are specifications of this general perspective.

In the *figurational* perspective that Elias (2012b) explicated in his treatise on the fundamentals of sociology, human social life consists of shifting and overlapping networks of interdependent human beings – "figurations" – rather than stable, self-contained, and sharply bounded "social systems" that are separate from "individuals." The relations of interdependence between people on multiple levels are by implication relations of more or less unequal power, or "power balances," which are a source of instability and change. Group boundaries are always temporary and rest on social definitions that are contestable and often contested. The functioning of any social group – including the large and comprehensive groups called societies – can only be understood in relation to the wider figurations of which it is a part. The figurational perspective is, therefore, one of very broad scope; it is, one might say, ultimately a global perspective that takes humanity as the largest and most enduring social entity (Goudsblom 1977, 3-5, 107-52; cf. Wilterdink 2003, 70-1).

This perspective is also termed *processual*. It is opposed to what Elias (2012b, 106-11) called "process reduction," the widespread tendency to reduce processes to entities conceived as static. Human social life is continuously changing, and these changes are not just erratic but exhibit, to some extent, regularities. Short-term historical transformations, large-scale events, and dramatic turning-points are causally connected with more gradual and regular processes of change. When successive stages of phases in a development are distinguished, each of these stages is not static but consists of processes that contribute to, though do not fully determine, the transition from one to the next stage (Goudsblom 1996, 21-2). The processual approach also implies a rejection of simple monocausal explanations. If causal connections between distinguishable processes of social change can be demonstrated, these are themselves subject to change. Moreover, social processes are usually interconnected in relations of *mutual* influence. As Goudsblom (1988, 13) put it: "If we find that a development *a* had an impact on development *b*, we may assume with a high degree of certainty that *b* also had an impact on *a*." A key

notion is that social processes – in particular long-term trends – are, to a large extent, the unintended, unforeseen, unplanned outcomes of more or less intentional, goal-directed human actions. Intentional human actions are a function of largely unintended relations of interdependence and result in turn in (at least partially) unintended social processes that change these relations. It is an aim of this approach to provide insights into long-term social processes that help to diminish their "blind" character and enhance their potential controllability.

More specifically, the Elias-Goudsblom perspective on human history can be called *developmental*. The term "development" is not conceived as referring to the unfolding of a supposed essence (as in a philosophical tradition since Greek Antiquity[5]) nor to a progression toward a desired goal (as is still the connotation in the distinction between "developed" and "underdeveloped" or "developing" countries); it is defined in neutral, descriptive terms as referring to processes of social change that go – continuously or predominantly – in a particular direction for a long period of time. These may be assessed for a certain world region during a certain historical period, such as, for example Western Europe since the late Middle Ages undergoing various intertwined processes of "modernisation," such as commercialisation and monetarisation, urbanisation, industrialisation, state and nation formation, and democratisation. Developments in different parts of the world, however, are interconnected, and can be understood, to some extent and in certain respects, as being part of long-term trends that cover humanity as a whole. In a theoretical essay, Elias (2009a [1977], 28-39) put forward four "examples" of general social trends on that level: functional differentiation; integration into larger social units; a trend "in the direction of an increasing civilisation of human feelings and behaviour" (ibid., 32; see also below); and a long-term shift in the development of human knowledge from fantasy-laden representations to greater object adequacy. Goudsblom (1988, 1996) posited five long-term dominant trends in human history since the beginning of agriculture: population growth, increasing residential concentration of the population, growing scale of organisation, functional differentiation or specialisation, and stratification. These are all related to a long-term trend of increasing human control of natural forces and an increasing dominance of humans over other animals. Both Elias and Goudsblom stressed the interconnectedness of the distinguished trends, which is key to the explanation of each trend. They insisted that none of these trends is determined by any developmental or evolutionary law. This also means that these long-term historical developments cannot be simply extrapolated to the future.

The term *civilisational* refers to the most distinct features of this perspective. In Elias's theory (2012a [1939]), "civilisation" means a long-term process

[5] Nisbet (1969) takes this essentialist definition as the basis for his attack on any kind of developmental or evolutionary thinking in the social sciences.

of increasing "social constraint toward self-constraint," or, more specifically, a socially induced trend toward more comprehensive, more differentiated, more even, and more temperate self-control. Elias observed this process in particular for Western Europe in the period from about 1200 to the 20th century, in which processes of state formation and monopolisation of the means of violence were crucial for the development of more "civilised" behavioural standards among the upper classes, which gradually spread to other strata of the population. As Elias suggested and as has been confirmed in later research, similar processes of civilisation took place in other societies and other historical periods (see among others Mennell 1996b; Lau 2022). The question is not only how civilising processes in different societies compare, but also how they are interrelated, and whether one can speak of an overall process of civilisation in the very long run on the level of humanity as a whole.

Both Elias and Goudsblom answered the latter question in the affirmative (Elias 2012b, 151-2; 2009a, 32-3). As Goudsblom (1984a, 86) put it: "Just as any individual process of civilisation is part of the development of a particular society, the process of civilisation of any society is part of a process of civilisation that encompasses the whole of humanity." In *Fire and Civilization*, he argued that the human control of fire already signified a civilising move; it brought a "fire regime" in which people had to constrain each other and themselves in new and stricter ways:

> Because of the discipline it inevitably requires, the domestication of fire was also a civilising process, involving the development of social codes in accordance of which people had to behave. [...] As people succeeded in stoking increasing numbers of larger and hotter fires, they needed tighter regulation of their social relations and individual impulses in order to keep those many fires under control. (Goudsblom 1992, 41)

The introduction and spread of agriculture was another important civilising force that heightened the social constraint toward self-constraint; on top of the "fire regime," an "agrarian regime" came into existence that required more work discipline, foresight, and time-ordering.

However, as Goudsblom also pointed out, the long-term civilising process at the global level is highly differentiated and cannot be simply viewed as an ongoing cumulation of self-controls. The question then is how to define it and how to assess its direction. "Civilisation" – in the general sense of being applicable to all human societies and humanity as a whole – can perhaps best be conceived as a sensitising concept, which directs the attention to changes in people's behavioural standards, self-control, and personality structure in connection to changes in their relations of interdependence. It refers to the interrelatedness of psychological or mental and societal changes that are, to some extent, structured, and are therefore amenable to systematic

description, analysis, and explanation.[6] The concept and its specifications invite to do historical and comparative research in this matter.

While Goudsblom built upon Elias's work, he also aimed to go "beyond Elias." Both authors proposed to synthesise sociology with insights from various other disciplines, including history, psychology, anthropology, and biology, and both moved in the course of their scholarly life from a focus on developments in Western societies to much broader – spatial and temporal – perspectives (see, for example, Elias 2009a; 2011; Reicher et al. 2022). However, the fact that they were of different generations had clear implications for their work; virtually all the literature that Elias used for his theoretical synthesis dates from before the middle of the 20th century, whereas Goudsblom made extensive use of more recent literature. On the basis of a vast array of theoretical work and empirical studies that included new ideas and discoveries, Goudsblom formulated the outlines of a research programme for the study of long-term processes in human history.

Another difference between the two scholars is that Goudsblom emphasized more explicitly the crucial significance of socio-ecological transformations, as he specified in his study of the control of fire (Goudsblom 1992). People are not only dependent on other people, but also on their natural environment, and when they increase their control over the forces of nature this dependency changes profoundly but does not diminish: this insight became central in Goudsblom's later work. It is the core of what he came to call a "long-term socio-ecological perspective" (De Vries and Goudsblom 2002). Several contributions in this HSR Special Issue are in line with this perspective, focusing on changes in the relations between human beings and their natural environment.

7. About this Issue

As this issue is the outcome of an international conference honouring the work of Johan Goudsblom, it is fitting that the first contribution after this introduction is the – slightly revised – text of *Stephen Mennell*'s opening address of the conference, "Remembering Johan Goudsblom." In an account that is both personal and informative, Mennell portrays "Joop" as mentor, colleague, and friend, recalling important moments in his biography and career. He highlights Goudsblom's various achievements and contributions as a

[6] "Civilisation" in this broad sense includes "decivilising" and "dyscivilising" processes (Mennell 1996a; De Swaan 2015). Remarkably, Goudsblom refrained from using these latter concepts and did not enter into the debates around them.

teacher, research supervisor and scholar, and the significance of his work for sociology and the human sciences at large.

Two texts by *Goudsblom* are included in this issue. "Long-term processes in the history of humanity" was originally published in Dutch in 1988; it appears here for the first time in translation. The article entails his first programmatic statement, at once nuanced and firm, for studying long-term processes in human history, which shows his aim to synthesise insights from different disciplines.[7] The last article in this issue, "The Worm and the Clock," exemplifies Goudsblom's approach. Written in the mid-1990s as a contribution to the vivid debate about "globalisation," it proposes a sober and systematic process sociological account of what is commonly taken for granted: the emergence of a world-encompassing time regime.

David Christian, the founder of the Big History project, presents in his article, "The Trajectory of Human History," his most recent insights into the shapes of human history and their meaning. Assessing long-term patterns of accelerating growth, illustrated by figures on population growth and increasing energy consumption, Christian raises questions about their distinctiveness and implications for the future. As compared to the evolution of other species, human history displays remarkable and far-reaching processes of "collective learning." And these very processes, Christian argues in the last part of his essay, provide clues for informed scenarios concerning the future of humankind.

In the article on "Goudsblom's Law of Three Stages," *Nico Wilterdink* returns to Goudsblom's work by highlighting a process model with respect to human history that Goudsblom put forward in several of his writings. Wilterdink discusses the implications, scope, and validity of the model, illustrating it with various examples. He advances an explanation in terms of general mechanisms, which he compares with Darwinian evolutionary theory, and inquires into the model's relevance for understanding important contemporary changes.

The four articles that follow all engage with socio-ecological issues. Taking the case of local food markets, *Nina Baur* demonstrates how being locked into global value chains with a long history and complex spatial arrangements makes them as difficult to understand as to change. Long-term processes with a global reach here appear as major obstacles to widely recognised and urgent change.

In his article on "Bison, elephants, and whales," *John R. McNeill* describes lesser-known ecological changes brought about by industrialisation. Hunting these big mammals for the industrial use of, respectively, leather, ivory, and oil caused a sharp decline in the population of these key-stone species.

[7] He elaborated parts of this essay in later treatises, such as, in particular, Goudsblom (1996).

Various direct and indirect ecological consequences followed and were accompanied by profound changes for the human groups involved.

Socio-ecological changes in a more general sense are central in the contributions of Marina Fischer-Kowalski and André Saramago. In the system-theoretical perspective of "social ecology" that *Fischer-Kowalski* presents, changes in the use of energy sources are viewed as drivers of change in social organisation. The paper focuses on the transition from agricultural to industrial societies permitted by the access to fossil fuels, allowing a much higher level of energy use. It explores the connection between this transition and revolutionary changes in political and social relations by comparing developments in a large number of countries, and finally discusses the question what social and political changes will be required to bring about a new transition away from fossil fuels.

André Saramago analyses different theoretical views on the relationship between humans and their natural environment. He argues that the "materialist-emergentist" approach represented by Elias and Goudsblom provides a much-needed alternative for the opposition between reductionist forms of naturalism, in which humans are indistinct from other forms of life or matter, and idealist exceptionalism, in which unique mental qualities would radically separate human beings from nature. Norbert Elias's reflections on "levels of integration" in the "great evolution" provide a way out of this persistent and misleading dichotomy. Human beings are an integral part of nature yet occupy a unique position with regard to other species, because they have the capacity to produce, transmit, and accumulate knowledge. Having been used to exploit their habitat and become the dominant species on Earth, these emergent capabilities might also be mobilised for clarifying ecological threats, and for countering ecocidal forms of behaviour.

The two subsequent articles, respectively by Abram de Swaan and Randall Collins, equally demonstrate how adopting a long-term perspective can improve our understanding of current issues. In order to deal with global crises, *De Swaan* observes, coordinated action of states on the world level is required. As the global state system is dominated by four "gigants" (USA, China, EU, India), they tend to have a leading role. Yet in facing problems of global coordination, states are confronted with the dilemmas of collective action that in previous epochs occurred primarily at the local and the national level. De Swaan considers the cases of the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine as problems of collective action on a global scale. Reflecting on the social mechanisms that are able to overcome the dilemmas of collective action, De Swaan shows why the outcomes in these cases have been different and suggests how they might have been otherwise.

Against the background of long-term historical transformations of the oldest human institution, the family, *Randall Collins* addresses current issues about gender and sexuality, focusing on the disputes around abortion in the

United States. Kinship structures, which are invariably based on regulated and legitimated sex, have in the modern era lost several of their former political and economic functions. Family relations have become more personal, more open to individual choice, while sex-related behaviour outside of marital relations has become increasingly politicised. Pre- and extra-marital sex, abortion, homosexuality, and transgender identities have become stakes in battles about civic rights and forms of public regulation. Taking a longer view, these struggles concern what will remain of the family and which social arrangements might replace it. While data on household composition show a decline of the family, it is likely to survive, Collins concludes, as a privileged enclave for reliable intimacy and the advantageous pooling of resources.

The final article by Goudsblom is detached from pressing current issues. It shows, on the contrary, how regulations that were absent during most of human history became gradually accepted on the global level. Tracing the long-term development of "timing," Goudsblom substantiates and specifies his core idea that long-term socio-cultural processes are both variegated and structured, that they follow a "logic" of successive stages in which each stage provides necessary but not sufficient conditions for the next.

Taken together, the articles in this HSR Special Issue demonstrate, we think, the fruitfulness and relevance of an approach that puts long-term processes in human history in the centre of attention. Studying these processes is essential for understanding the human condition, for the advancement of the social sciences, and for gaining insight into current problems. While this field of investigation covers an enormous variety of topics that can be approached with different time-scales and from different viewpoints, it also offers the possibility of cooperation and theoretical synthesis beyond disciplinary boundaries. This special issue aims to show this, and to contribute to further efforts in this direction.

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