

# Dangers of Deep Time

## Introduction

The poster for this symposium shows a black and white picture of one of Hutton's unconformities. It was here, at Siccar Point on the Berwickshire coast of eastern Scotland, that James Hutton is said to have made his 'discovery' of deep time. Assuming that geological processes of sedimentation, mountain building, and erosion have always occurred at a similar rate, Hutton realised that vast stretches of time were needed to produce the rock formations he saw in front of him. The vertical slabs of greywacke must have been deposited, tilted, and eroded, before the red Devonian sandstones could be layered horizontally on top. The whole process must have taken tens of millions of years. As Hutton commented, famously, he discerned in these rocks 'no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end'.

In recent years, academics, cultural commentators, environmentalists, and politicians have all invoked the concept of 'deep time' as a way of thinking about not only the geological past but also the planetary future. Several books and articles have been written—many by people who are joining us for this discussion—explaining the kinds of impacts that human beings are having on the long-term future of the Earth, and setting human activities in a much larger temporal context.

At this juncture in human history—as global society seeks to address catastrophic climate change and devastating species extinction—there is much that is beneficial about a deep time perspective. It reckons with the scale of the current ecological crisis, acknowledging the millions of years for which human impacts may last. It expands our temporal horizons, offering an antidote to the presentism and short-termism that have driven capitalist consumption and the Great Acceleration. It questions presumptions of anthropocentrism, prompting greater humility in the face of the sublime scale of geological time. And it encourages thinking on intergenerational justice, fostering new forms of politics and policymaking that could be more sustainable.

However, in this symposium the aim is to discuss and address some of the possible *dangers* of deep time thinking, approaching this topic from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The title here—Dangers of Deep Time—has a deliberate double meaning. On the one hand, there are those dangers that exist *in* deep time, *in* the long-term future, about which we are seeking to know more. These dangers are the focus of scholarship on, for example, existential risk and the future of humanity.

But, on the other hand, there are also dangers entailed in employing the very concept of deep time. An initial scan of the secondary literature reveals some emerging outlines. So, here are six potential dangers of deep time thinking:

1. The first is what Michelle Bastian has called 'chronowashing'—or what Roman Krznaric refers to as 'longwashing'. The concern here is analogous to the more general problem of

'greenwashing': companies, or institutions, or individuals purport to be thinking about the long-term future, but without making many meaningful changes to their *modus operandi*. For example, Jeff Bezos—founder of Amazon—funds The Clock of the Long Now with the express aim of getting people to think on longer timescales, whilst simultaneously profiting from a business that is built around immediacy and the instant gratification of consumer desire.

2. A second danger is that deep time thinking might do nothing to challenge modern myths about the progress of history. As Stefan Skrimshire and others have suggested, deep time might lengthen temporal horizons in a horizontal direction, but without any sense of verticality or non-linearity it risks perpetuating ideas about ongoing improvement. The linear teleology of secular modernity is bolstered, rather than challenged.
3. The third danger is a corollary of the second. If deep time thinking simply extends modernity's ideology of progress, then it may also bolster an anthropocentric sense of human mastery and control. This is demonstrated by the proposal of the so-called 'good Anthropocene'. For ecomodernists, the fact that human beings now have the power to act as a geological agent is an opportunity rather than a concern. A growing awareness of the deep future here becomes simply a prompt to think about how human influence can be perpetuated for the long term.
4. The fourth danger is, roughly speaking, the mirror image of the third. Instead of worrying about humanity having too much influence, the concern here is that deep time thinking risks sidelining humanity altogether. One metaphor for the depth of time compares planetary history to the length of the human arm, and emphasises how, on this scale, the entirety of human history could be erased with the single stroke of a nail file. But if humanity is so insignificant, temporally speaking, then the risk is that this line of thinking ultimately promotes misanthropy.
5. A fifth danger of deep time is the temptation to speak in terms of universals. Deep time thinking often relies on a scientific metanarrative that melds cosmology, geology, and anthropology into an all-encompassing account. But such overarching stories frequently fail to address the multiplicity, the diversity, and the particularity of temporal experience. Just as not all humans are equally responsible for the Anthropocene, not all humans see the future through the same lens.
6. A sixth and final danger concerns a form of deep time thinking that has become formalised in the philosophy of longtermism. According to this philosophy, the rights of future generations (which may far outnumber all existing and historical generations), should be given a prominent voice in present policymaking. But the danger comes when the wellbeing of potential people in the future is prioritised over the wellbeing of actual people in the present because of a blunt utilitarian calculus. Morally speaking, a focus on the future must not blind us to inequality and oppression in the present.

This is not a comprehensive list. And many of these points require further development. But the aim here is just to point to some of what we might discuss during our conversations.