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REVIEW ESSAY

The Perils of Prehistory: A Review

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Gowan Dawson, *Monkey to Man: The Evolution of the March of Press Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024)
Stefanos Geroulanos, *The Invention of Prehistory: Empire, Violence, and Our Obsession with Human Origins* (New York: Liveright, 2024)

Maria Stavrinaki, *Transfixed by Prehistory: An Inquiry into Modern Art and Time*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Zone Books, 2022)

Recent decades have brought a growing interest among historians in the concept and practice of "deep history": in historical accounts that cover centuries, even millennia, rather than just a few years or decades. Deep historians seek a temporal expansion similar to the geographical expansion sought by global history: a "transtemporal" history making linkages across time, as David Armitage puts it, just as transnational history stresses connections across space.[1] David Christian proposes starting our history writing with the Big Bang and envisions a thirteen-week interdisciplinary course that would draw on astronomy, geology, evolutionary biology, and archaeology, as well as "history" proper. "Our own species appears in the course only in the fifth week," Christian notes. This is big history on a cosmic scale.[2] Jo Guldi and Armitage decry historians' obsessive focus on "short-termism" and microhistory, arguing that historians have ceded analysis of long-term trends, and thus of prediction of future trends, to economists and other social scientists, and that in order to make themselves relevant to policy making in a world threatened by climate change, historians must vastly expand the time frame that they study. (Expanding the time frame will also, Armitage and Guldi explain, mean a vast expansion of historians' source base: reading and analysis of individual documents will no longer be possible, so the practice of history must include computer analysis

[1]David Armitage, "What's the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée," *History of European Ideas* 38/4 (2012), 493–507, at 498.

[2]David Christian, "The Case for Big History," *Journal of World History* 2 (1991), 223–8, at 236.

of "big data.")[3] Daniel Lord Smail argues that the distinction between history proper (based on written records) and the "pre" (anything that happened before writing) is entirely artificial and suggests a focus on neurohistory—centered on the brain and its changing interactions with its environment—as a way to heal this rupture.[4] Taking their cue from Fernand Braudel and the *Annales* school, although differing from that earlier approach in important ways, both Armitage and Smail envision a *longue durée* "history in ideas" that would trace a concept like "civil war" over thousands of years, or a history of money that stretches from beads to Bitcoin. These deep historians recognize the challenges inherent in such a pursuit but believe that it is doable and highly worthwhile.

The three books under review here, by contrast, historicize and criticize the concept of "prehistory," rather than engage in the practice of it. All three treat prehistory (a term popularized by John Lubbock in the 1860s) as an "invention" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Prehistory, on this view, in itself is forever unknowable—an assertion that seems to cast serious doubt on the project of deep history. Instead, each of these books argues, in its own way, that what moderns and postmoderns say about prehistory reveals more about *them* than it ever does about the "deep past." Our constructions of prehistory are actually projections of our own anxieties and desires and beliefs about what it means to be human: in defining the prehistorical, we define ourselves over and against it. The three books, all richly illustrated, also stress the power of images to convey meaning, whether scientific illustrations or works of art. On these basic claims the books agree. They differ widely, however, in their definitions of what counts as "prehistory," in the audiences they are aiming at, and, as a result, in their arguments.

Gowan Dawson, in *Monkey to Man*, defines prehistory as referring to the human evolutionary past: the deepest of deep pasts. For Maria Stavrinaki, in *Transfixed by Prehistory*, the concept denotes the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods, the eras of stone carvings, cave art, and megaliths. Stefanos Geroulanos, in *The Invention of Prehistory*, uses the most expansive definition: prehistory stretches from the dinosaurs to the sack of ancient Rome; his book is more a history of concepts and uses of the ancient *past*, rather than prehistory per se (if prehistory is defined as what came before writing). All three write as cultural and intellectual historians; their books are as much about the histories of art, literature, film, and philosophy as they are histories of geology, paleoanthropology, and archaeology, especially in their popularized forms. But the audiences of the three books are different: Dawson's seems aimed at historians of science who are interested in the craft practices and material cultures of science, while Stavrinaki addresses mainly art historians and art theorists. Geroulanos, meanwhile, speaks to a generalist audience of historians and literate lay readers, especially readers who may be fascinated by the writings of Yuval Noah Harari on the history of humanity and other popularizers of the so-called "Anthropocene" epoch and its history. By criticizing such popularizations and offering an alternative account of the aims and purposes of prehistory, Geroulanos's book is the most openly political of the three.

[3]Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2014).

[4]Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley, 2018).

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Both Dawson and Stavrinaki cover about a century and a half, analyzing changing portrayals of prehistory from the 1860s to the present, while Geroulanos begins his history in the mid-eighteenth century. All, therefore, could be considered to be doing just the kind of *longue durée* history that Armitage calls for—as long as "the long term" refers to centuries, and not millennia. Dawson and Geroulanos emphasize continuity over their respective time periods, especially in Western assumptions about evolutionary, racial, and historical progress. For Dawson, the present-day pervasiveness of the "march-of-progress image" (a portrayal of human evolution in which man appears to emerge from apes and ape-like forebears) stems from and is continuous with the first such image, created for an 1863 book by Thomas Henry Huxley. Dawson shows, through analysis of the details of these images and of the circumstances of their production, that they were imbued with many varying meanings and implications, but the assumption of progress, he argues, has persisted over time. For Geroulanos—whose book notes the broad resonance between the discourses of prehistory and the project of empire—the metaphors, analogies, and images developed in the nineteenth century to depict the deep past have lasted to the present day, especially in the way that they rationalize and justify violence against the "other," colonialism, and genocide. Stavrinaki, on the other hand, emphasizes the discontinuity between Romantic and Victorian portrayals of prehistory and those in modern art and art theory: twentieth-century artists from Miró and di Chirico to Picasso and Pinot-Gallizio imagined the deep past in much more ambiguous and less glorifying ways than their predecessors did. For these modern artists, prehistory—the vertiginous view into the abyss of deep time—brought to mind the prospect of human extinction, rather than any optimistic idea of progress. Stavrinaki argues that the representation of time in these artworks itself changed over time, from a progressive to a cyclical or regressive conception.

Dawson's book is divided into three parts, each focusing on images of evolution-as-progress and the artists who made them. The first part analyzes the drawing originally by Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins, in the frontispiece of Huxley's 1863 *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*, which presents a side view of five skeletons—gibbon, orang, chimp, gorilla, and man—and its reuse in the American edition of Huxley's book and by the evolution popularizer Ernst Haeckel. The second part takes up Helen Ziska's drawings for exhibits on human evolution for the American Museum of Natural History in the 1920s, which both challenged and reinscribed notions of evolution as progress and racial superiority. And the third part considers Rudolf Zallinger's chronological sequence of fifteen simian and hominid figures, included as a foldout illustration in the 1965 volume *Early Man*, entitled "The Road to Homo Sapiens" and nicknamed the "march of progress," an image copied, imitated, and parodied to the present day. Ubiquitous and iconic though these images are, little is known about the circumstances of their production. Dawson's book pulls back the curtain on their creation, focusing on the "invisible technicians"—"artists, engravers, printers, art directors, or publishers' marketing teams" (7)—and arguing for their importance. He emphasizes the "contingent events" that helped create the images, events that often had little to do with scientific issues and much more to do with artistic choices and technical matters.

For example, Dawson reveals that Hawkins's five-skeleton image in Huxley's book was originally drawn as five separate drawings and only later combined into one image by Huxley. Hawkins was an antievolutionist who, as Dawson shows, included

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arguments against evolution in the very details of his drawings: the gorilla's skeleton foot is pictured as arched, which would give the animal a distinctly un-human "waddling" gait (47). Illustrator and author thus had conflicting agendas and the conflicts are embedded in the illustration (and the admirably clear illustrations in Dawson's book, including seven color plates, make these details readily visible once they are pointed out). The then brand-new technology of photographic reduction was used on the illustration to compensate for the shortcomings of a second, inexperienced engraver, who was unable to draw the skeletons to the required dimensions. This resulted in the creation of skeletons of comparable scale, which were arranged in order of increasing size for the frontispiece. Rather than simply showing the structural similarities of the skeletons, the image tells a story of human evolutionary ascent from the ape.

Dawson points out that the image has its own history and that its meanings changed depending on the context in which it appeared. For Huxley, it resembled a "dance of death" and underscored the humility of the human frame, an anti-progress idea that the evolutionist borrowed from Thomas Carlyle's 1833–4 *Sartor Resartus*, a fictionalized biography of a German mystic who believed in the fundamental equivalence of all human beings beneath their clothes. When the image was reengraved for the American edition of the book by the ardent abolitionist Albert Higley Jocelyn, it embodied the egalitarian claim that one skeleton represented all of humanity; Huxley himself, however, lacked sympathy for enslaved peoples and declared in an 1862 lecture that a Saan "Bush-woman" was closer to the apes than a white European man. As the frontispiece image circulated, often detached from Huxley's book, it attained new meanings, especially with regard to race and evolutionary progress. When it appeared in Haeckel's *Anthropogenie* (1874) it took on polygenist implications by being placed alongside images that highlighted racial difference. The image even appeared in the early Hollywood film *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, where once again it depicted evolution as inexorable upward ascent.

The same contest between visual representations of evolution took place in natural-history museums in the early twentieth century. Dawson does an art historian's analysis of the iconography of the scientific illustrations on which museum displays were based. Working for William King Gregory at the American Museum of Natural History for an exhibit on "the skeleton from fish to man," the artist Helen Ziska depicted skeletons arrayed in linear sequence but portrayed from the rear view, in humble posture, with "the culminating figure positioned as a subjugated supplicant" (188). The exhibit was intended to refute Henry Fairfield Osborn's rival "Dawn Man" theory, which emphasized the distance between human and ape lineages. For her illustrations for Gregory's popular 1929 book *Our Face from Fish to Man*, however, Ziska traced an upward sweeping line leading toward a Tasmanian aboriginal head pictured just below the head of a white Roman athlete, an image imbued with notions of progress and racial hierarchy. Dawson traces the history of both human-head images to their original subjects. Ziska's image again took on its own life, appearing in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1931 and in *The Science of Life*, a popularization of evolutionary biology by H. G. Wells, G. P. Wells, and Julian Huxley.

Dawson then turns to Rudolf Zallinger, the mural artist and illustrator who was influenced by Ziska's images in drawing the so-called "march of progress" for Time Life's 1965 volume on human evolution. Dawson shows that the publishing team

worked with Zallinger to ensure that the final illustration showed a series of figures gradually increasing in height, from Pliopithecus to modern man: the phylogenetic relationships it showed were both "linear and progressive" (263), reflecting Ernst Mayr's streamlined theory of human evolution. Similarly, the distinctive "forward stride" of the figures—as if literally "marching"—resulted from decisions by the artistic production team. The visual power of the image was thus shaped not only by scientific theories but also by iconographic traditions and by the publishing requirements of Time Life. And it was this illustration that has had tremendous public visibility to our present day, whether satirized in cartoons or hanging on schoolroom walls. Dawson concludes by considering a reworking of the image in a recent sculpture by Zadok Ben-David that rearranged the figures, showing that "the potential for questioning linear progress was always inherent in the original image" (312). But even a 2009 cladogram, a visual representation of evolution intended to refute the march-of-progress idea, reproduced images of skeletons with the same gait and posture as those drawn by the antievolutionist Hawkins.

The relationship between science and art in representing prehistory is also at the heart of Stavrinaki's book. The art here, however, is not scientific illustration but paintings and sculpture by nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists. And the prehistory depicted is not the hominid past but Paleolithic and Neolithic mobiliary art (carvings on small stone objects) and especially parietal art: cave paintings. Stavrinaki, an art historian, discusses the ways in which modern artists from Cézanne and Max Ernst to Dubuffet and Miró have come to terms with and responded to prehistoric art, and to the sense of vertigo or "stupor" induced by such a prospect. If the scientific illustrators of Dawson's book thought about progress when considering human evolution, Stavrinaki's artists, art theorists, and critics often thought of its opposite: degeneration and extinction. Unlike their Romantic predecessors, modern artists were most often led to contemplation of humanity's end when faced with its remote past rather than to any celebration of its ascent.

In five long chapters Stavrinaki explains that as the origin suggests the end, the notion of prehistory trades in oppositions: nature versus culture; savage or primitive versus civilized; past versus future; cycle, return, repetition versus progress; universal versus racial; collective versus individual; organic versus mechanical; child versus adult; beast versus man; hunting versus agriculture. Each of these terms enjoins and invokes its opposite; each is linked, dependent upon, and defined against its partner. In toggling back and forth between these oppositions, modernity forever "reinvented" prehistory, and, in doing so, reimagined and reinvented itself. Grasping onto prehistory was a way for moderns to better come to terms with themselves.

In Chapter 1, Stavrinaki considers how nineteenth-century geologists made comprehensible the abyss of deep time: through metaphor and analogy ("ladders" and "scales"), narrative, and periodization. The painter Paul Cézanne, she argues, took the opposite tack: instead of "domesticating" prehistory in this way, his paintings of quarries depict the earth as vast, permanent, and strange. Stavrinaki then turns to three artists for whom, as for Cezanne, the idea of prehistory suggested post-history. Giorgio de Chirico's paintings of the 1910s defamiliarize and decontextualize objects, presenting them as if they were just as mysterious as fossils. Max Ernst's paintings (1920–1) also make analogies between inert machines and fossils, objects from the deep past whose

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function is unknown. And Robert Smithson, in his monumental *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a sculpture built into the shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake, evoked a far future time when the human world would be reincorporated back into the earth. For these three artists, prehistory was a way of reminding us that our modern world was strange and provisional. All three works, however, as Stavrinaki points out, presume an observer who survived the "end" and surveyed its remains.

In Chapter 2, Stavrinaki turns to the discovery of mobiliary art in the 1860s and of parietal art, first discovered in the 1870s and increasingly in the 1890s in France and Spain. In the nineteenth century, mobiliary art was considered to have been the work of individuals, while cave painting presupposed social collectivities, a distinction that drove a wedge between nature and culture. Nineteenth-century folklorists interpreted cave art as having a religious function and relied on the analogy between primitive humans and present-day savages to make that explanation stick, portraying early man as inhabiting a prehistoric Arcadia.

In Chapter 3, Stavrinaki discusses the overturning of some of these assumptions by twentieth-century artists. Matisse's *The Joy of Life* (1905–6), which quoted cave painting, suggested that prehistoric art was just as singular and as fictive, just as much a product of individuals, just as artificial and aesthetic, as modern art—and not "natural"—and that therefore time was cyclical, not progressive. Matisse abolished the nineteenth-century notion of evolutionary progress; nothing had changed between "them" and "us," and the breakdown of this distinction was the prerequisite for joy or happiness, according to Stavrinaki's interpretation of the painting. The idea of time itself had changed; by the early tweintieth century it was conceived as "regressive, reversible, and polyphonic" (188). Instead of progressive change, time was viewed as a cycle; the "primitive" represented the "childhood" of the modern age and thus still existed within modern humans, somewhere deep in the unconscious, and could recur in memories.

On that view, the nineteenth-century equation between present-day "savages" and primitive man—and the progressive assumption on which it rested—was disrupted, a disruption made even more complete by the discovery of the Lascaux cave paintings in 1940. Joan Miró emphasized the connection between present and deep past by treating machines as the fossils of modernity (as did Max Ernst) but then "reenchanting" them by giving them biomorphic forms. Jean Dubuffet, meanwhile, collapsed time and abolished history, eliminating the gap between cave art and his own art, and putting himself in the position of prehistoric man, by using actual dirt and gravel as a medium and by painting geological landscapes in which the sedimentation of the earth covered practically the entire canvas, dwarfing the tiny figure who dug into its very top layer, as in *The Geologist* (1950) and *The Stone of Dordogne* (1952). "The viewer's participation," Stavrinaki writes, "was stimulated by the fragmentary, suggestive, and open character of the compositions. The openness of the form translated directly into an openness of the experience of time" (238).

In Chapter 4, on artistic responses to and representations of the Neolithic, Stavrinaki again emphasizes the discontinuity between Romantic and Victorian conceptions and modern ones. While for both the Romantics and the moderns, megaliths like Stonehenge were enveloped in an aura of mystery, the moderns tended to posit a "revolution" between the Paleolithic and the Neolithic and identify themselves with

the latter, which they considered superior. For twentieth-century artists like Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, the Neolithic's abstract forms, rather than the presumed realism of Paleolithic cave art, prefigured the project of modern abstraction. The Neolithic was also supposedly responsible for the advent of agriculture and social organization—of culture. Tensions abounded in the representations of the Neolithic megaliths: some, like British painter and photographer Paul Nash and archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes, saw the Neolithic as strengthening their connection to their homeland and national and racial pride; others, like Picasso, who emulated Neolithic figures in his paintings of the 1920s, saw them as evidence of human universality. The American post-minimalist art of the 1960s and 1970s took the universalist theme even further: the sculptor Robert Morris aligned his own body with the geoglyphs of Nazca, three-thousand-year-old patterns traced on the ground in Peru.

Chapter 5 analyzes another tension—between the origin and the end—as it played out in the art and philosophy of the post-1945 atomic age. The French philosopher Georges Bataille theorized an uncanny symmetry between the discovery of the Lascaux cave in 1940 and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. According to Bataille, Lascaux marked the beginning of history—the moment when animal became man; the atomic bombs, its end—the moment when humans were turned back into animals, in a reversion to a state of "quietude," a post-historical era (288). Prehistory/post-history, past/future, beginning/end: the oppositions were mutually constitutive and interdependent. For some the post-human era implied extinction, while for others it heralded the advent of unprecedented technoscientific domination—a strange mash-up of present-day discourse on the Anthropocene and transhumanism *à la* Elon Musk. Stavrinaki then turns to three artists who invoked the idea of the prehistoric cave, but whose works "interrupted the recurrence of motifs and formal techniques" formerly used. Lucio Fontana's carved spaces were purposely disorienting, blurring the line between the cave and the viewer's own unconscious mind and between the beginning of the world and the end. Frederick Kiesler's and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio's works, by contrast, evoked the protective function of caves at the projected end of the world. Kiesler's *Endless House* (1958–60) was a totally enclosed invulnerable space, and Pinot-Gallizio's *Cavern*, a fabric installation, was meant to "protect and soothe" the moderns living in an atomic age, much as the "cavemen" calmed "their great fear" by painting magical figures on cave walls (321).

Prehistory, Stavrinaki concludes, is always "self-reflexive" (331)—we are "transfixed" by it, stupefied, because it signifies both the possibility of a beginning and the terror of an end. Modern attempts to grasp its immensity, through art and science, metaphor and fiction, only underscore the difficulty, even the impossibility, of the task. In itself, she tells us, it is unknowable: an "unsolvable enigma." But because modern thinkers have always defined themselves with respect to it, understanding the ways in which they have done so will help us better understand them, and presumably ourselves as well.

Geroulanos's book covers even more ground than Dawson's or Stavrinaki's. *The Invention of Prehistory* includes both the march-of-progress image and cave art, along with much else, into a *longue durée* history of the idea of prehistory from the Enlightenment to the present day. Geroulanos also has an avowedly political purpose: he connects the depictions to justifications for white Western violence against anyone

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deemed "other." He treats not only visual images of prehistory but also metaphors for it. And he considers not only ideas about ape-men and cavemen, but also about the "barbarians" who sacked Rome: his book might be described as a history of images of and metaphors for the ancient past. The book's expansive coverage makes the argument that these pernicious tropes are pervasive and long-standing, they are being recycled even at present, and we must become aware of them *as metaphors* so we can reject them.

The book is organized chronologically into four overlapping time frames. In the first part, Geroulanos considers the part-mythic, half-imagined forms that populated ideas about prehistory from the 1750s to the 1860s: Rousseau's "noble savage," the "ancient Germans," de la Beche's dinosaurs, ancient ruins and fossil ape-men. Geroulanos observes that the deep past was often envisioned as a three-stage process—savagery, barbarism, and civilization, and variations on that theme—a construction that rationalized and justified the extermination of indigenous peoples. This habit of thought is still with us in the tripartite schemas of "first, second, and third worlds," and "underdeveloped, developing, and developed countries."

In the book's second part, Geroulanos analyzes metaphors employed from the 1830s to 1914. The idea that primitive society was communist and matriarchal entranced not only Lewis Henry Morgan and Friedrich Engels but also socialist feminists like Alexandra Kollontai and Rosa Luxembourg (though Simone de Beauvoir criticized the idea for its gender essentialism). The trope of the "disappearing native"—which even anthropologist Alfred Kroeber was party to, Geroulanos claims—rationalized the genocide of indigenous peoples as a "natural" process. Neanderthals, discovered and named in the 1850s and popularly depicted by the 1870s as opposed to "sapiens," also acted as "metonyms" (144) for colonized peoples. Images of Neanderthals as heavy-browed, stooped, brown-skinned, helped to define them, not just to decorate the descriptions. Recent theories of Neanderthals have portrayed them as more sensitive and as white-skinned, as a kind of "indigenous European," swamped by an invading African race and feeding fears of "white replacement." Like Stavrinaki, Geroulanos emphasizes that these changing images continue to say more about those creating them than they do about the fundamentally unreachable Neanderthal. The metaphor of the "thin veneer"—a savage existing beneath a thin layer of civilized morality—appearing in primitivist art and literature, in scientific images, and in psychoanalytic theory, was not a harmless turn of phrase but justified violence as our patrimony and thus became a "weapon of war": "We know that concepts do more than we want them to," Geroulanos writes; "sometimes they hurt and even kill" (161).

Part Three, "The Horror," from the 1900s to the 1960s, analyzes the mixed metaphor of the "flooding hordes" used to describe and deplore "invasions" by outsiders of all types, from Huns and Mongols to Irish, Jews, and Chinese, refugees and revolutionaries. Here "prehistory" expands to become a history of racist metaphors, which, Geroulanos points out, were always connected to ideas about savages from the deep past. The Nazi idea of race depended on the notion of purity of origin (Aryans were supposedly related to those putative "ancient Germans")—a claim that also appeared in theories of language origin and evolution. Here the images that Geroulanos analyzes are Nazi maps crisscrossed with bold arrows representing movement of racial and cultural "types." Do such ridiculous origin fantasies really matter? Yes, he affirms, ideas

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have power. They have become "lived reality" that "destroyed and claimed civilization" and brought on "merciless death" (229). The phrase "bomb them back to the Stone Age," used in 1965 by the US Air Force chief of staff in reference to the Vietnamese, seemingly disrupted the three-stage theory of human history because aerial bombing was considered to be barbaric (thus alluded to prehistory). But even this concession ended up reinforcing the idea of progress, now thought to hinge on technological superiority over the "savages." Meanwhile the French paleontologist and Catholic priest Teilhard de Chardin (to whom Geroulanos devotes a chapter) foresaw future human evolution culminating in the divine "omega point."

In Part Four, Geroulanos considers an array of "new scientific ideologies," from 1930 to the present, which more often than not recycle old themes. The UNESCO Statements on Race purported to make an argument for human unity but ended up reinscribing racial categories. The dominant interpretations of cave art have changed from those that celebrate the individual artist to those that aim to reconstitute the societies that produced cave art—but these theories, Geroulanos notes, "have not improved by much" and the caves themselves "refuse to answer" (308). Claims that human ancestors were "killer apes" who arose in and then migrated out of Africa both supported cultural-diffusion myths that rationalized colonization and contributed to pan-Africanism and calls for decolonization. The idea of "man" as toolmaker, hunter, and weapon wielder was challenged by equally essentializing feminist alternatives, though the latter drew attention to the problem of using the male-gendered pronoun to refer to all proto-humans, at least half of whom were female. Competing theories posited human warfare as coextensive with hunting and therefore inherent in human nature or as a consequence of civilization and colonialism, but "each answer is … about humanity itself," Geroulanos writes (371). And this debate about the origins and status of warfare, whether primitive or not, matters because "it continues to shape how Westerners treat much of the rest of the world" (386). The past performs tasks for the present, and readers of these theories can simply "select the image of humanity that most appeals to us," whatever its truth value.

Given this welter of ideas—some reinforcing, some conflicting with each other—what are we to believe? All three of these histories emphasize critique: their message is to take every image or theory of prehistory with a grain of salt, become attuned to their present-centered assumptions and ideologies, and treat skeptically the ways in which they recycle tired, timeworn, and even dangerous themes. This is surely salutary advice for consumers of currently widely popular triumphalist histories of humanity, from Harari to Steven Pinker. Even recent ostensibly scientific theories of human origins—the Mitochondrial Eve theory, the "reptilian deep brain," the explosion of "creativity" some 80,000 years ago (a favorite theme of Harari's)—however enchanting they may be, especially in their popularized forms, rehearse the "original illusions" (397). Prehistory is a "mirror," in Geroulanos's word—a conclusion with which Dawson and Stavrinaki would certainly agree. Rather than ending with the fundamental unknowability of the deep past, Geroulanos offers some suggestions for what we should look for in a theory of prehistory: a story that admits its own partiality and its incompleteness; that acknowledges its complicity in promoting certain attitudes toward indigenous peoples and toward the Earth; that refuses to search for or identify the "origin" of anything; and that, above all, does not present itself as a grand narrative seeking to define once and

for all what it means to be human. Readers of these three books can be assured that they will never be able to look in quite the same way again at a scientific illustration of human evolution, a work of modern art that evokes a cave painting or a stone tool, or a popularization of prehistory.

And what of the practitioners, those historians who are heeding Smail's call to do deep history, to push beyond the self-imposed but artificial limits on how far into the past historians are allowed to go? Is there a message in these three books for these deep historians too? The two types of historical writing—one attempting to cross the boundary between history and prehistory, the other contextualizing and criticizing past attempts to do just that—do not seem to be talking to each other yet; indeed they seem to have different purposes and even to belong to two different genres. Yet they could be put productively in conversation.[5] Does the complicated, checkered, often ugly history of prehistory mean that current attempts at "deep history" are doomed to repeat its predecessors' myths, stereotypes, and illusions? Not necessarily. But deep historians might need to tread carefully: to recognize that their pursuit has a history of its own, to acknowledge the criticisms that these three historians make, and to concede that at a certain point their own attempts to reconstruct the deep past become an "invention."

[5]See Stefanos Geroulanos and Maria Stavrinaki, "Editorial: Writing Prehistory," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 69–70 (2018), 1–4.

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