

“The Post-War Human: A Physiological and Cognitive History of the Species During the Great Acceleration, 1945–2001”

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On a physiological and cognitive level, would a representative group of ten thousand forty-year-old humans born in 1955 be on average the same as a group of ten thousand forty-year-olds born half a century earlier in the year 1905?

The goal of “The Post-War Human” research and book project is to examine the possibility that the answer to this question is, “No”: that many of the humans who lived in 1985 were significantly different at a material organismal level than their ancestors who lived in 1935; and if the evidence suggests this was indeed the case, to consider how these changes might have affected the history of the postwar era. Until very recently, most scholars have generally assumed that historical change occurs solely because events, ideas, and cultures change, not because the human beings who interacted with these changes were *themselves* changing at an organismal level. Today, however, this assumption appears increasingly problematic. Over the past few decades, scientists and humanists alike have begun to reveal and grapple with the many ways in which human bodies and minds are embedded in a material environment that surrounds, shapes, and permeates them. Consider, for example, that since 1945 the global production of synthetic chemicals has increased more than thirty-fold. As the historian Julia Adeney Thomas recently observed, our chemical environment is not just around us or in us, “our chemical environment *is* us.”

Yet this new chemical environment is only one of many other radical environmental modifications that constitute what the historian John McNeill and others have aptly termed the Great Acceleration. McNeill and other researchers note that since 1945 many humans have increasingly lived in strikingly different material environments than had predominated in previous eras. *If* (and this remains very much a research question the project seeks to answer) many postwar humans were (and still are) materially different than prewar humans, to effectively analyze this era presents daunting methodological challenges. The goal of this project will be to grapple with these challenges and, if possible, make the first steps towards developing a new and more materially grounded approach to understanding the place of humans in the world and their history.