

Will Steffen Presentation Summary

Title: *The Evolution of the Anthropocene: From Hunter-Gatherers to a Global Geophysical Force*

Monday August 28, 2006 (17:30-18:50)

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General (and brief) Summary:

The variety of presentations of the first full day of the course culminated with a presentation by Will Steffen on the establishment of a new epoch, called the anthropocene period—a presentation that captivated most in the audience. The speaker began by presenting the project, called IHOPE, that is forming as ground for further developing this concept. He then set the stage for the three stages of the anthropocene period by describing the characteristics of the pre-anthropocene period, or the most-recent epoch up to 1945. Will then presented the fundamental defining parameters of the three *stages* of this new period. Stage I (1800-1945), a period defined by increasing GHG concentrations, the industrial revolution and what was described as Flow-on effects. Stage II (1945-2010/20), was characterized by ‘globalization’, a stark increase in scientific activity, the neo-liberal capitalistic thinking paradigm, and the ‘growth’ (consumption) imperative. The result of these factors leads to what the presenter described as “the human imprint being everywhere.” The speaker then moved to Stage III (2010/20 onward), and the obstacles and possibilities we face in the future. Personal reflections were offered regarding each incremental increase in global temperature change and the ability for humans to cope with these changes in this century.

Will Steffen’s presentation was placed perfectly within the framework of the Alter-Net summer school, offering further insight into how participants research projects can be viewed in a larger global perspective as well as how each project can be seen in a larger time perspective. A number of interesting inferences came up during the presentation that is worth further exploration by participants. Work by the Global Footprint Network (and the tie to UNDP’s Human Development Index) is always interesting to explore. The variety of books mentioned by authors as J. Diamond, Tainter, Friedman and Scarborough can also be viewed as a basis for further establishing this epoch, as well as just plain interesting reading. Additionally, Will mentioned that it is not only critical to incorporate human- and natural sciences but also the humanities into the research.

Group Discussion

Everything described above can be found in greater detail on the presenter’s power point presentation and should be reviewed. The group discussion that followed is not there and is summarized here:

Question 1: Centered on a definition of sustainability and the value of such a concept?

Response: It is very difficult to define sustainability but it is easier to describe what is NOT sustainable.

Question 2: Questioned the initial graph presented, she had a different opinion on the order of events.

Response: Yes, there are numerous inconsistencies, but it captures the general dynamics of the system.

Question 3: Questioned the use of fire for land clearing by hunter-gatherer societies, stating that is common practice today.

Response: Presenter was in agreements, but humans then didn't have the global impact as they have now.

Question 4: Do the global powers have the ability to change (the J. Diamond question)?

Response: ??? At least a decoupling of impact and economic growth is needed.

Question 5: How many (Ecological Footprint) worlds do we need now?

Response: 2.5 if we live like Swedes, 5 if we live like Americans.

The Ecological Footprint/Human Development Index example was then given. A question to the audience was posed asking which one country passes the sustainability test given these two measurements. Cuba was the only.

Question 6: Focused on the approach. Is it easier to change values or just focus on not exceeding the 'limits'?

Answer: It is very difficult to change the current paradigm.

Question 7: How do we move from the nation-state optimization paradigm can a 'global consciousness' be sown?

Response: This is 'the' question. Will expressed optimism via the three 'success' examples of acid rain (Montreal protocol), agreements on the reduction of CFCs and depletion of the ozone layer and the many 'water' agreements that have been made in the past. The presentation ended on an optimistic note.