



Do They Get It?

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One of the MAHB's initial goals was to recruit more social scientists into the battle to avoid a collapse of civilization.¹ It is unfortunate, as Harald Welzer of the Institute for the Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen notes about those scientists' failure to deal with climate disruption: "In the social and cultural sciences, it is exactly as if such things as social breakdown, resource conflict, mass migration, safety threats, widespread fears, radicalization and militarized or violence governed economies did not belong to their sphere of competence."² Welzer points out that there is probably no equivalent in the history of science when a documented existential threat "has been regarded with such equanimity by social or cultural theorists."

There are of course outstanding exceptions such as Herman Daly and Partha Dasgupta in economics; Dennis Pirages in Political Science; William Catton, Bob Cialdini, Tom Dietz, Gene Rosa, and Richard York in Sociology, Lee Ross in psychology, Naomi Oreskes and Robert Proctor in history, ethicist Clive Hamilton, and others. But with regard to the vast majority of social scientists – indeed scholars in general, Welzer is correct. The reasons are multiple. One, of course, is simply denial. A second is the difficulty of understanding even common attributes of social systems, which are much more complex than systems in the biophysical sciences, and the latter often contribute their complexities to the social world. For instance, aggression, common as it is, itself remains a poorly understood behavior. Another factor is the pathetically poor education in the biophysical sciences to which most social scientists (and most "educated" people) are exposed.³

The failure to recognize the seriousness of the situation also seems characteristic of academia as a whole. The utter failure of universities to assume any leadership role in dealing

¹ <http://bit.ly/Os0k8Z>; <http://bit.ly/199dg7Z>

² Welzer H. 2012. *Climate Wars: Why People will be Killed in the 21ST Century*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, p. 27,

³ Colander D, Klammer A. 1987. The making of an economist. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 1: 95-111; Ehrlich PR. 2011. A personal view: environmental education—its content and delivery. *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 1: 6-13..

with the perfect storm of environmental problems society faces could be symbolized by the fatuous response of Harvard President Drew Faust to requests that the University divest from the fossil fuel industry. That industry has been working hard to end the sort of society in which universities can persist, and the symbolic value of major universities divesting might help wake up a society that pays little attention to abundant and widely distributed scientific evidence on important matters. Faust clearly doesn't even begin to "get it" despite (or because of?) her privileged background and fine (by contemporary standards) formal education, including a Ph.D. in history – a critical social science discipline often sadly steeped in irrelevance. Her near \$1 million salary is likely based on an ability to please funding sources, especially rich alumni and certainly not people who might be interested in seeing Harvard become an influential factor in deflecting society from its suicidal course.

The situation among political science scholars is equally grim,⁴ characterized by the content of the magazine *Foreign Affairs*. A moment's thought reveals that if nation states (already obsolete) are going to persist through the current century, more than half the issues they need to deal with will have huge environmental components (as oil supply now dominates international concerns, food supply shows increasing signs of competing, and global pandemics are standing in the wings). Yet the journal is totally lacking in competent coverage of the issues. The situation in standard economics is in some ways worse as the discipline continues its plunge into insignificance,⁵ but at least it has spun off a new discipline, ecological economics, that is grappling with important problems.

It has become increasingly obvious that the problem of "not getting it" is hardly confined to the social sciences. Universities in general (as opposed to individual scholars) are doing pathetically little to solve the human predicament; as the saying goes, humanity has problems, universities have departments. Failure to get it is also endemic to politicians in virtually every country, including (or especially) the United States. Those politicians who take environmental problems seriously, rather than viewing them as a left-wing plot to produce more government regulations, still seem to think of them as the concerns of one more pressure group. There are signs that President Obama does get it, but sadly more signs that his political minders and his Republican opponents are determined to keep him from doing anything significant about it. And, of course there are the conservative "thoughtless tanks," *Fox News*, and a wide variety of ideologues and intellectual prostitutes dedicated to keeping decision-makers and the general public from understanding the global predicament – even at the potential cost of their own and their children's futures. As Welzer says,⁶ "cultural, social, emotional and symbolic factors often play a greater role than the survival instinct."

⁴Ehrlich PR, Pirages DC. 2012. Political science in a new era. *World Future Review* In press.

⁵ Ehrlich PR. 2008. Key issues for attention from ecological economists. *Environment and Development Economics* 13: 1-20, see pp. 15-16. Check out also the "contributions" of the 2013 winners of the Nobel Prize in economics (<http://nyti.ms/1hn8CHO>).

⁶ Pp. 59-60

Even within the environmentally concerned community, there are also diverse signs indicating that many do not want to grasp the full dimensions of the problem, ranging from those who fail to recognize that overpopulation and overconsumption by the rich are the major drivers of ecological destruction to those who think that recycling and technological innovation can make society sustainable. The MAHB's gigantic challenge is to educate and coordinate civil society so that it first "gets it" and then tries to change it; I hope it's not too late.

MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

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