Sustainable development in ASEAN: The key role of social sciences and humanities

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Let me, by way of introduction, say a few things about myself. I have been involved with research in Thailand now for some time. I was working until recently at Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), near Bangkok, and it was there that I became active in thinking about, and researching into sustainability issues. The reasons for doing so were obvious—questions of sustainability were everywhere, and they were all vitally important.

I thus came to see Bangkok as a laboratory for sustainability issues. I used to commute every day from Saladaeng in the central Silom business district of Bangkok, to the outlying Pathumthani area, where AIT was located; and, every journey, I looked out of the car or train window, and asked myself a simple question: "Is Bangkok a sustainable city?"

After two years going back and forth, I had to answer, "No—not yet."

What work, then, needs to be done to make a city like Bangkok, a country like Thailand, a region like ASEAN, sustainable?

The answer is both simple and highly complex—we need people, organizations and governments to behave differently.

The great philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), talked about the analytical importance of understanding the ways in which people experience the world. He called the on-going, lived, ways in which we experience and understand the world, the "natural attitude"—a state of mind which encourages us to see the way things are as given, normal, inevitable (Husserl, 1962). What that means in practice, is that if people, organizations and government see the world as-it-is as being the natural state of things—then their actions reinforce this status quo, this stasis. The world "how it is" does not get challenged or changed.

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As I travelled around the region, I saw that Bangkok as-it-is, Thailand as-it-is, ASEAN as-it-is need radical change if they are to become positive, beneficial places—good for their people, and in a healthy balance with their environment. Of course, the comments apply not just to Thailand, or the ASEAN region, but to the whole world.

People, organizations, and governments in Bangkok, Thailand, ASEAN, and the whole world, live in a natural attitude where pollution is inevitable, deforestation is a necessary evil, mass urbanisation is inevitable, profit-seeking capitalism is the only realistic economic model, and building—more homes, more roads, more airports, more factories—is perceived as an acceptable way for countries to develop. The implicit acceptability of polluting the environment, burning oil and coal to produce energy, using capital to exploit low wage economies, speculating in real estate bubbles and overseeing an ever growing world population, demarcates the parameters of the current, dominant—or "hegemonic"—mind-set (Gramsci, 1971).

What is needed, then, is for this mind-set, this natural attitude to be criticised, challenged and changed—for business as usual, life as usual, is clearly unsustainable. In a world of finite resources, finite space, finite water, finite air within a complex and fragile eco-system, we are fast approaching the point where our supplies of natural resources are drying up, and we are impacting negatively upon the very eco-systems that allowed our particular species to develop and prosper.

I say "our species". In many ways we are not a particularly pleasant species for the world to play host to. We have in our brief time as *homo sapiens sapiens*, completely altered the world's ecosystems—overseeing the elimination of certain key fellow species. One of the lowest estimates, by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), is that since the year 1500, humans have been responsible for 869 extinctions (IUCN, 2012). For the first time since the time of the dinosaurs, we are seeing extinctions at a rate which is faster than the rate at which new species evolve. We are thus in the midst of the "sixth great extinction" in the earth's history—and we, through the way we live, are responsible for it (Barnosky et al., 2011).

Here are some of the wonderful animals that our "natural attitudes" about business, trade and the environment, have killed off:

The dodo was a large flightless bird, found only in the island of Mauritius, in

the Indian Ocean. After millennia of peaceful existence, the whole population was wiped out with the coming of Europeans to the island. They were extinct by 1662.

The Tasmanian tiger was killed off by people in the early years of the 20th century.

The English wolf was killed off during the reign of Henry the Eighth around 1509.

The Quagga of Southern Africa was hunted to extinction in 1883.

Steller's Sea Cow was a huge gentle marine animal discovered by George Wilhelm Steller in 1747. Within twenty five years of its discovery and documentation, it was extinct.

The Moa, a huge flightless bird, found only in New Zealand, reached over 3.6 m in height and weighed up to 230 kg. It was killed off by humans in the 19th Century

At present, of course, in the ASEAN region there are a number of species that are on the verge of extinction:

The Irrawaddy Dolphin was once found in large numbers, but it is now down to a few hundred, and is very sparsely distributed through the Mekong and SE Asia. Then, of course, there is one of our closest, and most intelligent, relatives, the orang–utan, which is facing imminent destruction, owing to the clearing of its habitat, the rainforests of Indonesia and Malaysia.

On the whole, then humans are not good news for the environment. The world would get on just fine without us. However, from small beginnings, the genetic leap to *homo sapiens sapiens*, and their enormous, sometimes exponential growth, has caused the health of the world's eco–systems to be stressed to the point of collapse. Because humans are so adaptive, they are not restricted to one location or environmental niche. They are everywhere! I remember looking at Google Maps on my computer one day, and exploring a northern area of Siberia—a stunningly, beautiful, remote area, in a seemingly uninhabitable region. However, as I marvelled at the majestic beauty of the lakes and rivers of the area, I zoomed in closer and closer . . and, to my amazement, I saw roads, and houses, and mines and factories. Humans! Obviously lots of them, busy altering the landscape and ecosystems of this inhospitable area.

Another time, I became interested in Lake Baikal, again in Siberia. For those people who have not heard of it, it is the world's oldest lake. It is also its

most voluminous, holding 20% of the world's unfrozen fresh water (UNESCO 2012). What a wonderful asset for the world. What a beautiful, amazing, feature of our ecosystem. My fascination with this important resource led me to research more into it, to the point where I discovered, that once again, humans were causing massive environmental damage. Right on Lake Baikal, there is the Baykalks paper mill bleaching paper through using chlorine, and pumping out raw waste into the waters of Lake Baikal. It operated from 1996—2008, when it was closed. However, due to intervention by President Putin, it has now been reopened—and is again pumping bleaching waste freely into the pristine waters of Lake Baikal.

I mention this case, as it clearly shows how politics, economics and the environment are delicately balanced—and in order to understand why the decision to pollute Lake Baikal was taken, we need an understanding of the relationship between politics, society and the environment. This is the job of the social sciences and the humanities.

To return to the big, global, economic, cosmic picture . . . In terms of planetary welfare, we can see that the Earth has been infected. It has a disease called Humans; and as with other diseased organisms, instead of looking its usual green, fertile, fresh self, the world is now looking patchy, and has growing spots—cities—all over its body. It also has a fever—one that is getting worse.

Of course, this is a rather negative, misanthropic view of the situation we are currently in—but, from a planet-wide perspective, there is some truth in it. As a living planetary eco-system, the world, with all its species of animals and plants, would benefit enormously if we humans just disappeared. There is currently on international television, a program called, "Life after People", which looks at just that—how the world would look 1, 5, 10, 1000 years after human extinction. What is striking about this programme, is how, within the blink of an eye in ecological terms—1000 years—all traces of our humanity have disappeared under jungle, sand, river or sea; and the living world has started to recover from the destruction caused by this so-called intelligent species.

We are, then, mere fellow travellers on this planet, but those that have killed, enslaved, eaten and genetically altered our fellow passengers, many to the point of extinction; and we have altered and unbalanced the very environment

that allowed us to appear and prosper.

There are signs now that this “natural attitude” is being challenged, and that it is in some places, changing. This is no major voluntary or altruistic intellectual shift on our part, but this is a response to events, which threaten those things that we, in the natural attitude, most value: economic welfare, income, long term financial security, comfort.

But the natural attitude is so strong, and so many of our values, social structures and media, support and sustain it. For instance, in the middle of the last decade, it was becoming increasingly apparent that we were heading towards a three–fold crisis: economic, environmental and humanitarian, and that each of the three–fold crises was linked.

The subsequent financial crisis held important lessons for us, as a species. But perhaps the most importance was that the “natural attitude”—our everyday understanding of the world, and our place within it—can blind us to what is, in retrospect, completely obvious. To have whole economies built upon a combination of massive debt and real estate speculation, which fuelled the world real estate bubble (some of which has not yet popped), is a form of naturalized lunacy on a global scale. Because one part, property speculation, was reliant upon massive debt, and many companies defined these debts as “assets”, the whole system became a highly unstable house of cards. Once one part of the structure started to wobble, the whole lattice of property–debt–asset contingencies came crashing down.

One of the lessons of this crash was that the interlinking between “natural attitudes”, which saw high risk, low asset, speculation as somehow “normal”, fuelled runaway development and environmental damage. Western demand was also fuelled by the lending of money from the supplier of many of its consumer goods, China. This is a crazy money–go–round, where China pegs its currency low against the dollar, locking in competitive advantage, which it then uses to build up a huge balance of payments surplus, which it then lends to the West so that the West continues to buy its goods. As we can see, the “natural attitude”, which treats our social and economic systems as somehow “normal”, “unremarkable”, “inevitable”, is responsible for allowing an unsustainable money-go-round, both at national levels, but also, more importantly at global financial levels.

To take off our “natural attitude” glasses for a minute, we can see that the

trade relationship between China and the West resembles car dealers lending money to their customers so that they can buy their cars. This global Hire Purchase (or HP) arrangement has also promoted the environmental damage that continues to devastate China, and the countries surrounding it. While China and other Asian countries have been more prudent with their money than the profligate United States and Europe, their massive development in recent years constitutes the most significant threat to the world's environment. China, it is often claimed, is building two coal power stations a week, and is now the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases. Actually, the former claim is not necessarily true. However, the latter claim—that China is now the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases—most certainly is.

Let me return, however, to ASEAN, and identify the main sustainability issues, and thence reveal what we in the social sciences and humanities can best do to tackle these issues, before they get out of hand—before it is too late.

To do this, I would like to return to the question of sustainable development, and what it actually means. Over the past few years, particularly since the financial crisis of the last five years, there has been much talk about sustainable development, to the point where many people seem to be suffering from "sustainability fatigue". In some countries, we see a backlash happening, with an increasing number of people expressing scepticism when it comes to environmental issues, with many simply not believing in climate change. The anti-sustainability lobby seems to have hardened, and gained increased following, not just because of sustainability–fatigue, I would say, but also because of the intolerance that those who believe in climate change have for those who do not.

A good example of this intolerance to other view points came from a Penn State professor, who proposed, in all seriousness that those who deny climate change should be prosecuted for "crimes against humanity." For those who are interested in this particular over–reaction to climate change denial, I wrote an article on my blog researchshed.com defending the right for people to hold whatever convictions they have, even if these convictions conflict with established science (Neal, 2011). Condemning those who happen to have different views on climate change, and to lampoon or ridicule them as "climate deniers" is an act of intolerance, which simply aggravates these

people, and hardens their position. Climate change may be a fact—but like all facts, it should be discussed, debated, criticised and deconstructed. It is the job of the social sciences and humanities to examine these debates, and to deconstruct the rhetoric on either side, so that we may better understand how climatic developments filter through into the consciousness and discourse of people living within these ecosystems.

Sustainability fatigue has also been aggravated by those who are at the foundations of our knowledge of the issues—climate scientists. One of the problems for those who see climate change as a threat, is that this "inconvenient truth" has taken on the mantle of a full blown ideology. And like all ideologies, there is a risk that those producing "the truth", are influenced by their convictions, and the need to find supporting evidence for their claims. There have been two celebrated examples of this in recent years. The first being claims of selective referencing in International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, to the point where, had they been student projects, they might have lost marks on their bibliographies. The second example was more serious, involving a British climate scientist discussing manipulating data to support the view that climate change was happening. Both of these cases were highly publicised, and fed into public debate on climate change, just as public sympathy for the issue and its champions was beginning to ebb.

For those of us who are suffering from "sustainability fatigue", and are starting to get tired of related issues such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), environmental accounting (EA), etc., the best antidote is to remind ourselves of what "sustainable development" actually is, and the best way to refresh our memory of what it all means is to go back to the original Brundtland Report discussion of the need for sustainable development (Brundtland, 1987).

As is well known, the Brundtland definition of sustainable development is as follows:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (1987, p.43).

This is a simple, but damning, definition. In Europe and the West, we now see something entirely unexpected—one with huge philosophical and political implications. That is, it is likely that those young people growing up now, and subsequent generations, may actually be worse off than those

before them. In the UK, for instance (where I come from), we are cutting pensions and raising the retirement age of people to 67—I now have to work two extra years, for less money, relatively speaking, than my father did. This is of philosophical importance because, as the scholar John Gray (2004) has noted, the notion of "progress" has always been at the heart of much Western thinking, action and strategy. This assumption of economic, social and intellectual progress over time, has now been shaken by events. Interestingly, one of the reasons why people are feeling poorer, and will feel even more poor in the future is the imperative to raise taxes to meet climate change deals on renewable energy sources. Our damage of the environment is, at last, hitting people where it most hurts—in the pocket.

The Brundtland definition is also at the heart of what has been called "cradle to cradle" management, which lays down as a value that our products and processes should make no lasting impact upon the environment. By the benchmark of "cradle to cradle" management we are failing dismally. Our generation––the people sitting in this room––are bystanders to massive deforestation, increasing CO_2 emissions, increasing people trafficking, mass extinctions, and the concreting over and destruction of vast areas of countryside. Both by the Brundtland Commission definition and the "cradle to cradle" benchmark, we are failing our future generations, and failing them badly.

So, we need to do something about it. The first thing to do is to identify the key sustainability issues that are causing us to fall short of the Brundtland and "cradle to cradle" targets.

Here are the obvious issues here in ASEAN:

1. Deforestation (Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma in particular)

Forests are hugely important, both in terms of atmospheric and climatic regulation, but also in terms of biodiversity, and the destruction of forests, interacts with other systemic factors. Deforestation is thus a key issue, which requires a shift from "natural attitude" thinking about markets and products. Those who assume that they are somehow apart from deforestation, are stuck in the "natural attitude", which allows this practice to continue. Once you replace this isolationist viewpoint of the world, with systems thinking, we see that Indonesia is being deforested for economic reasons. One of the most important of these is the need for land to grow palm oil. Farmers are not just slashing and burning trees for fun. They are doing so because there is demand

for palm oil, and therefore money to be made from growing it. “Demand” is not something abstract—a mere economic concept. It is us. We are the demand for palm oil. Next time you buy a packet of noodles, or pack of chips, or a jar of peanut butter, if you read the ingredients, the chances are that you have just contributed indirectly to the deforestation of Indonesia.

2. Air pollution and CO_2 emissions

ASEAN is an enormous and hugely diverse region, with over 600 million people. One of the biggest sustainability problems in the region involves air, and one of the most immediate threats to the health of the population comes in the form of haze—a veil of pollution in the air that causes transport delays, business shutdowns and respiratory problems, particularly among children. In 2002, there was the ASEAN Agreement on Trans–boundary Haze Pollution, and there have been other further attempts at tackling the problem of poor air quality. For instance, there was the Cebu Declaration on East Asian Energy Security, the ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN–WEN) in 2005, and the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate. These were hugely significant steps, which laid down clear guidelines for the elimination of air pollution (including CO_2). However, there have been setbacks, with the SE Asian Hazes of 2005 and 2006.

This is not merely a SE Asian problem. Here we see a clear interconnection between profit-seeking slash and burn deforestation in one country—Indonesia —and child health problems in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. This is the negative side of globalisation.

Back in 1992, Ulrich Beck wrote a forward-looking book called, “The Risk Society”, in which he argued that the globalization of trade, manufacturing, transportation and technology has resulted also in the globalization of risk. Potential hazards, such as CO_2 emission, nuclear plants, genetic engineering, water pollution and social hazards such as religious or political extremism, no longer pose risks only to particular countries or regions. With globalization, we are all interconnected—not just in theory, but in reality—such that an event, or a new product or technology, or a disease, or a terrorist act, in one country affects us all, in this great interconnected dynamic, living system called Earth.

Whereas Ulrich Beck’s theory about the new global risk society was just that ––a theory––in these images of haze in SE Asia, we have clear evidence that what he said was true.

3. Climate change and water management

Climate change is happening, and we are still totally unprepared for it. The reasons for the lack of preparedness, after all the warnings we have had, is again the domain of the social sciences and humanities, which can examine why it is that we have prioritised some things, such as economic growth over environmental damage.

Over the past twenty years, Thailand has gone from drought crisis to flood crisis, and this pattern appears to have been exacerbated over the past five years. The last two years have been disastrous, as we all know. In 2010, the drought situation in Korat in Isaan, Thailand, was very serious, with the government, and farmers deeply concerned about the effect of such water shortage on rice production. At the same time, the same was true of Vietnam.

Later that year, Central and Southern Thailand experienced hugely damaging floods, which caused chaos in terms of agriculture, transport, business, and life in general. Due to the floods, in November 2010, Hat Yai really stopped functioning as a city. Of course, worse was to come the next year, when Central Thailand and Bangkok experienced the worst flooding in living memory. All talk of drought was gone, as the water inexorably rose. There was an enormous impact in terms of tourism, the supply chains to the city were broken, and thousands of businesses, great and small were unable to ply their trade. Some major institutions were shut down. An example of this was my old university Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), which was devastated by the floods coming from Ayutthaya. Next to it lay an equally devastated Thammasat University. Now, if we are to talk of the sustainable future of a country, then the prospect of some of its major universities not only being shut down for a considerable time, but also having enormous infrastructural damage inflicted upon them, is a major issue—one that needs to be understood better, and addressed. Indeed, one of the great unaddressed sustainability issues for higher education in the region is how to sustain universities from closure and damage, during times of extreme weather and environmental conditions. Universities across the region need to organise and collaborate on long-term risk reduction strategies, to enable rapid response collaboration and support among member universities.

But it is not just major institutions such as universities that are at risk due to climate change. Whole cities are too. Bangkok is famously sinking

into the ground at a rate from 1.5–5cm per year, and some estimates claim that the city will largely be consumed by sea water within thirty years. The reasons for Bangkok sinking, in themselves, make up a useful list of sustainability issues. Firstly, climate change, which leads to a reconstitution of the earth around Bangkok, through a system of extreme dryness and extreme flooding (as we saw a few months ago). Secondly, the enormous weight of sky scrapers on the earth is simply pushing it downwards. Thirdly, the diminishing water table surrounding the city, which means that the area is contracting as it becomes dehydrated. All of these are fascinating areas for research. The big threat for Bangkok, of course, comes with the fact that it already lies below sea level. A combination of rising seas due to climate change, with the annual lowering of the city, means that water increasingly will simply pour into the basin. The coast below Bangkok is already flood prone, such that for weeks per year, people are wading through ankle deep water.

When it comes to what we can do about this, we obviously need a great deal more research into water management in SE Asia. This requires not only scientific work, but research that looks at the social and economic impacts of regular and massive—and maybe permanent—flooding throughout SE Asia.

It is important to realise here that crises can be inspirational—a catalyst for positive changes in thinking, technology and systems. The humanities have a key role to play in this, by exploring the seemingly peripheral issues associated with such crises, and producing different "ways of seeing." A good example of this kind of "out of the box", crisis-catalysed, thinking, has come from the architects and futurists discussing the prospect of "Wetropolis", a thriving, radically designed response to the long term challenges facing the region.

One of the key distinctions we must make here is this: At the moment, floods are treated as individual crises. Treating them in this way is to misunderstand, misrepresent and ultimately to mismanage them. The floods we have seen are not mere individual crises, but are part of a much greater mega-crisis that is affecting not just Thailand, not just ASEAN, but the whole world. In order to manage the individual crises better, the gaze must be shifted to the long term trends as the mega–crisis of climate change rolls on. This means it is critical for the ASEAN region to research and improve crisis and risk management, seeking sustainable development in the context of massive, wide-scale climate change.

To do so is not popular with governments, who—understandably—are bound up with the everyday business of running economies and winning elections. Governments, like all of us, are bound up within everyday concerns and priorities within the "natural attitude", wherein long term climatic trends seem intangible, far-off, and therefore less important than the immediate, the now, the happening.

Education and research play a vital role here. The role of research is to rattle the cage of the natural attitude, to show people the consequences of inaction and stasis now. In order to do this, we need more work done in urban sociology, public management, risk management, and town planning. We need more forecasting about the impact of these massive developments on family income, personal wealth, health and welfare. At the moment, the figures and data that people are used to are retrospective. Accounting, for instance, takes a retrospective view on business dealings—it does not usually ask, "what next?" "What next?" is the most important question that those in the ASEAN region can ask—and the best people to help answer this mega question, are those people in our universities, in our faculties of social sciences, demographics, economics, sociology and our business schools.

4. Poverty

Many ASEAN countries have made enormous progress when it comes to the reduction of poverty. However, it is still a massive factor in the region, and one that is bound up with environmental systems.

Poverty alleviation is listed as one of the key Millennium Development Goals (MDG), and is one of the most important issues facing humanity today. It is inextricably linked to the achievement of sustainable development, both at the economic and the environmental levels—neither economic nor environmental sustainability can be achieved without huge improvements in the economic welfare of the poorest people in our societies.

Much of the world's population lives in poverty, sustaining endemic regional corruption and crime, which are significant barriers to investment and to the implementation of sustainable business practice.

The lack of education associated with poverty enables self—interested populism to thrive, and thus encourages poor governance and lack of accountable investment in much of the world. In terms of the sustainability of the human race, the clustering of millions of disparate people in high density and unhygienic urban slums raises the risk of the appearance of devastating superbugs—

bacteria or viruses that could quickly affect much of the world's population, and cause social and economic collapse.

Poverty alleviation is a prerequisite for real sustainable development, because its dynamics and influence undermine initiatives aimed at enhancing sustainability. Governments of countries with low economic development and mass poverty are—perhaps understandably—reluctant to adopt environmental legislation (and implement it effectively) if it results in a slowdown in growth. This intractable feature of the economic development of poor countries is clearly seen in the economic and environmental policies of Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Brazil, Vietnam and China, where economic growth has been overwhelmingly prioritized over environmental sustainability.

The oft-quoted realities of China's coal power station program, or Indonesia deforesting at a rate of five million hectares annually (Lang, 2012), undermine attempts to reign in carbon emissions, or preserve biodiversity. The dash for growth by large developing countries, the subsequent enrichment of millions of their people, and their new demands for goods and services (cars, paper, detergents and power) constitute further direct threats to the world's eco-systems.

It is unfortunate, then, that the issues surrounding poverty are not wider taught in universities. Poverty is an economic issue (related to trade and the structure of local/global agribusiness industries), yet it is still largely overlooked by business education. It is a formative context wherein markets and businesses operate in most of the world, yet it attracts scant attention. In the current blaze of concern about "sustainability issues in business", poverty alleviation is treated as a second-tier sustainability issue, as compared to the environment, climatic considerations and stakeholder concerns.

A crucial and recognized reality of sustainable development is that it is multi–systemic—and commentary usually concentrates upon the social, the environmental and the economic interactions. Poverty—for all the reasons given above—influences and shapes the political, social and environmental contexts in which business operates, and undermines policies aimed at promoting sustainable development. Poverty alleviation should thus be thoroughly integrated into university education provision—not just as an adjunct to stakeholder issues, but as one of the most important economic and ethical issues of our time.

Sustainability in popular culture—the role of the humanities

Sustainability, then, is of obvious importance to disciplines such as economics, sociology, management, business and public policy—inputs from each of these disciplines is vital if we are to be able to make sense of the sustainability issues, and make a meaningful and relevant contribution towards addressing the challenges associated with climate change, flooding, poverty and the like. We have thus seen academic departments responding of the last decade, not only with research into Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Environmental Accounting and the Economics of Environmental Crises, but also in terms of developing new educational programs (Naeem & Neal, 2012). Two notable examples of this are at University Sains Malaysia (USM), which has developed an MBA into Sustainable Management. It has also established the Centre for Global Sustainability Studies. Asian Institute of Technology meanwhile has developed a highly innovative Masters degree in Corporate Social Responsibility with the organization, CSR Asia, based in Hong Kong.

Whereas university managers see the relevance of economics, sociology and business to the study of sustainability issues, there appears to be less urgency, and less momentum, in developing links between the humanities and environmental and sustainability issues. This is a mistake, because shifting people from the "natural attitude", getting them to reconsider their values, is as much the job of the arts and humanities, as it is the hard and soft sciences. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that without a serious contribution from the arts and humanities we will only have a skewed and restricted—and ultimately less realistic—view on sustainability issues. We need the contribution of not just the social sciences, but also the humanities.

I would highlight here the case of what is often seen as a "pure" humanities course—philosophy. As every student of philosophy knows, the great lesson of philosophy, is asking questions of what we take for granted. The great Athenian philosopher, Socrates, introduced what was later known as the Socratic method, which involved asking questions—taking the other side—so as to expose and explore the truth about the world. He thus made a real nuisance of himself, going around to the politicians and thinkers of the time, and asking them incisive questions, of what seemed to them to be obvious. We need Socrates nowadays, as we need much more questioning about what we take for granted in our lives. We need his questions, so that we can

expose and explore the “natural attitude,” which sustains our whole economic system. We need him to ask such deep questions as: Why are we allowing the destruction of our environment, when we know this is a threat to humanity? Why do we need to buy things we do not need? Why do we waste our lives searching through the Internet? Why don’t we consider the big picture? Why are we obsessed with the minutiae of everyday life, or next year’s economic data, when the biosphere in which we live is being damaged?

Through such questioning, philosophy has the potential also to strengthen our very understanding of what sustainability actually means—clearing our thinking on important matters, and enabling more productive discourse and better communication. There is a lot of heated debate and rhetoric on the issue of sustainability issues, and hence widespread public confusion about definitions and the scope of sustainability categories. We need more philosophers to work on the system of meanings associated with our discourse about the environment, and the future of our planet.

We also need philosophers, sociologists, writers and filmmakers to expose the invisible philosophies that underpin our current “natural attitude” —our implicit conviction that capitalism is the only way, that we are the masters (not the servants) of nature, that people in their cars, in their supermarkets, surfing the internet, are somehow “apart” from nature—that ecosystems are somehow “out there”, and have nothing to do with us, as we sit watching television, or driving our cars.

There are signs now that the creative arts are taking up the challenge of climate change, pollution and risk. Al Gore’s movie “An Inconvenient Truth” of 2004 was historically significant in that it combined the most powerful entertainment mass medium––movies––with a serious warning about the state of our biosphere. Since then, we have seen the movie industry take up this theme with gusto. The film “The Day After Tomorrow”, showed dramatically the perils of the redirecting of the Gulf Stream, through climate change The movie “Avatar”—one of the most innovative and successful movies of all time—explored themes of environmental destruction, and biodiversity, as well as cultural diversity and American hegemony. The movie “The Road” showed the aftermath of environmental and humanitarian destruction to great effect. Finally, the movie “2012” explored the theme of the biosphere reconfiguring itself with a huge global flood.

There are many other examples of how the media and popular culture are engaging with sustainability issues. However, in spite of this, the evidence of people actually changing their behaviour is very mixed. Governments and media talk about the virtues of car sharing for commuting—but there is no evidence that people are doing this in larger numbers. Governments and the media talk about the need for recycling—this has been more successful, and people are increasingly doing this. Actually, businesses have been leading the way on many of these issues, with companies now competing to out-Green or out–CSR each other. A good example of this is Siam Cement, which has led the way on many environmental and CSR projects and issues.

We need the humanities to examine the relationship between popular culture, the media and the environment. Whereas ten years ago, undergoing research, or putting on educational programs, on "media and the environment", would have been seen as rather quirky and non–mainstream, now such research and teaching themes are of obvious importance. We need analysis of the kinds of communications, messaging and discourses that make up our societies, in order to understand how they sustain the "natural attitude", why we see ourselves as standing outside the world's eco-systems. Certainly when one looks at television, one can clearly see how advertisements fuel the desire to buy things that people simply do not need.

There is a wonderful movie, directed by the American Director, John Carpenter in 1988—called "They Live." The plot to this movie begins when a man is walking down a regular street in Los Angeles, and discovers a pair of sunglasses. He decides to keep them, and thinks nothing of it as he walks down the street, which is a usual scene of tall buildings, traffic, and lots of advertisements. Then he puts the glasses on—and his view completely changes. Each of the advertisements displays the message it is imparting: "Obey", "Don't think" and "Consume". In this way, the movie clearly shows the power of the popular media, particularly marketing, in transmitting messages that sustain a natural attitude, wherein the key values are obeying orthodoxies, not questioning or challenging prevailing socio-economic systems, and, above all, uncritically accepting the wish, by hundreds of millions of people, to "consume."

"Consume." Indeed, one of our societal definitions of "success" is to be rich—and to have the ability to consume even more.

The arts and humanities have a key role to play in holding our consumerist, pro-globalization, pro-capitalism, ideologies that define us as being somehow

separate from our environment—ideologies that encourage us to think that what we as individuals do does not matter. In this huge globalising world, we are each so, small, so insignificant, that our buying of palm oil infused noodles, of paint, our driving of cars, our taking vacations—our travelling to conferences—are seemingly without significance. Of course, the reality is that, with millions of us talking these choices—each convinced that we are too small to make a difference—we are causing huge damage to our environment, and to our sustainability as a species.

Here, for instance, is a slide that shows the UK electricity demand during the 1990 World Cup semi-final against Germany. The peaks you can see, are the intervals for normal and extra time, when everybody went to the kitchen to put on the kettle, or grab a drink from the fridge. Everybody saw their actions as nothing more than individual actions. However, as can be seen—each of these individual actions, all in the take–for–granted–natural attitude, collectively caused massive surges in demand. One of the most pervasive and damaging aspects of the natural attitude is the notion that we are small, insignificant individuals in a huge world—and that nothing we do is of any real consequence.

Another aspect of this is that great bane of Thai life—traffic. How often do we sit in our cars and complain,"Oh no, the traffic is terrible" or ask, "Where has everybody come from?" And sometimes, we get angry or irritated that so many people have blocked "our" route home. This is the natural attitude expressing itself—a view on the world that sees the world, and what happens in it, as somehow external or apart from us.

Of course, the opposite is true—we are the traffic that we complain about. Our car is behind some cars, but it is also in front of others, blocking their way. We are part of the system.

We thus need new views on the world, which take us out from our everyday perceptions, and allow us to see our place in the complex systems of the world.

I would thus encourage all those involved in the arts and humanities to ask of ways in which their own research and teaching can address environmental and sustainability issues. You may think that your own research or teaching is "far removed" from the issues of sustainability; however, this belief is itself part of the "natural attitude" that encourages us to see what we do as somehow

separate from our environmental context. We all live within the biosphere, and every action, every thought, every lesson, every meeting, every research paper, is an integral part of the world system, and is interconnected directly or indirectly with every other part of the environmental system, of which we are a part.

Take the study of religion—another "pure" humanities area. The study of religion, however, is key to understanding how humans have seen their place in the world, the cosmos—and how we do so today. It also gives us models of what it is to be human within the world, that challenge the consumerist "natural attitude" so prevalent today. For instance, the study of Buddhism reveals quite clearly the systemic interconnectedness of our place in the cosmos. It explains this interconnectedness with two terms. One is "dependant co-arising", which explains how life develops in connection with everything else around it. Nothing is isolated from its history, and from its environment. Another key concept is that of "karma", which reveals that our actions are not without consequence, or limited to the cause and effect implicit in much current consumerist thinking. Our actions, through the medium of our context, our environment, are formative of ourselves, as we "dependently co-arise" through time (Neal, 2006). There is an argument that what we are experiencing with the current environmental crisis is the principle of karma in action. It is to be hoped that if we could just begin to see our connectedness in the world, and to act in ways that benefit the world around us, then we would see a positive karmic relationship develop healthier systems between humans and their environment—and this would transform ourselves in the process.

Finally, then, I would stress the importance—indeed the vital importance—of the arts and the humanities for enhancing our relationship with our world, and making sure we have a sustainable place within it. The role of the arts and the humanities is to provide new prisms—new sunglasses—to expose the consumerist ideologies through which we live, and encourage us to see ourselves, not as separate from all the other species of animals and plants around us, but, as fellow inhabitants of the biosphere. Your lessons and your research are vital opportunities for you, colleagues and students to ask key questions about our humanity and our role in the biosphere—why we treat our fellow species as mere food, pets, entertainment or tourist attractions—and to try better to understand how we, and our ideologies, are interconnected in this amazing, beautiful, fragile world, in which we live.

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