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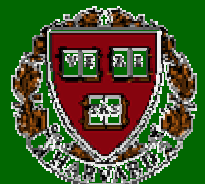
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Our Historical Context: Colonialism,  
Imperialism and Sprawl

Timothy C. Weiskel

Session 5  
19 October 2004

Harvard University Extension School  
Fall Semester 2004



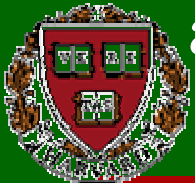
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## Two Approaches to the Study of Ethics as there are Two Approaches to Grammar

Broadly speaking there are two approaches to the study of ethics and morality (just as there are two approaches to the study of grammar).

One approach is to assume the prior existence and subsequent implementation of rules. Hence the exercise is one of announcing, applying, re-stating, enforcing, etc. rules to behavior.

The second approach is one of trying to discover or derive principles of moral behavior by evaluating the likely consequences of behavior alternatives.



# Deontological Vs. Consequentialist Approaches to Analyzing Ethics

Broadly speaking these two approaches to ethical reasoning are known as:

- the **Deontological** approach (absolute rules already exist and merely need to be applied to circumstances). **Deductive approach.**

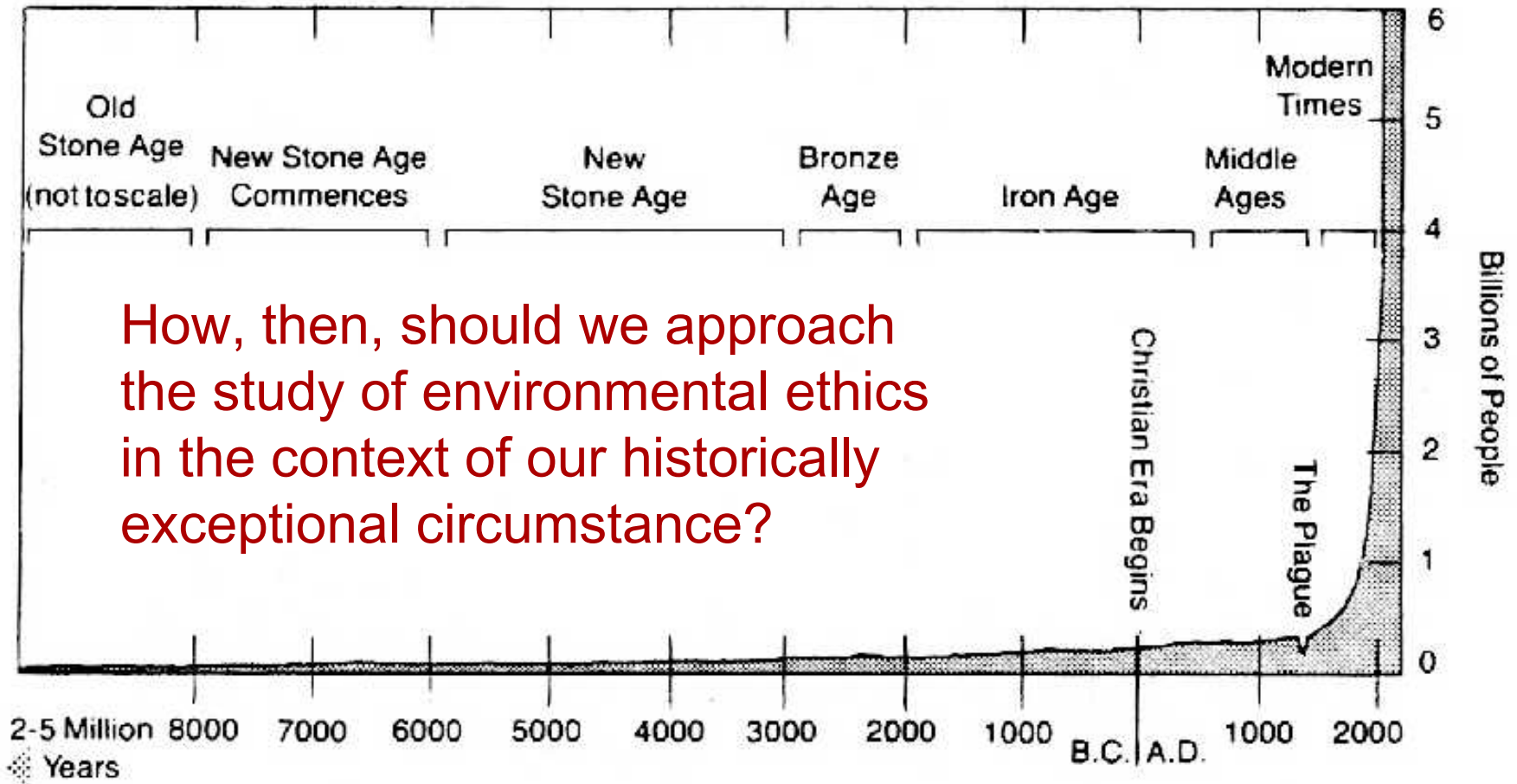
- the **Consequentialist** approach (principles do exist, but they must be derived by evaluating the consequences of proposed behavior and establishing norms) . **Inductive approach.**

*Important to underscore that:*

*Both approaches emphasize principles, BUT these principles are constituted in a different manner.*



# World Population Growth Through History



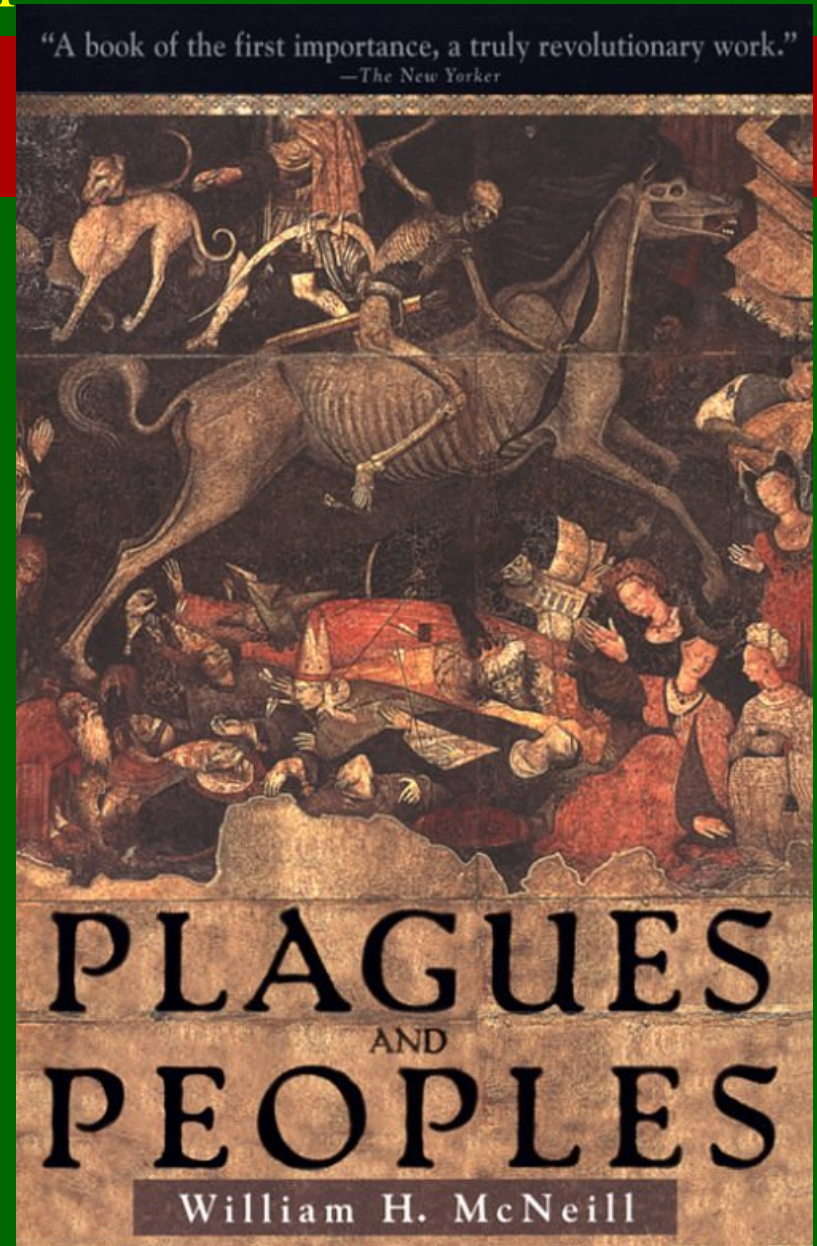
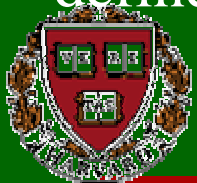
How, then, should we approach the study of environmental ethics in the context of our historically exceptional circumstance?



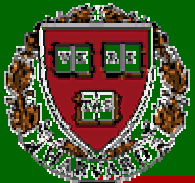
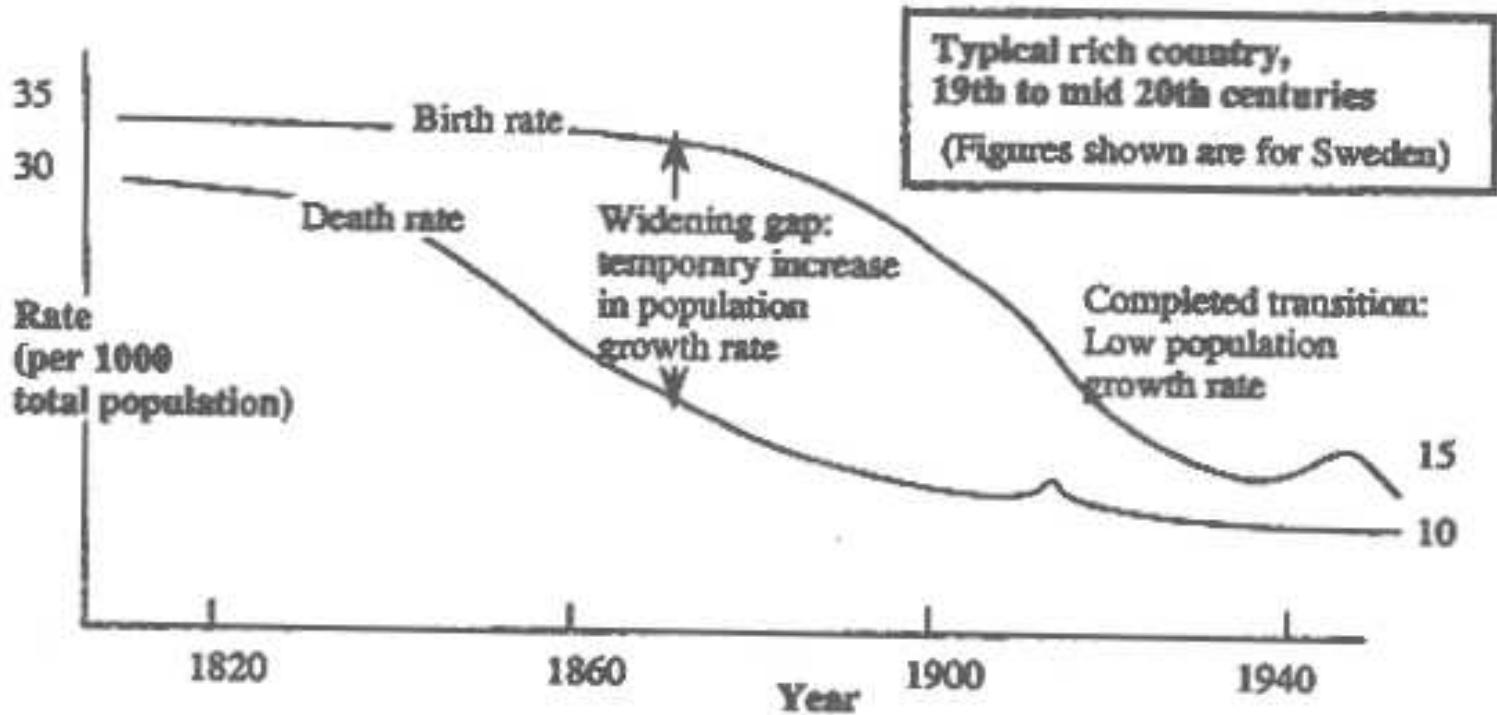
Let's begin by looking at radical imbalances of the past...

“Skill and knowledge, though they have profoundly transformed ordinary encounters with disease for most of humankind, have not and in the nature of things never can extricate humanity from its age-old position....

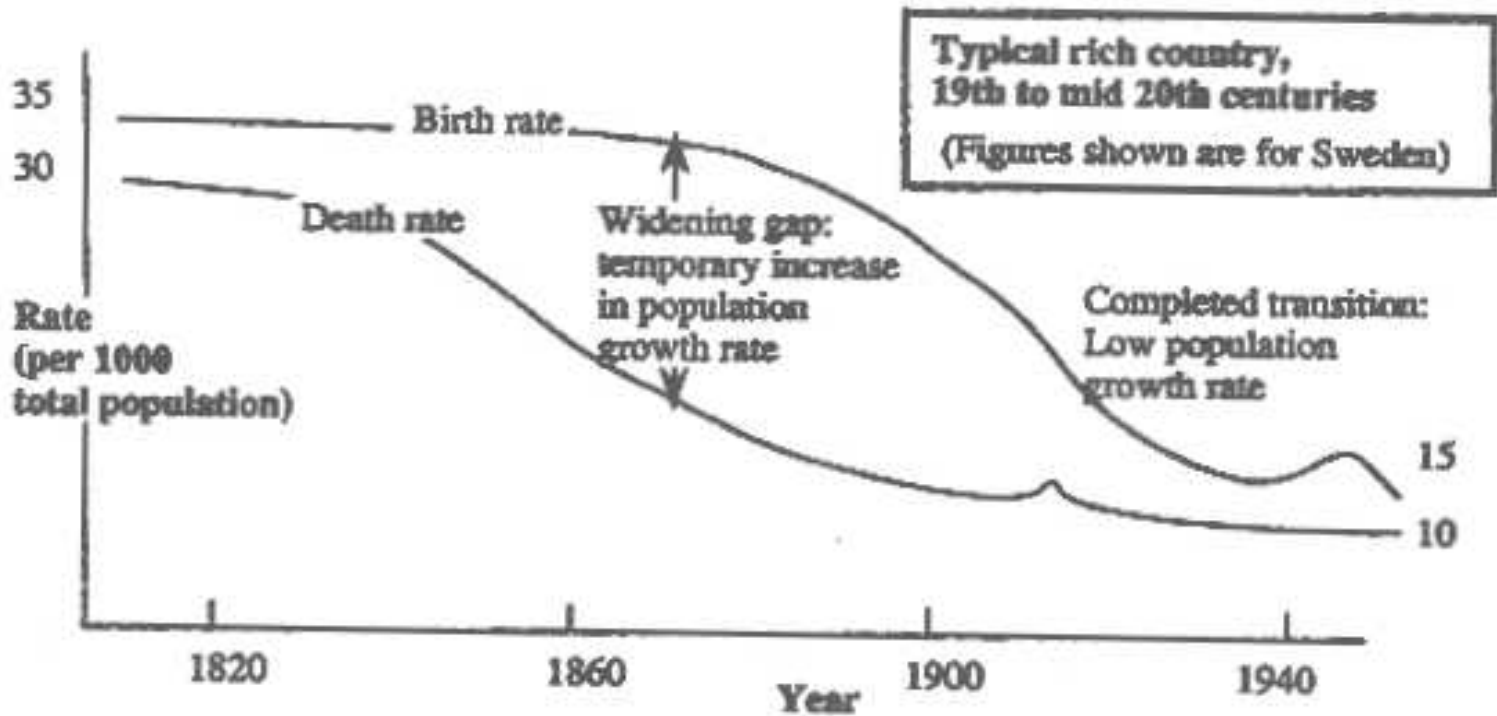
Birth control may in time catch up with death control. Something like a stable balance between human numbers and resources may then begin to define itself.”



# The “Demographic Transition”



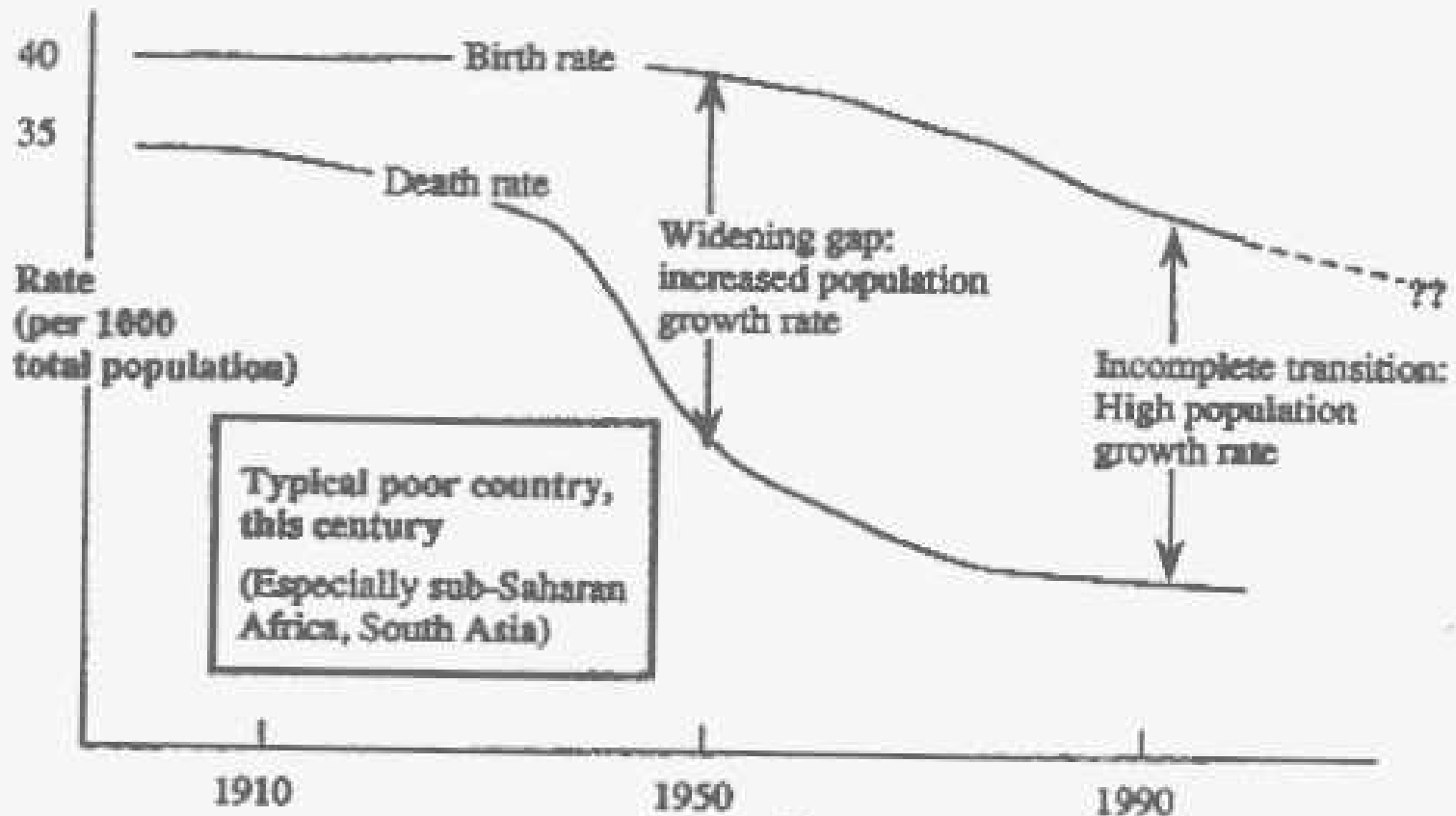
# The “Demographic Transition”



But, this is only typical of rich European countries in the 19th and 20th centuries....



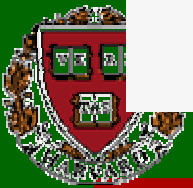
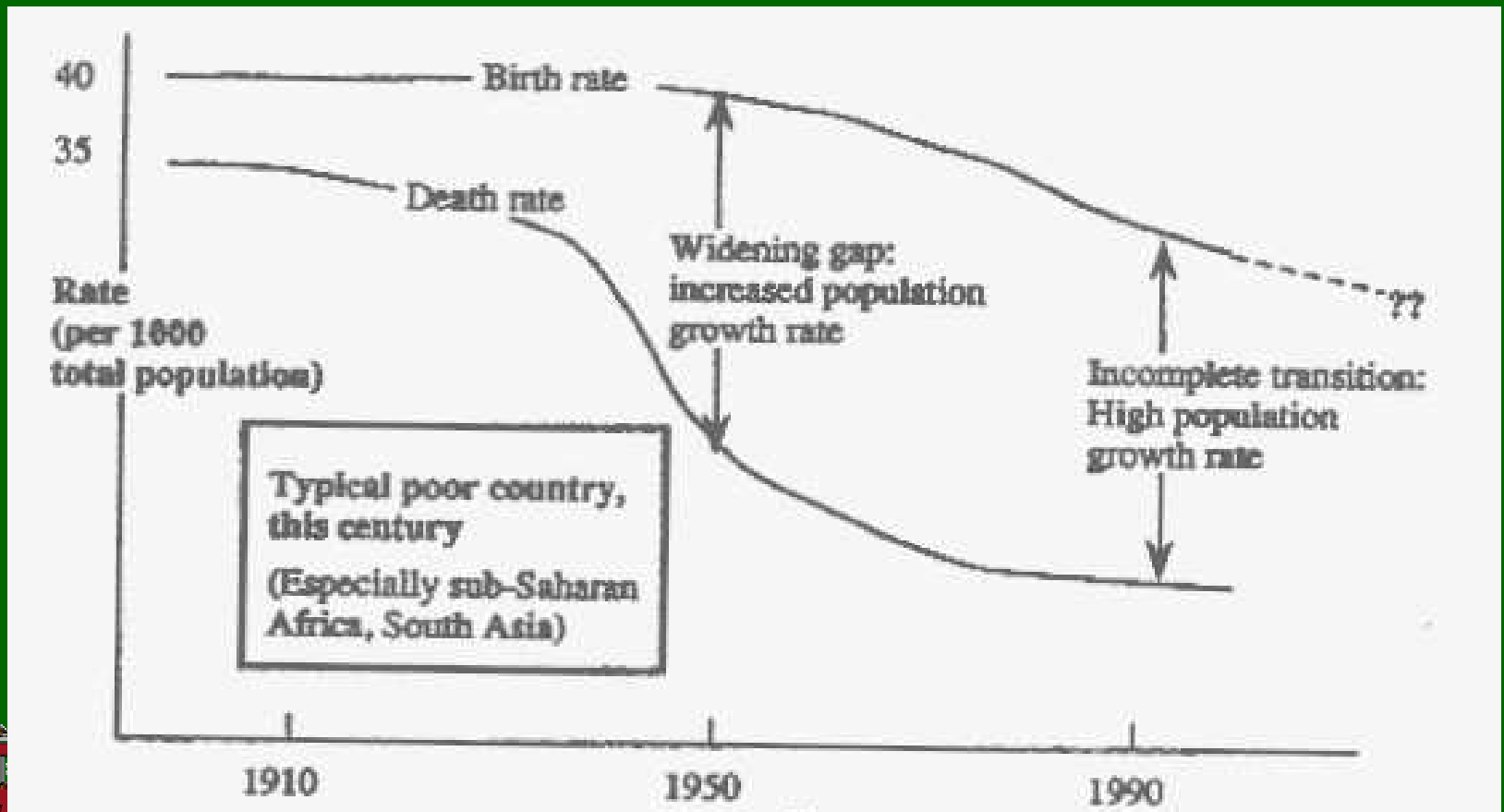
What about the 'Third World' -- i.e.. the two-thirds world, really the four-fifths world?





What about the 'Third World' -- i.e.. the two-thirds world, really the four-fifths world?

What 'transition' is occurring here?



“A book of the first importance, a truly revolutionary work.”  
—*The New Yorker*



# PLAGUES AND PEOPLES

William H. McNeill

“... for the present and short-range future, it remains obvious that humanity is in course of one of the most massive and extraordinary ecological upheavals the planet has ever known. Not stability but a sequence of sharp alterations and abrupt oscillations in existing balances ...can be expected in the near future as in the recent past.

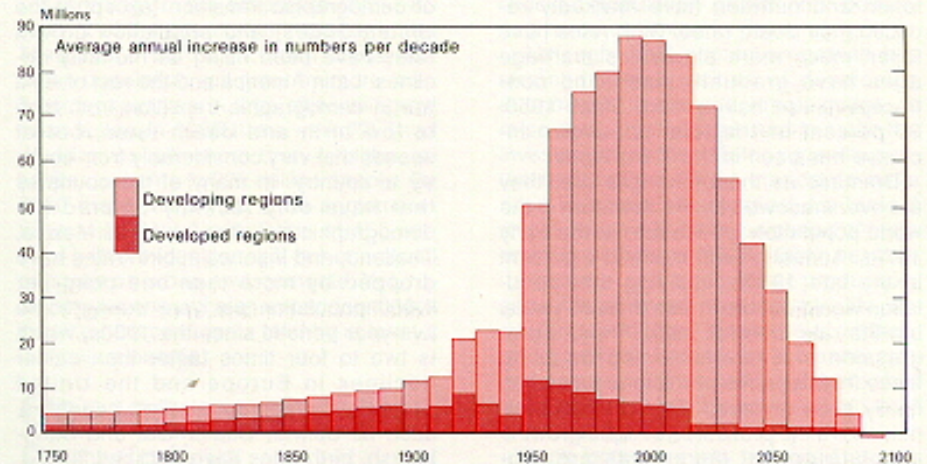
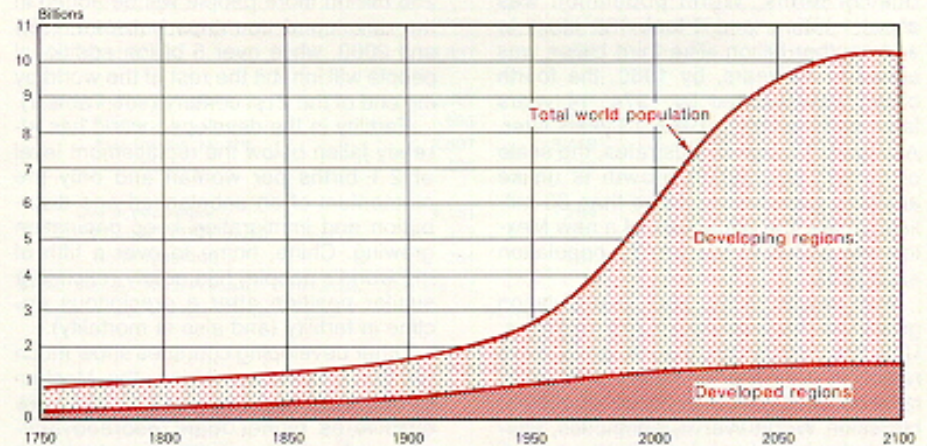
“Ingenuity, knowledge, and organization alter but cannot cancel humanity’s vulnerability...”

Clearly, there are widely differing assessments of our circumstances and widely moral differing positions on how we ought to behave collectively.

This, in part, derives from a different 'lived experience' ...



Figure 1. World, Developing and Developed Regions, Population Growth: 1750-2100



Source: Thomas W. Merrick, with PRB staff, "World Population in Transition," *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (April 1986) Figure 1, p. 4.

# OVERSHOOT

The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change

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**carrying capacity:** maximum permanently supportable load.

**cornucopian myth:** euphoric belief in limitless resources.

**drawdown:** stealing resources from the future.

**cargoism:** delusion that technology will always save us from

**overshoot:** growth beyond an area's carrying capacity, leading to

**crash:** die-off.

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**William R. Catton, Jr.**

Foreword by Stewart Udall

Some authors have written about how the human community has “overshot” the carrying capacity of the earth.

**Georg Borgstrom**

\$2.95

author of *The Hungry Planet*

An international food science authority spells out the stark realities facing man if we continue to push our earth to its biological limits.

# TOO MANY

AN ECOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF EARTH'S LIMITATIONS

"Level-headed, factual and scary . . . not a book for those who would remain complacent."  
—*Los Angeles Times*

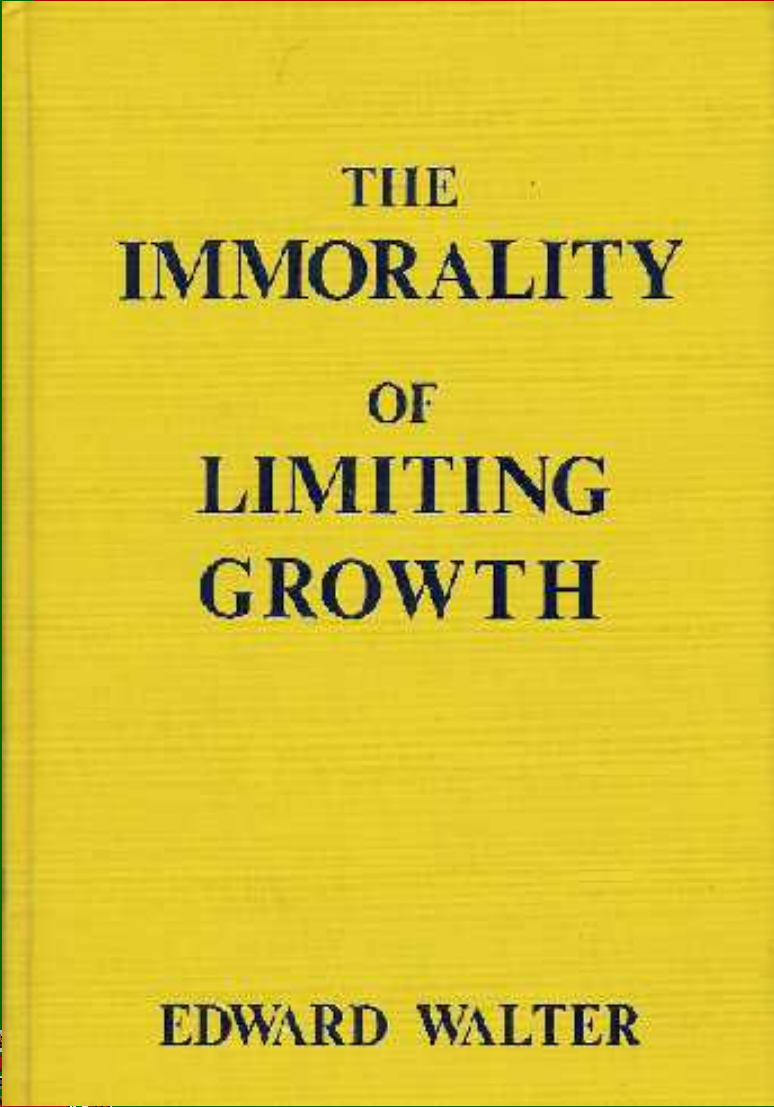


These perspectives are not new. They have been stated with increasing urgency since Thomas Malthus's first *Essay on Population* in the late eighteenth century.

Both Thomas Malthus and many who have written since have portrayed this as a moral issue.



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**THE  
IMMORALITY  
OF  
LIMITING  
GROWTH**

**EDWARD WALTER**

But not all people agree with the morality expressing the need for limits.

Indeed, some argue that it is immoral to limit human growth and the economic growth that seems to accompany it.\*

This argument often comes from conservative religious leaders on the one hand or techno-scientific salvationists -- perhaps the leaders of the most pervasive form of religion in our Western culture, if not the world.

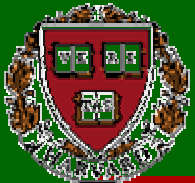
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## Some examples...the Ethics of the Ivory Trade....

Elephants are reported to be on the verge of extinction.  
(AP Report).

What are the factors behind the demand for Ivory?

Yet despite threatened extinction some people seem to be promoting the trade in ivory in Africa. (See for example the [BBC Report on this African dilemma.](#) t)



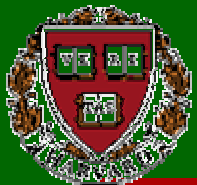
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## What are the ‘ethics’ of the ivory trade?

Is the trade in ivory ethically defensible?

Who should judge? Who has a ‘voice’ on this question? Whose are the relevant opinions? groups in Africa? which groups?

What about non-African elephant populations in India?





# On beyond elephants....

Isn't the elephant issue part of a larger problem?

For example,

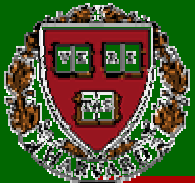
What about elephants populations Vs. other endangered species?

What about the large mammals of the sea whales? T \*

What about non 'charismatic' species? t

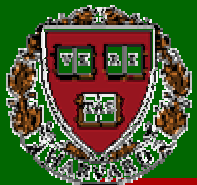
What about the the full range of biodiversity?

Including insects and microbes? \*



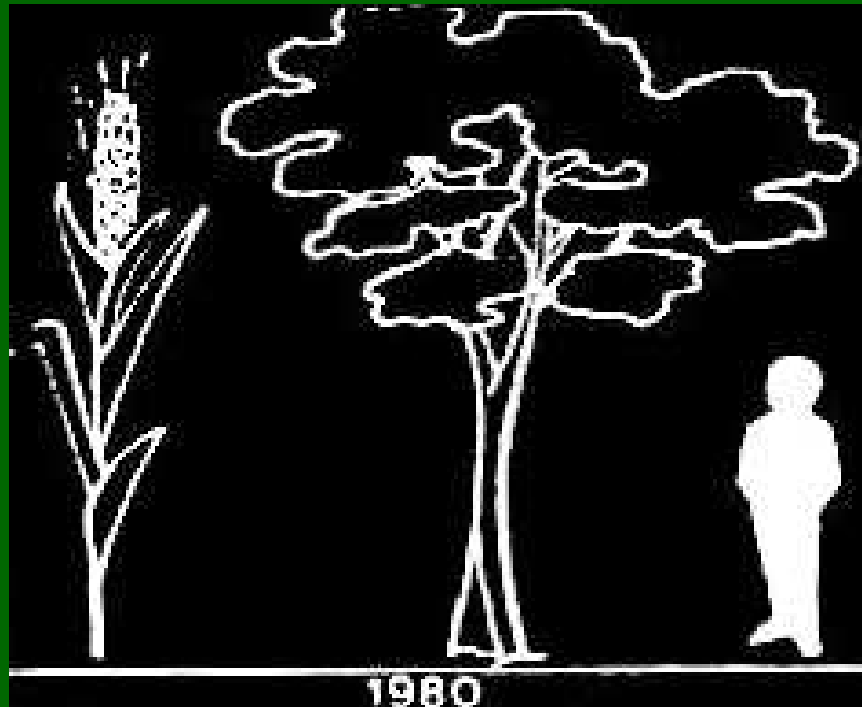
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The community of life forms on earth can be described in terms of ratios between living populations.



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Further, these ratios can, in principle, be measured and specified at specific times in history.

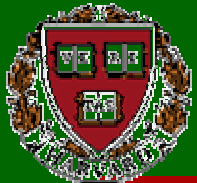
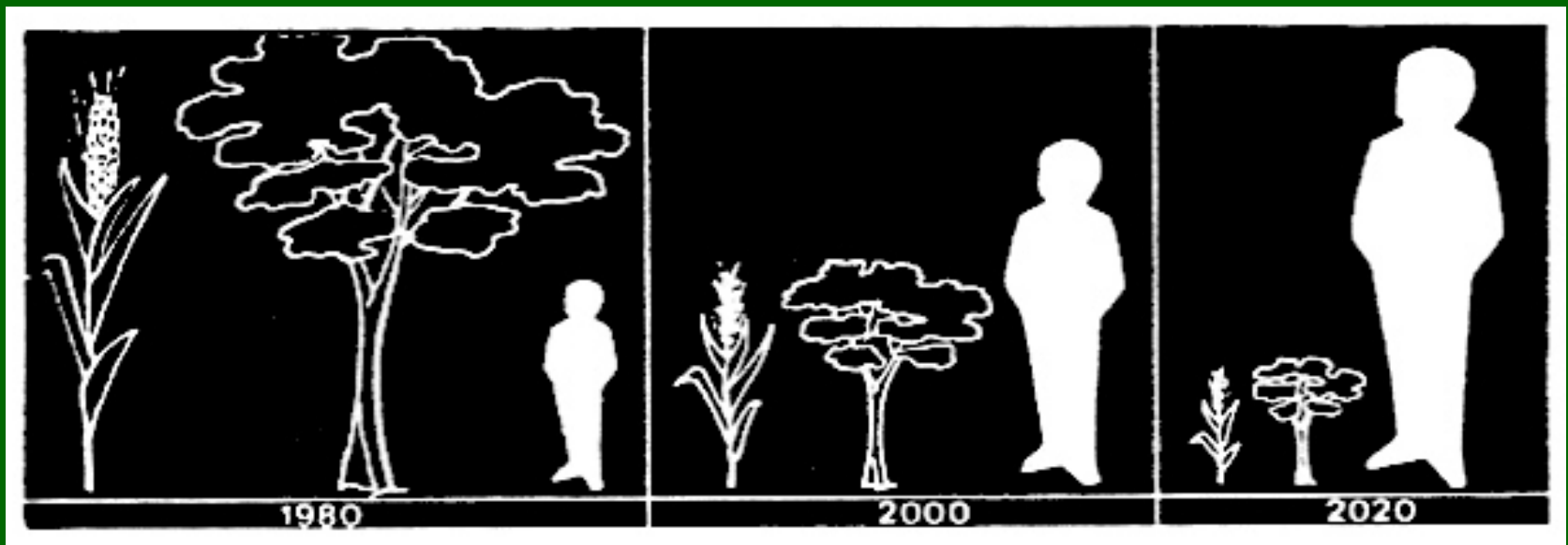


If you compare the evolution of ratios over time,  
some worrisome trends become apparent...

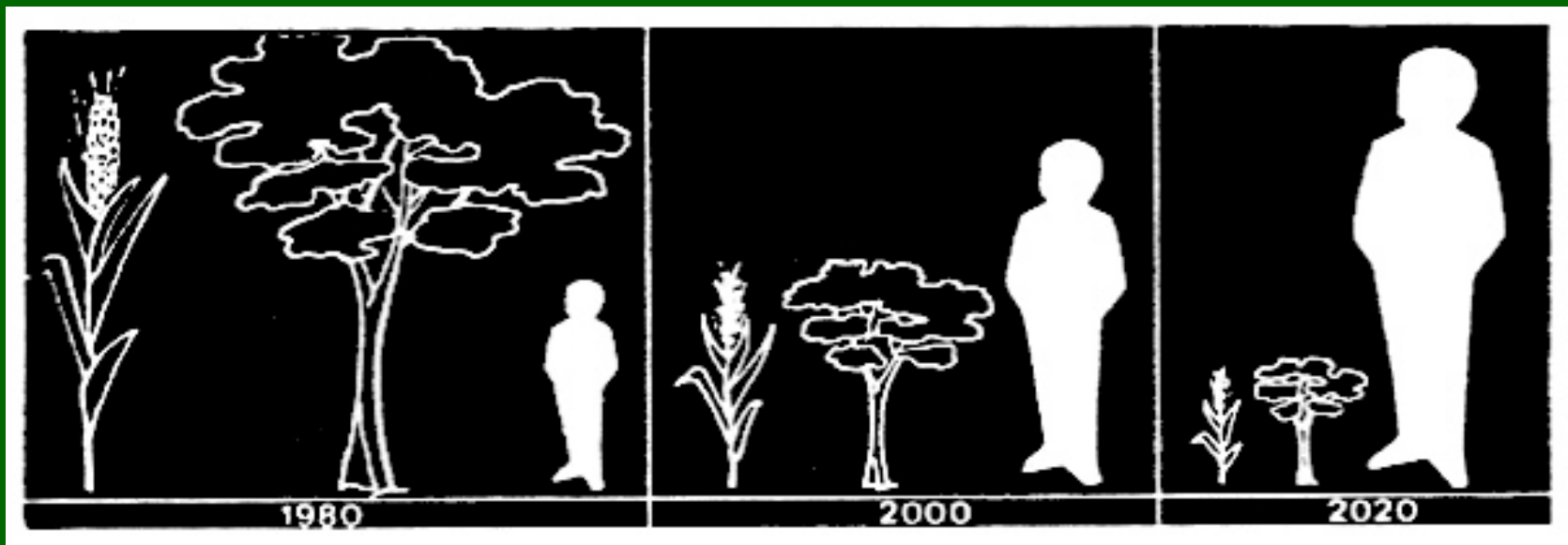


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If you project these trends into the foreseeable future, some very dramatic problems are inescapable



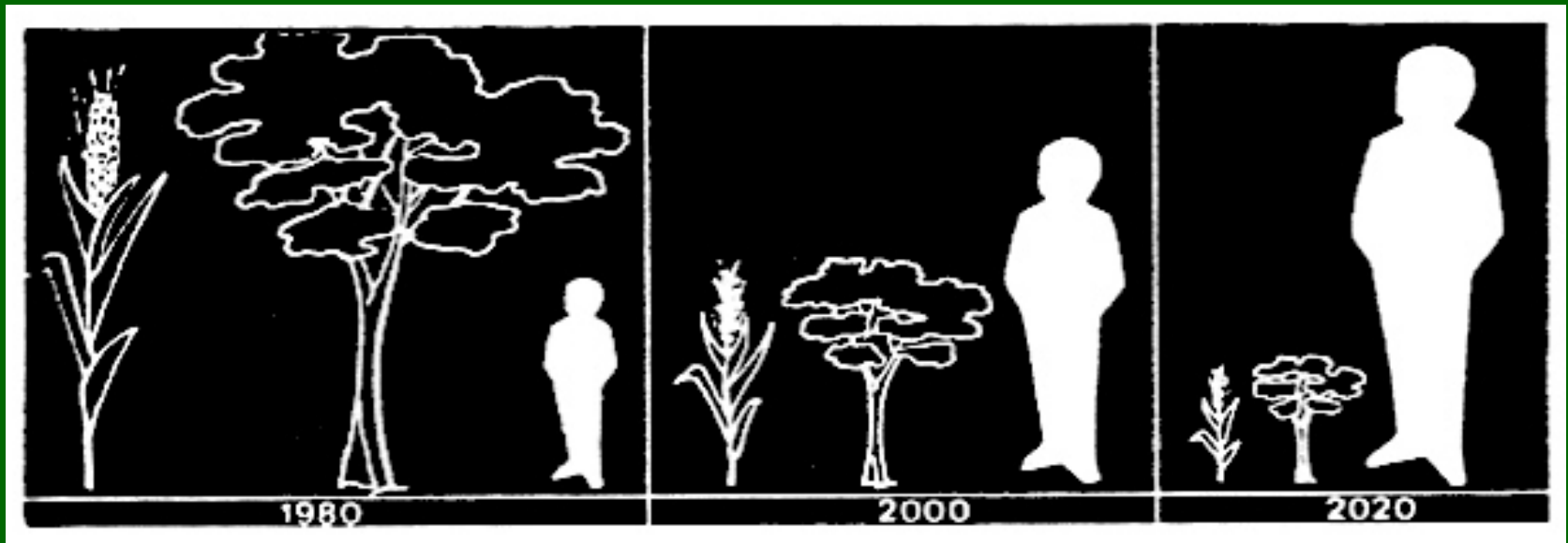
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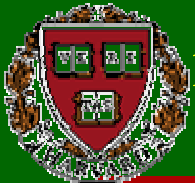
The projected trajectory of these shifts in ratios is both unstable and unsustainable.



What do we *believe* will happen next?



What we *believe* and what we *know* may be quite different. Somehow we *believe* we are exceptions to nature...even though we *know* this is impossible.



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The structure of “Western” belief is largely the same. It rests upon an assumption of “exceptionalism” -- somehow “we” are “set apart.”



Historically the Abrahamic religions which emerged from the marginal agricultural lands of the Middle East were an important source of this “exceptionalism.”

### Covenantal Exceptionalism

People believed themselves to be “set apart” (from nature and history) by virtue of a special covenant with Yaweh -- an Israeli war god.



# Christianity emphasized “Confessional Exceptionalism”



JESUS WALKING ON THE SEA  
He saith unto them, It is I; be not afraid.... (John 6: 20)

According to some, the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, was said to be the “Christ” -- son of God, and thereby an exception to the natural process everyone else experienced.

## *Confessional Exceptionalism*

Confessing faithfulness promised abundance...

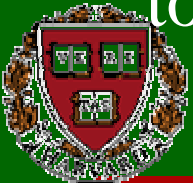
Jesus is presented in several narratives as if he has control over natural process. For those who trust him and declare their faith, he directs them toward resources they normally find hard or impossible to acquire on their own.



THE MIRACULOUS DRAUGHT OF FISHES

And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes. . . . (John 21: 6)

PHIL WEISKEL - 20



Richard Leakey  
and Roger Lewin



# the Sixth Extinction

PATTERNS OF LIFE AND THE  
FUTURE OF HUMANKIND

"Well informed, artfully purveyed—and unsettling...an unnerving tale of [flora and fauna] emerging in a wink of the evolutionary eye and exiting just as abruptly."

—New York Times Book Review

But scientists are reminding us that despite our sincere beliefs in convenantal exceptionalism or confessional exceptionalism, humankind is not an exception to the laws of the functioning laws of the ecosystem over time.

Further, they point out, that our enduring structure of belief grounded in exceptionalism is blinding us to the major biogeological fact of our time -- that we are in the midst of Earth's *Sixth Extinction*.



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To compare and contrast these kinds of debates we need to look at the structures of the world-views that are contending with one another...

A Theory of **Community**

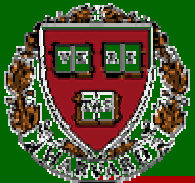
A Theory of **System**

A Theory of **Authority**

A Theory of **Change**

A Theory of **Agency**

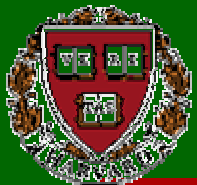
A Theory of **Time**



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# *A Theory of Community*

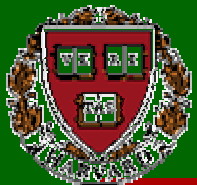
What community is assumed to be the relevant moral community by what the speaker has either stated or implied? Is this community aware of itself as a community? Are there a variety of moral communities? Who or what is "within" the moral community? Who or what is explicitly excluded or excluded by implication?



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# *A Theory of System*

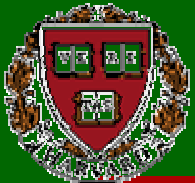
What is the overall concept of system employed by the discipline? How do various moral communities relate to one another in a larger system of connected relations? What are the principles or attributes of that system governing how moral communities relate to one another?



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# *A Theory of Authority...*

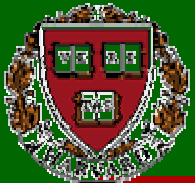
What is the explicit or implicit concept of authority in the propositions being forwarded? What *warrant* do we have to assert that such-and-such is “good” or “right”? What source of authority exists to settle disputes between contesting ideas of the “good” and the “right”? In other words, what is the *ultimate source* of moral authority?



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# *A Theory of Change*

Where does change come from? How is it explained?  
Does change emanate from *within* the system or is it conceived as *exogenous*? If it is endogenous *how* is change alleged to occur within the system? What is (or are) the presumed indices of change?

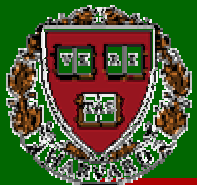




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# *A Theory of Agency*

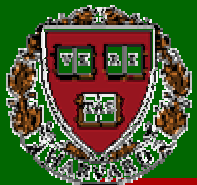
Who or what the agent *of change* or *stability* in the moral community or in the system as a whole? Is it ever legitimate for moral agents to intervene in a wider inter-connected system to achieve certain ends? If so, when and under what circumstances is intervention justified? If not, what is the justification of non-intervention?



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# *A Theory of Time*

How late is it? Are different kinds of intervention morally justifiable according to a "theory of moment?" When is it morally justified not to intervene because the "moment has passed" or perhaps it "has not yet come?" What is the narrative shape of time implied by the disciplinary discourse? Is it "never too late?" or "always too late?" or sometimes just the right "window of opportunity?"



# What is the 'Neolithic Outlook' in these structural categories of perception?

## *Implicit theories*

## *Neolithic and Peasant Cultures*

### **Community**

Those people are part of my moral community with whom I share common access to land, language and symbols of belief, e.g. the book.

### **System**

The wider natural world is made up of many (competing) moral communities, mostly engaged in agriculture as well. – all subject hierarchically to vicissitudes of nature (floods, drought, epidemics, epizootics etc.) perceived as “acts of God” -- “ours” or “theirs”

### **Authority**

Disputes settled at appropriate level of hierarchy within land-based state/religious system. Ultimately God or gods have authority and express themselves through natural processes. Priestly class vs. King

### **Change**

No change but cyclical change. Putatively changeless and eternal. Norm is to resist change. Ritual effort is to rehearse system and cycle in hierarchically arranged repetitive cycles – “There is nothing new under the sun” Innovation is not rewarded. Change thought subversive.

### **Agency**

God(s) is(are) agents of change – sometimes through privileged revelations to faithful followers. Prophets and “chosen people.”

### **Time**

Normal experience of time is as a series of cycles within a larger structure of “interval” -- a time between a “creation” moment and a “redemption” sometime in the future..

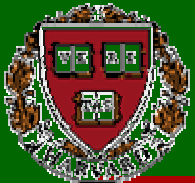


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While ideology seeks to deny change, much change occurs over time in peasant societies.

Change occurs because of the interaction of the different elements *within* the system:

- members of different moral communities (ie. “foreigners”) dispute access to arable land, water and resources;
- conflicts arise between specialized priestly classes and land owners or between city-based land owners and permanent peasant class;
- conflicts arise between groups whose wealth is based on production vs. wealth derived from trade.

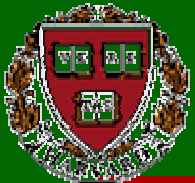


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Ultimately internal dynamic of conflicting elements in system push it “outwards.”

In Europe, the loose confederations of competing landed gentry and the royalty they support focus their competition “outwards” to obtain new raw materials useful in their intra-European struggles for domination of one another.

Because of the *lack* of hegemony and effective political power in Europe, competing feudal structures look abroad for resources to fuel and arm their intra-European struggles for power.



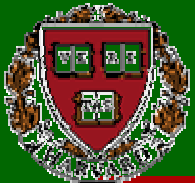
# The “European Miracle?”

Thus, the “European miracle” is born...

Big Historical Question: “What accounts for European exceptionalism? That is, why did Europe ‘lead’?”

One (essentially political) Answer...

Unlike other areas (China, India, the Middle East under Ottoman-Turkish rule, etc.), the *fragmentation* of Europe meant that one of the most convenient and effective forms of competitive survival for royal aristocracies was to search outwards for new sources of established forms of wealth and novel forms of wealth as well.



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## A Royal-Charter $\Leftrightarrow$ Bourgeois Revolution

Remembering, then, the nested, reciprocal and cumulative kinds of causation that we are sensitive to in ecosystems, it is understandable that European *political weakness* combined with the emergence of *moneyed trading classes* and sought to build power on *new* sources of wealth obtained *outside* and beyond the realms of their existing political control.

Discovery, innovation, change and movement become positively valued and a major shift in Europe's historical worldview emerged as a result.

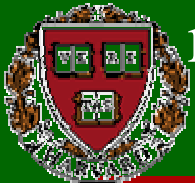


## The “Colonial Worldview”

The dominant worldview that emerges out of the 500 years of experience since 1492 is still with us today. It represents a shift from a peasant to a bourgeois outlook and valuation of the world.

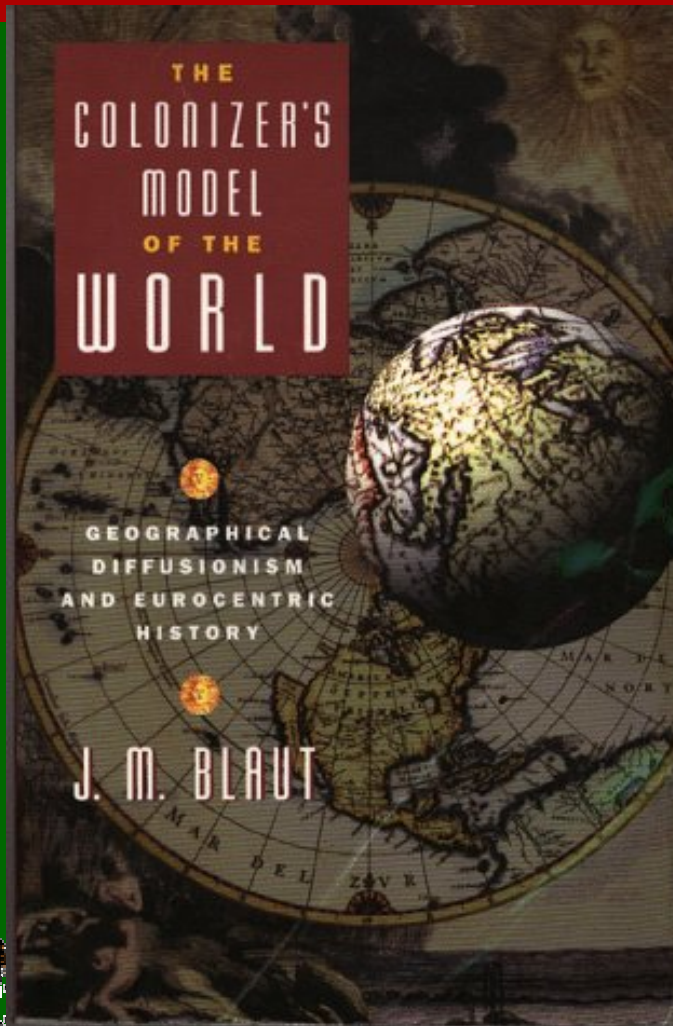
It differs from -- but does not entirely displace -- the peasant worldview born of the neolithic revolution.

In many cases it extends and expands that earlier worldview, particularly concerning the Divinely ordained “chosen people” theme. But in other respects it totally subverts that worldview.





# What are its key components?



Numerous studies abound to characterize the worldview of the colonizers, and it would be presumptuous to attempt to summarize all of Western European thought in this course.

Nevertheless,...

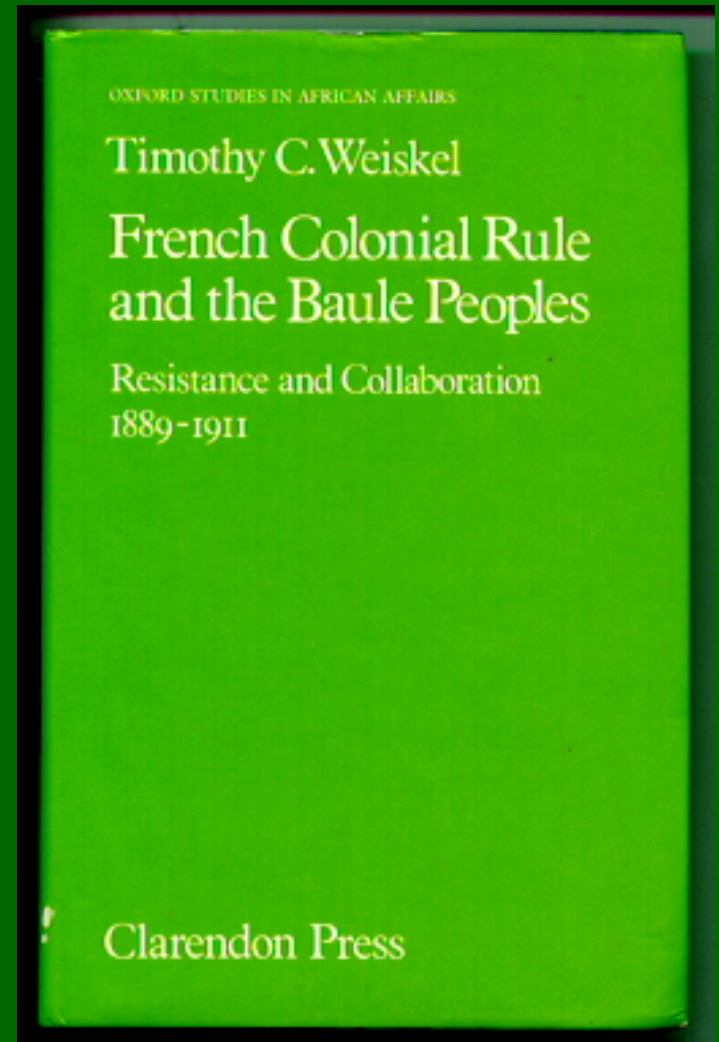


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# Colonialism can be studied as an ecological phenomenon

The careful study of modern colonialism -- especially as an ecological phenomenon -- is a basic necessity for understanding the ecological worldview of Americans today.

Most of the time those who thought they were in charge were acting out roles on the ecological stage of which they were only vaguely conscious, and certainly did not control.



# The approach is three-fold

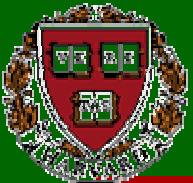
This includes

==> Cultural Ecology (emic approach)

==> Ecological Anthropology (etic approach)

==> Ecology of Culture (historical approach)

Effort is to understand the origin, function and persistence of cultural beliefs about the environment and how these beliefs condition individual and collective behavior.



## *Agents of Empire: Steps Toward an Ecology of Imperialism*

Timothy C. Weiskel

The first step to understanding man is to consider him as a biological entity which has existed on this globe, affecting, and in turn affected by his fellow organisms, for many thousands of years.

Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange* (1972)

When contemplating the invasion of continents and islands and seas by plants and animals and their microscopic parasites, one's impression is of dislocation, unexpected consequences, and increase in the complexity of environments already difficult enough to understand by alone control, and the piling up of new human difficulties.

If we look far enough ahead, the eventual state of the biological world will become not more complex but simpler—and poorer.

Charles S. Elton, *The Ecology of Invasions* (1958)



European mercantilism was based on the discovery, appropriation, transport, cultivation and sale of exotic plants, animals and animal products -- purposeful and sustained ecological disruption.

The 'Age of Discovery' was largely an age of ecological discovery -- and disruption. Europeans and their trading counterparts acted brutally to transform the ecosystems around the world.

We are heirs to this cultural tradition....

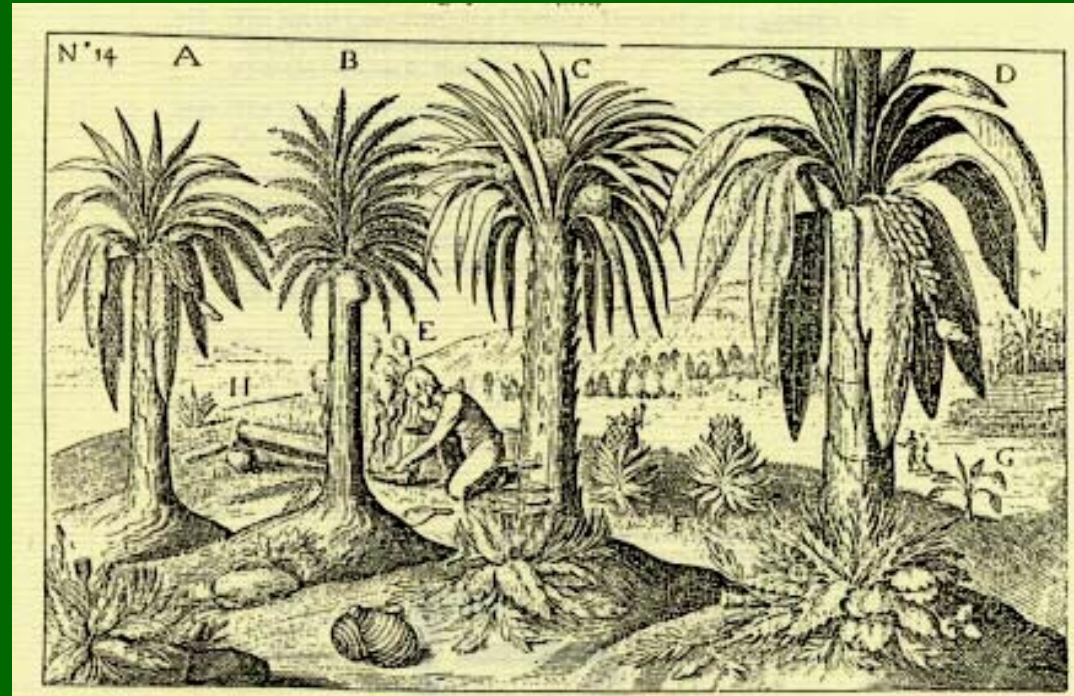
Tim Weiskel - 44



# Colonialism was built on plantation agriculture

From 1492 (and before), Europeans observed native usage and looked to the 'economic' value of new and exotic plants (sugar, coffee, pepper, bananas, tea, etc.)

Some 'introductions' were intentional -- most were not. We are heirs to these cultural habits of behavior and thought....



**European travel accounts are stuffed with detail about how to introduce “new” crops and alter local environments for profit.**



PL. 173

# Our concepts of race emerge from the culture of colonialism as well....

TIMOTHY C. WEISKEL

## Rubbish and Racism: Problems of Boundary in an Ecosystem

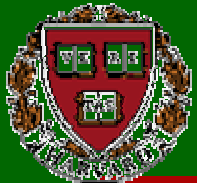
We had fed the heart on fantasies:  
The heart's grown brutal from the fare.

W. B. Yeats, *Meditations in Time of Civil War*

**I**n an age of mounting racial tensions and in the presence of an impending environmental crisis, it may seem irresponsible for anthropologists to fly off to remote corners of the world and continue their studies of people who, even if they do survive, will have no effect upon the world's major problems. As research money becomes scarce, government agencies and foundations appear to agree that such field work is a luxury they can ill afford. Anthropologists, of course, have always maintained that their research has been intimately bound up with the total human condition, and if their peoples have been remote and their theories esoteric, this has been so only in order to offer a fresh approach to the problems we all face daily. If anthropologists have been right, then they should have something to offer concerning two of the major crises which confront us: the growth of racism and the threat of irreversible environmental pollution.

Environmental problems and racist thinking are deeply related in western culture.

No effective effort can be made to address environmental issues without addressing the social experience of racism in this culture's history.



# What is the ‘Colonial worldview’ in these structural categories of perception?

## *Implicit theories*

### **Community**

The moral community is made up of those who share in the effort to discover, conquer, exploit and dominate ‘wild’ or untamed nature.

### **System**

The system consists of various moral communities which are also engaged in this competition or which are destined to be subdued by it. All of this is played out in a vastly expanded natural world of plentiful resources that are there simply for the appropriation.

### **Authority**

Authority is vested in competing sovereignties which settle disputes by treaty, alliance or warfare. Nothing like the authority of power.

### **Change**

Change occurs through the invention of new sailing techniques, manufacturing technology and willful innovation. Change is good -- and necessary – for competitive survival of rival trading powers. Growth for the sake of growth is good – stored as “money” .

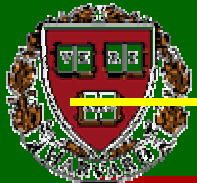
### **Agency**

The “Lord helps those who help themselves.” Explorers, discoverers and innovators are valued as agents of change.

### **Time**

The focus is neither upon the past nor the remote future, but upon the present and the immediate future in which plans for growth, innovation and measurable expansion can be realized. The “New World” is a “New Heaven and a New Earth” -- Messianic, utopian communities abound.

## *Colonial Worldview*





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Our Historical Context: Colonialism,  
Imperialism and Sprawl

Timothy C. Weiskel

Session 5  
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