

Panel Topic: “Peak Oil or Climate Emergency? We know we’re in Big Trouble. But What Kind Exactly?”

Date: Thursday, December 15, 2011 at the David Brower Center in Berkeley, CA

Panel Description: A debate over the relative urgency and usefulness of peak oil and global climate emergency for thinking about the future of environmental change and politics. Sponsored by the Earth Island Institute, Bay Localize, Eco-Equity, and the Post Carbon Institute.

Moderator & Panelists: Dave Room (Moderator), Bay Localize (co-founder and Community-Centered Media Advisor); Richard Heinberg, Post Carbon Institute (Senior Fellow-in-Residence); Tom Athanasiou, Eco-Equity (Director).

Design, Methodology, Approach: Heinberg and Athanasiou were each given time to make opening remarks and to respond to each other. Room began the Q&A with a few questions, then opened the floor to audience questions and comments.

Main Panel Discussion Points:

Heinberg and Athanasiou acknowledged that they share many positions regarding the obstacles to addressing climate change. Given that the two authors were left-of-center progressives speaking to an eco-conscious Berkeley audience, finding true points of contention between the two and their audience was indeed a challenge. Heinberg and Athanasiou differed in how they framed the crux of the problems at hand and in how they viewed the efficacy and urgency of potential political responses and technical solutions.

Heinberg explained the connection between fossil fuels and unsustainable economic systems tied to growth. In his view, the recent economic crisis and the recession that has followed are fundamentally related to increasing oil prices. Efforts to end the recession turn on calls for “more growth,” which will only exacerbate current habits of fossil fuel use; we will attempt to resolve the debt crisis by growing consumption. Heinberg argued that responding to the economic issues should be a priority, and that our responses have to be geared towards getting us off the “growth treadmill.” We need to rethink how we measure human well-being, and facilitate efforts in the developing world to “leap-frog” the fossil fuels age. Heinberg is wary of putting full faith in technical fixes; he does not believe renewables will scale. With deference to Athanasiou, Heinberg warned that our society cannot continue to address the global problem of inequality by assuming a constantly growing economic pie.

Athanasiou acknowledged that peak oil, and resource limitations more generally, act as multiplier effects, but argued instead that governance failures are at the heart of economic crises and are the source of obstacles to confronting climate change. The problem of the transition is paying for it, which is a political question implicating issues of national and global equity. Athanasiou believes we have the technology and expertise to deal with climate change as a technical problem, but that we have to mobilize political coalitions to make these advances real. He put a strong emphasis on what needs to occur *now*: massive grass-roots political mobilization against what he sees as the current oligarchic state of governance in the US, which is reliant on a carbon-based economy.

Questions from the audience dealt largely with broadening the public discussion and building and strengthening a political movement with a positive vision. Audience comments also indicated general agreement with both speakers.

Outcomes & Analysis:

As even the participants acknowledged, the framing of the event as a “debate” was perhaps misleading. While Heinberg and Athanasiou undoubtedly disagreed, neither would likely suggest that the priorities outlined by the other were irrelevant or unworthy of pursuing. They appeared to be bringing some different information to bear on answering these questions. Several questions from the audience brought the discussion back to next steps that can be taken in the area of sustainability. Both participants expressed optimism regarding the potential of the Occupy movement, seeing it as the product of past and present crises, both financial and environmental. Progressive taxation of the rich was mentioned as a way forward to pay for new, climate-adaptive renewable infrastructure. Like Heinberg, Athanasiou urged reduced consumption in the US, which he framed as the “social disciplining” of our desires. Athanasiou mentioned that in order to transition in to a new era, greater “positive visioning” would be required, as well as the taming of our consumptive imaginations. The event highlighted the energy behind rethinking both macro-structural realities of global economic systems and the political coalitions at the grassroots that aim to influence them, but left the connection between the two somewhat unresolved.

Keywords: peak oil, climate emergency, climate justice, limits to growth, United States.

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