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Lessons for the Anthropocene from the Recent Past: Tobacco Use, HIV/AIDS, and Social Transformation

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Abstract

In light of the dilemma of global climate change that we have presented ourselves with in the twenty-first century and beyond, many researchers express despair at the ability of humans and societies to change behavior. The paper identifies how global humanity at individual, institutional, and governmental levels have addressed life-threatening dangers in the recent past and begun processes of long-term corrective action. The paper thus discusses global social transformations from the recent past in regards to tobacco use and HIV/AIDS, to think about how Hannah Arendt's concept of the *Polis* detailed in *The Human Condition* (1958) may be engaged to address the human dimensions of climate change. As an output of the Andrew W. Mellon European Observatory of the New Human Condition, this paper's focus is commensurate with the thrust of this special issue of *Global and Planetary Change* which considers climate change to be more of a crisis in the human condition than an environmental problem. Arendt's concept of the *Polis* provides a framework for a better understanding of change in behavior, preference and motivation. We argue that her perspectives are central to developing multi and inter-disciplinary humanities, social science, science and business perspectives to mobilize collective human action towards adapting to and mitigating the social and environmental threats of global climate change.

Keywords: *Social Transformation, Climate Change, Hannah Arendt, Polis, Tobacco, HIV/AIDS*

Introduction

Senses of doom, alarm and perceptions concerning humanity's inability to deal with the threats presented by global climate change prevail in works such as American ecologist and geographer Jared Diamond's book *Collapse* (2005) and British scientist and Gaia theorist James Lovelock's gloomy lament: "we are at the end of our tether, and the rope, whose weave defines our fate, is about to break" (Lovelock 2006, 146). Statements by distinguished scholars are necessary Jeremiads alerting us to the emergence of the 'Anthropocene,' and have led to motivate political and scholarly action. But Jeremiads also have potentially and inadvertently negative impacts upon the popular imagination and consequent actions needed to mitigate the cascading social-environmental threats facing our human condition in the twenty-first century. Historical scholarship illustrates that societies are much more resilient than supposed, and possess abilities

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