

Pembroke Environment Seminar / Centre for History and Economics

(How) should we 'teach' the Anthropocene?

Wednesday 15 May, 5.30pm, Nihon Room, Pembroke College

Panel (Chair: Paul Warde)

Mike Hulme Professor, Human Geography, Cambridge

Harriet Ritvo Professor, MIT School of Humanities & Social Sciences

Duncan Kelly Professor, Department of Politics & International Studies, Cambridge

The scale of the environmental and social challenges facing today's world has grown enormously in recent decades, and will grow greater still in a world of scarce resources, growing population and unmet human development needs. These challenges are sometimes referred to in political speech as 'global', 'grand' or 'sustainability' challenges. Within the academy and amongst thought-leaders the scale of the transformation of the planet is regarded by some as warranting the terminology of a new interval of geologic time: The Anthropocene, the 'age of humans'. The meaning and adoption of this specific nomenclature is nevertheless contested, for scientific, political and moral reasons alike. The Anthropocene is a forceful idea which both opens up and closes down certain ways of thinking about the past, present and future. It is laden with tacit assumptions about human exceptionalism, about multiple agencies, about histories of power and about ownerships of the future.

Given the importance and the provocative nature of this terminology, the Department of Geography at Cambridge will be launching a new MPhil in Anthropocene Studies from October 2020. And there are various other existing courses around the university which also touch on the idea of the Anthropocene in their syllabi, explicitly or implicitly. But how should one 'teach' the Anthropocene -- indeed, should we? How can one do justice to such a multi-faceted and contested idea in a student curriculum? Given that the Anthropocene disturbs conventional lines of thought and analysis, and dissolves simple binaries between nature and culture, what role for disciplines in its teaching? What would a corpus of Anthropocene literature look like for a student course? What would be the 'learning objectives' of such a course of study?

This open discussion is intended to reflect on these questions, and more, and to explore some practical suggestions and insights from people who have already brought, or who are seeking to bring, the Anthropocene into their teaching.

As space will be limited please contact Paul Warde (psw1000@cam.ac.uk) to book a place.