Where Do We Come From? Where Are We? Where Are We Going?

In this seminar we will review the development of human societies from around 13,000 years ago projected a few decades into the future. I take our seminar title from Gauguin’s famous painting, which also usefully suggests that the answers to these questions are linked—that our understanding of where we are and where we are going is grounded in an appreciation of where we have been. There are advantages in using this long time frame. We are able to tease out connections that are often obscured when we are fixated on immediate events. We can propose interdisciplinary orientations to problem solving. Most importantly, we will be in a position to understand more deeply the major challenges facing us as individuals and as citizens.

We are fortunate in the quality and variety of relevant readings. Books for purchase will include Jared Diamond, Guns, Germs, and Steel; Tony Judt, Ill Fares the Land; Naomi Oreskes and Conway, The Collapse of Western Civilization: A view From the Future; and Amanda Ripley, The Smartest Kids in the World. There are other important readings, which will either be in the successor to On Course, or on the web, or they will be handed out in class.

All of our seminar assignments aim to further what Karl Mannheim called “democratic education,” by which he meant “learning the essential things and taking a stand.” This combination is remarkably difficult to bring off, but in my opinion it forms the basis for independent thinking and effective action. There are four major assignments. The first is to come to class prepared to discuss the readings and associated issues. The second is to take a short answer examination toward the end of the semester. (There will be no “final examination.”) The third is to write a series of two to three page papers on issues arising from our readings and discussions. There will be a number of possible topics; each seminar member will write on six. The final assignment is to write two six to eight page “Reflections” papers. One must be on the question, “Where Are We Going?” The other can address either “Where Do We Come From?” or “Where Are We?” These papers grounded in the seminar readings and your relevant life experiences. They are not “research papers;” additional readings, web searches, are neither necessary nor useful.

I would be pleased to discuss details and to answer questions from anyone who might be interested in taking the seminar. My office is Woodburn Hall, room 405, email: furniss@indiana.edu.