

# **Beyond climate fear: eco-optimism as a better path to deal with the challenges**

We believe a more positive attitude concerning our capabilities to overcome the ecological problems facing us, rather than feeding doomsday scenarios, is more realistic and will yield better results. We realize that trusting our technological and social capabilities to deal with the ecological challenges is not a popular stance; in the media those who are ecologically optimistic are ignored, sometimes even labeled climate-deniers.

We are now more or less continually confronted with climate fear. In the media and in the political discourse; there is what could be termed a 'war on climate', comparable to the war on terror and the war on drugs. These wars use the media and science to emphasize the impending disasters, basically using the same old strategy, to saturate public attention with messages of fear in order to to maintain the status quo power structures. And we comply, happily paying (taxes) for measures that may or may not have any positive effect, but that for sure sustain the position of those who will profit.

This constant feeding of the climate fear is not an effective way to deal with the problems; we better adopt a positive attitude, which could be called eco-optimism. This means trusting our capability to deal with the problems, to find solutions and mitigate the effects. We are already well underway with alternative energy on the rise. Climate change and the potential for an ecological crisis are a reality, but technological innovation, cooperation and goodwill can help us to minimize the impact.

For a while 'global warming' was the doomsday message, but now this is harked to in the increasingly lifeless and misleading term 'climate change'. The reality is more complex - changes in the climate are only one of several ecological problems. Contamination of oceans with plastic waste, the scarcity of water, the loss of biodiversity and degradation of soil quality are major problems too. So shocking are these that it is hard to accept, but they demand our attention and cooperative response immediately. Does it help to blow up the negative outlook and feed the fear to a level where most people freeze rather than realize we can deal with this together? A tunnel vision has developed and we keep blaming ourselves, the industry, materialism and the political system. Not a very productive approach, it would be a better approach looking at climate developments as a challenge, dealing with it optimistically.

What is needed is an inspiring and encouraging, positive outlook, a 'can-do' mindset, rather than the overdose of bad news and horror-scenarios. These may perhaps help to allow building more wind-turbines, solar installations, and raise the tax on gas and waste, but also take away the individual responsibility. We leave things to the government, and forget there is a lot we can do ourselves. It is us travelling around the globe as if planes are eco-friendly, driving polluting cars

and buying produce that comes from far away but doesn't carry the just price tag for the pollution it causes. It is us that ignore the ecological impact of what we do, what we eat, where we put our money and buy our insurance, mostly looking for the individual gain rather than the collective effects. Initiatives like the sharing-economy and the degrowth agenda can only flourish in a mood of cooperation among individuals.

If the media would honestly report about the true cost of our life-style, not generate what their advertisers want, maybe we could realize that it is us who can make the difference. We will not give up property rights, isolate our houses and install solar because the government forces us, but because it makes sense to do so.

The eco-optimism approach we favor is based on a very simple premise: We, the industrial age super-users of fossil resources, clean air and clean water, are the cause (and the solution) of the present environmental problems.

Having engineered ourselves into the age of the anthropocene, we are responsible for finding a way out. We have to use the same inventiveness, the same dedication, the same rational approach that brought us to the present level of comfort and waste, but only with the expanded consciousness that the resources are limited and that sharing them is no longer a choice, but a necessity. The ecological challenges are also opportunities to find solutions, adopt an eco-positive attitude, we can make a difference because the technologies are emerging or already there.

#### **Ulterior motives for the 'war on climate'**

So, apart from the need to deal wisely with energy, oil, pollution, etc. we can all agree on, what lies beyond the superficial fear mongering we see in the media and politics? Is the 'war on climate' not another form of the war on individual identity rights or a way to keep us consumption slaves in line? It all feels like a construction to keep us occupied and worried, while there are ulterior motives being played out. Is there perhaps a hidden agenda behind the media-offensive aimed at keeping us quiet and docile, feeling guilty but deprived of possibilities to deal with the situation beyond separating our household waste and paying more taxes? The real responsibility for our situation is taken away from us, replaced by government measures we can hardly influence, by corporate giants that pollute our air, seas, soil and water (and cyberspace) ever so happy, because it makes them a profit. The motives of the leaders of the war on climate seem honest, we have to fight an impending disaster, rising sea levels, and contamination of earth and sky. The future of mankind is at stake. But how truthful are these positions, what are their real interests? Keeping an enemy-image alive has many advantages, it is instrumental in maintaining interpersonal and international conflict, so that we remain distracted from what is really important.

We are easily manipulated by our deep need to belong. The group mind, sustained by the herd instinct, will often accept and bow to an enemy image to deal with this, and this is used by those in charge. The collective enemy idea hides the internal problems, inconsistencies and blinds us for the underlying reality, while putting time, money and energy in this 'war', this superior effort to replace our sense of inferiority. Although this initially seems to empower individuals in the group, in actuality it simply masks a sense of weakness and vulnerability that the group members feel as individuals.

We are dealt the guilt card on ourselves, on our consumption, our luxury, our use of fossil fuels, but what do we see? Public transport is made so expensive we don't take the train unless we have to. Holiday travel is so cheap we ignore local entertainment and vacation options. Our food is produced in inefficient, polluting and unsafe ways, transported tax-free and packaged in so much plastic that our oceans suffocate.

The much hailed cooperation at a global level still doesn't reach beyond compromises and agreements at international meetings, careful not to hurt the global trade and corporate machinations and without a clear way to enforce or control the outcome.

Fear is a bad master, always has been. It keeps us looking for security, for individual gains as an insurance for the bad times. Neo-liberalism feeds the ego, winners take all, but what is there for the losers. Nationalism is on the rise, identification with fashionable groups eats away at social cohesion, we see medieval martyr-like behavior, large-scale unconscious impulsivity and emotionality.

Fear makes us look for short-term solutions. We do deal with the disasters ascribed to climate change like hurricanes and flooding, but there is little concerted effort and real international cooperation to create effective long term defenses.

There is climate change, no denying it, but it has been there always, we had cold and hot periods, even in recent history and we have dealt with it. Yes, there may be pain, sorrow and destruction with the ecological catastrophes we are facing. But it is only an illusion that this is unnatural or unjustified, humankind has seen bad times and disaster before.

The problem is that now we continue to allow ourselves to be manipulated by the fear-mongering, instead of addressing it and moving on. Trust and hope are the antidote for fear, but where are the inspiring leaders to help us find them?

### **The globalized perspective; the Paris bait (and switch)**

The ecological problems and responsibilities are projected as our individual faults, if not sins, but kept far away from us, dealt with by impersonal organizations and governments, suggesting they can make a difference. Can they, or are they the smoke screen, while the real perpetrators are in it for the money and power? The 'war on climate' in the Paris perspective is high on the agenda, but what is the role of the corporations or nations who think they will benefit from the need for the technology to fight CO2 emission, and create alternative energy sources. We, the global taxpayers, are lured by the do-gooders but in the end pay for our own cigars! If one looks at the Paris Climate Agreement it really is no more than a compromise. The major sectors of air and sea travel are not dealt with, bio-industry and notably the way we raise and feed cattle are not included. What is kept out of the Agreement are things like the pollution by ever larger ships and planes, using (untaxed and cheap) fuel of a quality and in a quality that damages our atmosphere more than what for instance our cars do, It was obviously an PR-event to show unity, to impress the world and instill more trust in politicians through fear. In reality it's not a very balanced deal. Some countries benefit more than others, like China being allowed to flood the world with dubious product much longer than the USA. The real motives and interests behind Paris are unclear. Countries like Germany (and Holland) stand to profit from the technology investments in alternative energy and reduction in CO2

emissions. France has its nuclear expertise to throw in, so is China with blooming solar products. There are parties (like Al Gore) who like to make the war on climate a global issue, isn't it good for export, neo-liberalism and big business). Worldwide the shipping and the airline industry are among the worst polluters and least taxed, but they are the life-blood of the neo-liberal global trading and thus kept out of the Agreement. Just as banking, which benefits from the financial transactions and speculations at a global scale, not only in goods and financial constructions, but CO2 speculation promises to be a boon. All well and good, but the eco-optimists ('We can deal with climate, at a cost, and not only at a global but also a local level') are continually silenced.

### **Individual initiatives**

Humans, in our modern world, are not naturally inclined to give up their perks, comfort, pension plans or four-wheel drive. So we need the information, the data and the scenarios that would convince us that it is in our best interest (and that of future generations) to isolate our homes, share more, waste less, live ecologically sustainable, and design eco-integrated and cradle-to-cradle systems. This is not only the responsibility of the media, but also of the corporate world (or the NGO's supposed to check on them), they should report honestly about the ecological costs of their products and the government should make them do so. The real costs of a trip to some faraway destination need to be transparent, not only the ecological costs, but also the cultural ones and the effects on your health and productivity at work, and they might be positive. Fair trade is a great principle, but do we really know how fair it really is, to the ecology at both end of the deal?

On the individual level, especially in sharing things, gifts and time is what makes sense, in human, ecological and even financial respect. Inviting people to share dinner, a boat, a car or your couch, exchanging things in a coop-setting or with group-coinage, bringing the things we don't use to a recycle or second hand shop; it all saves and helps the environment and our sense of belonging. The government doesn't like this, as it foregoes tax-income, but maybe taxation needs a new footing, like a lower value added (sales) tax on eco-friendly or eco-zero products.

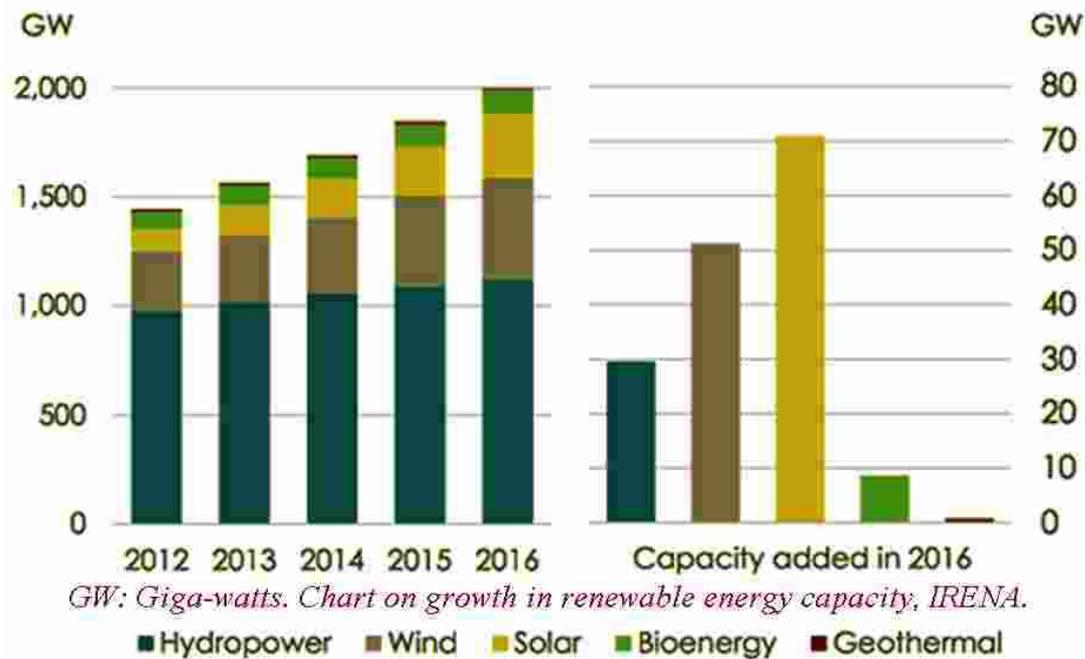
It's not only sharing and recycling tangible things that helps to reduce our ecological footprint, but sharing information, about products, services, and even the news may help to revamp the notion of reliable information. The cost of fake news, unreliable reviews, manipulation of customers and whatever else marketeers come up with, is substantial.

Social media of the present generation don't really offer a platform to do this efficiently, as one doesn't know where our input is used for, what filters are applied and where it goes. But maybe new forms of social media will emerge, new search engines, new methods to preserve our privacy.

Lack of privacy (essential for innovation and change at a personal and society level) can be a costly game, as it requires us to put up new shields, different (also digital) locks and feeds our anxiety, with consequences for our well-being, medical costs, insurance, etc.

For those of us with money in the bank, pension plans, savings or other forms of wealth we amassed, do we know what the banks, insurance companies or agencies do with that money. Our individual voice might mean little to those institutions, but social media are a great tool to convey a message to them,

suggesting or in the end forcing them to divulge where they put 'your' money to work and how.



### Positive changes in the works

The good news is that we can deal with some amount of global warming. There are many positive developments, new technologies and attitude changes. There are massive investments in solar and wind, while the efficiency of those installations increases. Cheap energy is on the horizon, the need for fossil resources is diminishing. Solar and wind energy production costs continue to sink, while the capacity for overall renewable energy was at a record high in 2016 and continues to grow. In other words, the transition to a low carbon economy is well underway.

No doubt we will improve our technology and invent new, we will become better in designing ecologically, re-use materials and the way we deal with waste. There is, however, another change in the works as the result of our efforts to deal with climate change and ecological problems. The world economy will dramatically change, but this is where little attention is going, busy as we are with the doomsday scenarios. The investments and successes in alternative energy and energy savings will significantly impact the economic balance of the world. It's nice to predict that the importance and impact of the classical oil, coal and gas industry and the use of minerals and other resources will diminish, but just think what this will mean for the countries depending on this industry now. The whole infrastructure in now affluent countries on the Northern hemisphere has been tailored and is depending on this, not only the harbors, the roads and the industrial facilities, but cheap energy will change the whole economy. Building, retail, agriculture, the whole trend towards urbanization, things will change! Even beyond the changes we can expect from automation, robots and AI, cheap energy will impact our lives at many levels.

The perspective of much cheaper energy at a much larger scale is not a pipe-dream, all the scenarios and graphs support this. Renewable energy is not stopping at solar, wind and hydropower either. We can use tidal energy,

geothermal energy and probably there are many ways to use bio-energy, not only in bio-fuels but using new mechanisms and bio-engineering. Where will the benefits of cheap solar energy be felt and monetized first? Probably in sunny countries, in Africa, South America, India, where small solar units will change urban life, bringing people back to the land where cheap transport and fresh water (desalination is easy with cheap energy) will make small scale local food production feasible again. Growing your own food in a city is not easy, but in the countryside a small greenhouse could supply most of the food a family needs, and of course fully automated greenhouse units driven by solar energy will be a growth industry. It may stop or revert urbanization, restructure mobility and transport and reduce globalism in favor of local grassroots identity. Even the diversity in education and work opportunities, the refugee and economic fortune seeker problems, the rich/poor dichotomy, the elite/loser schism, the Branko Milanovic elephant curve showing the disappearance of the middle class, all that may be affected by what we can see as cheap and even free energy. This also means cheap air-conditioning and heating, also in remote places, the climate changes made bearable..

This all means quite a different perspective and can be seen as a threat to the neo-liberal Western worldview and opulence for the elite of today.

It may even mean that within 20 or 30 years we will realize, that the real 21st century issue is not how we deal with energy, but how we will provide meaning for the individual. To provide meaning we may have to really work on our lifestyles. If we can't deal with the inequality, manage the diversity that we need but threatens to suffocate us, this big and probably global change in priorities in the 21st century will hit us hard. What will happen to the losers, the disenfranchised, the workless masses, who will need to find meaning elsewhere, what will they do?

### **The human perspective**

At its essence, the story of climate change has to do with separation, most fundamentally at the level of human – nature. We mastered much of the natural world, not only with serious consequences for our ecosystem, but also at the cost of separation and alienation and of dangerous diversity in income, opportunities and outlook. What we are facing is not so much a technological challenge, but a socio-psychological one. The changes ahead will not only mean we have to build solar plants, windmills, higher dykes and better isolated housing, but we have to fundamentally change the way we think about our relationship with nature and our fellow humans.

It is no coincidence that consciousness upgrading is increasingly at the forefront of technology and medicine innovation, at the same time in which mass group behavior is increasingly unstable. What this points to is the urge towards a new story, a reconnection. Meaning comes from stories, and the current crisis of meaning is a result of a culture that lacks a unifying myth. A new story would be a heroic one, in which we sacrifice the stories of the past, letting go of the weight of blame, petty nostalgia for the industrial age, the old story of separation, so that a new story and meaning can emerge, based on interconnection at the level of human - nature.

What is needed is an eco-optimistic approach, and this may involve a lot of opportunistic thinking and acting; we don't have the time to figure out all the details, so we have to reckon with some misfortune here and there.

The message is that present technology is enough to turn the whole thing around. There will be costs, as there always have been. There may be pain and destruction ahead, but it is only an illusion that this is unnatural or unjustified; humankind has seen dark times, climate swings and natural disaster before. We have to wake up to the severity of the situation, for sure, but we can realize the potential these times also carry for cohesion, cooperation and innovation. We can work towards tackling the ecological issues we face, and at the same time working towards healing much of the schisms and suffering in modern global culture. In a world with free energy but also increased automation and the disappearance of much traditional employment we have not only a need, but also an opportunity to restructure the entire work life narrative. Meaning is the real challenge of the 21-st century, how do provide a sense of worth for those who have trouble dealing with a new and different paradigm. If we don't change the story we live under, then free energy will simply serve the further plundering of resources. Let's use the technology of today and tomorrow, the media and communication technologies to engineer and implement the eco-optimism approach outlined in this article, rather than the current model of fear mongering.

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## References:

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sciencealert.com/adding-seaweed-to-cattle-feed-could-reduce-methane-production-by-70%>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jun/06/spectacular-drop-in-renewable-energy-costs-leads-to-record-global-boost>

*Things will and have to change, like the way we deal with food. It is often suggested that the majority of the world's population must switch to vegetarian or vegan, as our present way of cattle farming contributes in a variety of ways to the degradation of the ecosystem. They require large acres of land for grazing and providing fodder, large amounts of water, and the gas emitted from cattle releases a substantial amount of methane, contributing to the erosion of the ozone layer. We don't have to give up meat, but just change our ways. Recent research suggests that this methane emission can be tackled with a simple dietary intervention – seaweed has been show to significantly reduce the gassiness of cows, with some suggestions that it could reduce methane production by up to 70%<sup>1</sup> And as research into 'cultured' meat develops, it is easy to imagine how, with the help of a strong marketing campaign, it could become a popular alternative to animal meat.*