

Scold war

Radicals have hijacked the climate debate. It's eco-dictatorship vs. eco-Calvinism

BY JULIA BOEK

When *Time* magazine chose climate activist Greta Thunberg as its person of the year last December, US President Donald Trump fumed in a tweet: “So ridiculous. Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!”

Several journalists interpreted Trump's tweet as a tasteless spin on the “Run Forrest, Run!” clip from *Forrest Gump*. The eponymous character in Robert Zemeckis's masterpiece has a very low IQ and is considered to be mentally handicapped. Sweden's Greta Thunberg suffers from Asperger's syndrome, a vulnerability that is exploited with constancy and hostility by her political opponents.

In Berlin-Mitte this past summer, four pedestrians were killed when a Porsche Macan swerved onto the sidewalk. Even before the cause of the accident was officially announced, the SUV had become a multi-ton public enemy number one. At dinner tables, in the Bundestag, at roundtables and in op-eds, half of Germany began debating a ban on sports utility vehicles in cities. In the rhetoric of climate activists, the Left, the Greens and environmental groups, these half-car-half-trucks have become “motorized murder weapons” that are “responsible for climate change.”

Automobile industry executives, conservative politicians and car fans alike are countering with warnings about thousands of lost jobs while, above all, evoking the right of older people to have a comfortable way to get around town. They detect signs of a rising eco-dictatorship out to ban cars altogether.

Ecological issues have become a key component of a major culture war. In almost all segments of our society, climate protectors are pit against car owners, meat eaters and airline passengers. But what exactly is the nature of the problem?

As shown by its carbon count-down clock in Berlin-Schöneberg, the Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change now gives the world just 25 years and 8 months until the global population, at its current rate of emission, has spewed so much CO₂ into the atmosphere that the much-discussed two-degree threshold will be surpassed.

The world produces 1,332 tons of carbon dioxide per second – 42 gigatons per year. These greenhouse gas emissions are caused above all by oil, coal and gas, that is, by the fossil fuels upon which the growth of prosperity and advancement of the industrial world are based. As a result of these forces, scientists predict more frequent severe storms, heat waves, drought and rising ocean levels; and these in turn will lead to hunger crises, land loss, wars and climate refugees. At stake is nothing less than a livable future

This culture war is quite distinct from the emancipatory turmoil that began in 1968. Peter Unfried, senior correspondent for the left-wing *tageszeitung*, points out that up until now, the dynamic has been “men against women” or “heteros against homos,” that is, a disenfranchised group asserting its rights in the face of a dominant opponent; today, however, this narrative dichotomy of “us against the fill-in-the-blank” no longer holds. The old deep trenches are losing significance, as the obstacle, which was formerly “the others,” has now

But how do we go about creating this green industrial revolution? How do we achieve the democratic majorities we need to usher in innovative social and ecological policies and industries? No one can say exactly how. Nor can we know how much it will cost. At the moment, political and industrial decision makers are under tremendous pressure to agree on innovative climate policies that produce a smaller carbon footprint, as well as alternative concepts for mobility and production and huge investments in renewable energies.

conflict posed to their business models.

At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that politicians are shifting the climate problem to a moral and cultural level – a phenomenon that Ralf Fücks, a Green Party politician and cofounder of the Center of Liberal Modernity think tank, calls the “privatization of the climate issue.” This trend is bolstered by the claims of many climate activists that the looming climate disaster can be mediated by individuals rethinking their habits and values.

But how can the environment debate become more civil? How can we craft a rational and advisable climate policy? Climate experts like Unfried are demanding a new societal discourse that forgoes prophesying the apocalypse while constructively discussing the opportunities presented by the green transformation. It would behoove us to embrace a liberal democratic attitude bent not on dividing society with regulation overload vis-à-vis elite lifestyle questions, but on maintaining open and honest dialog.



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for all coming generations of humans and other species alike.

Climate protection has become an existential question. It affects all segments of society and all political camps. But different groups' perceptions of the issue vary to the utmost degree. While economic liberals, social conservatives and those generally on the right – including globalization critics, traditionalists, climate deniers, etc. – cannot or will not see the danger in it, the left-leaning cosmopolitan big-city elites have elevated the ecology issue to a matter of lifestyle and life philosophy.

become ourselves – that is, Western societies that consume ever more energy in order to satisfy their ever-expanding range of needs.

With its heavy dependence on fossil fuels, the world's growth economy is pushing its limits. At the beginning of the industrial revolution, the capitalist principle of economic growth relied on the idea that the Earth's resources would always be available for exploitation. Today, we are faced with the challenge of developing an energy economy to replace fossil-based raw materials with renewable energy sources like wind, sun, water and biomass.

However, instead of pushing forward with these policies, all their efforts seem to go toward forging half-baked compromises to buy themselves more time, such as modest increases to air-travel taxes in lieu of introducing a Europe-wide kerosene tax or gradually decommissioning the coal industry.

They embrace the former because they fear losing votes and possibly even re-election as a consequence of the socio-economic changes that will inevitably result; and they ignore or reject the latter because of the

At issue here are lifestyle factors like eating meat, fashion, driving SUVs, long-distance travel and the most extreme encapsulation of climate consciousness, “eco-Calvinism,” which preaches the renunciation of our consumer society, the abandonment of old norms and the acceptance of certain prohibitions and limitations, no matter what social disadvantages may accrue. This relocation of the climate question to the private sphere increasingly polarizes society and, so Fücks fears, could ultimately foment resignation and radicalization.

Finally, we could all use a little humor. And Greta Thunberg has some. The young Swede countered the petulant Trump's verbal attack by temporarily changing her Twitter bio. Under her photo she wrote: “A teenager working on her anger management problem. Currently chilling and watching a good old fashioned movie with a friend.” ■

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development of 5G networks, a move that would increase technical diversity. In addition, all parties agree that Huawei should be excluded from security-related network and system components.

One compromise proposal currently under discussion stipulates that the German Interior Ministry has the authority to exclude providers from involvement in 5G-network expansion if they run contrary to any of Germany's “predominantly public interests” or “security policy concerns.” In addition, a strict system of compulsory certification for all equipment is also in the works.

It's hard to believe that the US government will be satisfied with this compromise, especially since Berlin knows full well that such

an arrangement cannot offer 100 percent security against spying and sabotage. The fact that the EU ultimately decided in favor of Huawei has one simple and weighty reason, namely that most EU countries are highly reluctant to forgo the economic benefits of a relationship with Huawei and China.

Industry experts agree that Huawei offers by far the most modern and affordable 5G technology worldwide. It is already being used in two-thirds of commercial 5G networks outside of China; it is far greater use than the technology provided by its competitors, including Nokia, Ericsson and ZTE. Mobile phone companies are using this argument to put pressure on the

deployment process, warning that the expansion of the economically key 5G network would be delayed by years if the Chinese equipment supplier were excluded.

At the same time, the economic powerhouse that is China is tightening the reins to a noticeable degree. Today, the annual volume of trade between China and the EU is roughly €600 billion. In the 20 years since 2000, the exchange of goods between the two trading partners has almost tripled. The EU thus has zero interest in jeopardizing its relationship with such a powerful economic partner. This applies especially to Germany, which is more dependent on foreign trade than many other EU member states.

Beijing is well aware of this fact, that is Germany's Achilles' heel. In December, China's ambassador to Germany, Wu Ken, warned that the Chinese government would not take a German boycott of Huawei lying down. Wu pointed out that a quarter of the 28 million cars sold in China in 2018 came from German production facilities, an implicit threat that drew the attention not only of German car companies, but also of authorities in Berlin itself.

In other words, a European turnaround is long overdue.

An economic predicament such as this leaves hardly any room for something akin to free choice. In fact, it makes one thing all too clear: Even if it looks like

the trade dispute surrounding Huawei and 5G has been settled for the time being, the EU still faces tremendous challenges with regard to its economic future.

In the next couple of months, the first thing EU member states must do is agree on how to secure and control their vitally important communications infrastructure. They have until the end of April to implement the recommendations stipulated by the European Commission. After that, they must once again discuss whether the steps taken up until now are sufficient or whether further protective measures are required.

Yet this alone won't be enough. In recent years, the EU has

gravely neglected the research and promotion of key digital technologies in its own sphere; in that same time span, China has grown into a global superpower. This failure is now taking a bitter toll, as the Huawei case shows. It would behoove the EU to clarify as quickly as possible how it intends to achieve digital and economic sovereignty moving forward. Only then will it be able to counter growing pressure from the US and the Far East. ■

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