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**Harald Welzer**  
**Climate Wars**  
**What People Will Kill for in the 21st Century**

**Translated by Franklin Bolsillo Mares**

Contents:

A Ship in the Desert.

The Past and Future of Violence 9

Climate Conflicts 18

    The West I 18

    Everyone Else 23

    The West II 25

    Possible Remedies 33

    Killing Makes Sense 37

Global Warming and Social Catastrophes 41

    Under-Complexity 46

    Who's "We"? 47

    Old Environmental Problems 49

Climate Change. A Short Overview 53

    Two More Degrees 60

Killing Yesterday 62

    The End of the World 62

    Defend 65

    Body Count 68

    Altered Realities 72

Killing Today 79

    Your Mother's Flesh is Stuck Between My Teeth 79

    The Genocide in Rwanda 87

    Crowded Life 88

    What did the Perpetrators See? 92

    Darfur – The First Climate War 94

    The Ecology of War 100

    Failing Societies 101

    Collapsing States 107

    Violence and Climate Change 110

Injustice and Asynchrony	116
Violence and Theory	122
Killing Tomorrow. Permanent Wars, Ethnic Cleansing, Terrorism, Outsourcing Borders	126
Wars	128
Permanent Wars	134
Markets of Violence	142
Assimilation	149
Ethnic Cleansing	151
Environmental Conflicts	157
Terror	162
Terror as Transformation of Social Space	176
Obstructed Meaning	179
Aeneas, Hera, Amazon and Frontex: Indirect Border Wars	181
The Morocco–Spain Route	182
Camp	184
Frontex, Once Again	186
Illegal Aliens	190
Refugee and Asylum Policies	196
Borders Beyond One’s Own Territory	197
Processes of Rapid Social Change	200
Climate Change - Larger-than-life	202
Altered People in Altered Realities	211
Shifting Baselines	212
Frames of Reference and the Structure of Ignorance	218
Knowledge and Ignorance of the Holocaust	220
Shifting Baselines - Elsewhere	231
The Renaissance of Old Conflicts: Belief, Class, Resources and the Erosion of Democracy	240
Outsourcing Violence	244
More Violence	247

What One Can and Cannot Do I	250
Staying the Course	251
Future Pasts	257
The Good Society	261
Repressive Tolerance	267
Telling the History of Oneself	268
What One Can and Cannot Do II	273
Appendix	279
Notes	279
Sources	310
Acknowledgements	322
Subject Index	324
Name Index	334

## More Violence

We had to destroy the city in order to save it.  
U.S. Officer, 1968 in South Vietnam

In view of this, climate change represents a social danger that has not only been underestimated, but has also gone largely unrecognized. It may seem counterintuitive that this *scientific* phenomenon can unleash social catastrophes such as systemic failures, civil wars and genocide, especially at a time when everything seems to be running so smoothly. And yet we hardly need a wild imagination to envision such things actually happening. Even at this very moment we can pinpoint social conflicts, climate wars and security measures that have been triggered by a fragile environment:

1. Climate wars are already raging in regions and under conditions in which denationalization and the existence of privately run markets of violence represent the norm. Every negative, ecological change in such areas provides new opportunities for

those in the business of violence. Wars can thereby be waged on a permanent basis and spread beyond the borders of those who started them.

2. By aggravating existing problems, the consequences of climate change, such as soil degradation, flooding, lack of potable water, storms etc., limit where people can live and decrease their chances of survival. The asymmetry between favored and disadvantaged nations continues to increase.

3. Climate change hits the most vulnerable societies the hardest, in terms of the likelihood and the dimensions of such changes. The ensuing violence increases the numbers of displaced persons. These waves of migration, both domestic and international, give rise to yet further violence.

4. Cross-border migration has already reached the havens of prosperity and stability in Western Europe and the U.S., prompting political leaders there to tighten security measures and strengthen security forces. Such developments lead to a Western foreign policy which shifts border conflicts further away from home while increasing the retribution in cases where its borders are violated.

5. Terrorism, which spreads in accordance with the modernization process taking place around the world, is legitimized and buttressed by the disparities and injustices incurred by environmental factors.

6. That, in turn, leads countries to continually increase their security measures. Freedoms are curbed as levels of violence increase.

7. New regions unfettered by any legal jurisdiction – such as those which have cropped up in the wake of the war on terror – increase the level of violence administered by the state and give rise to social networks agitating beyond any and all constitutional norms. The use of violence gets outsourced, while suspicious activity is enough to incur stiff penalties.

8. Shifting baselines alter the perceptions of a problem as well as how to remedy it. Norms and what is otherwise considered normality get skewed.

9. These processes act upon each other. Rising numbers of refugees, tightened security measures, international conflicts over resources etc. generate autocatalytic effects.

While unexpected environmental catastrophes push the capacities of OECD and newly industrializing nations to their limits, in failing societies they are absolutely devastating. The sense of danger and emotional stress resulting from such events lead to unpredictable behavior.

These conditions create a situation that weighs in on the global figuration of societies as a whole. Various forms and intensities of strain and outbursts of violence will be the result. The social climate is more complex than the physical one, which is not to say that we can't identify *potential* threats and violence that may occur in the future. Climate changes work in two ways: they can elicit violent conflicts or exacerbate existing ones. They can also lead to *unexpected consequences* due to the interplay of various forces and ensuing events, even if they are only indirectly related. It is time that we figure environmental effects into our analyses of social conflicts. Most aspects of the changes sketched above have long since become reality for many people: there *are* climate wars, people are *dying, fleeing, getting killed*. Empirically, there is not the slightest reason to assume that we won't have to get used to a different world in the future.

### **What One Can and Cannot Do I**

Whether *radical solutions to social problems* can be prevented in the future is also a test of whether societies can learn from history – or not. It's not an academic question, it's a political one.

However, political thought in the age of global peril will have to avoid prefabricated models of the future, not simply because it is unable to conceive them, but because the promises of deliverance the 20<sup>th</sup> century made turned out to be totalitarian disasters. For that very reason, a renaissance of political thought is necessary, one capable of critiquing any infringement upon other people's requirements for survival. Such thought will have to be a great deal more prospective and anticipatory than we've been capable of in recent decades. In light of our present perils, whose ultimate consequences won't be fully revealed to us until the future, societies are heading for new problems

precisely due to their lack of experience in such matters. They are like a tanker unable to avoid an iceberg even though it's been spotted well in advance.

With all the social upheavals resulting from climate change that have been discussed in this book, it shouldn't be hard to imagine that the world is going to look a lot different in a few decades. There is every reason to fear that not a few regions of the world will be worse off in terms of their ability to support life. And so, at the end of this book, the question remains: what can be done to prove the author wrong?

### **Staying the Course**

One of the many possible options is as simple as it is obvious: stay the course. This alternative envisions further economic growth, which calls for the continued use of imported fossil fuels and other raw materials. Over the medium-term, it also leads to a systematic curtailing of aid and support to those societies facing ever-increasing difficulties. Such a strategy for the future would allow more biofuels to be mixed with conventional gas as a means of extending the time limit that petroleum is still available and would entail the further destruction of rainforests to obtain more cultivable land for energy crops. For many South American and Asian countries that is already the case.<sup>1</sup> The violent seizure of lands and the displacement of local populations frequently accompany this process.

Staying the course also requires an economic and foreign policy that, in order to guarantee the supply of raw goods for the middle-term, agrees to treaties with nations that disregard human rights and fail to observe environmental standards. Staying the course also leads to a relative reduction in humanitarian intervention over the middle-term to levels that are even lower than they already are today since both the number of conflicts

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<sup>1</sup> On the islands of Sumatra and Borneo roughly five million hectares of rainforest have thus far been converted into farmland for palm oil, usually by burning. During the process up to one billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub> are released per year. That is equivalent to approximately 15% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (v. <http://www.umweltschutz-news.de/266artikel1376screenout1.html?besucht=66eceb92>). To exacerbate matters, biofuels are ecologically counterproductive: they are climate neutral in terms of carbon dioxide, but not in terms of nitrous oxide emissions. The greenhouse effect is roughly 1.7 times greater with diesel produced from rapeseed oil in comparison to traditional diesel (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Oct. 2, 2007, p. N1).

and the number of refugees will increase at the same time that the resources for human survival decrease.

This will force aid to be allocated more selectively. It naturally follows that certain countries and regions will be excluded from this aid. Yet these are not events that take place front and center in public life; they are woven neatly into the fabric of intricate social stratagems. As such, negative measures of this kind offer no potential for scandal and pose no political problems.

And so, it is easy to view the strategy of staying the course as rational – up until the moment when the consequences of climate change, due to rising emissions, finally begin to seriously affect those countries that have been previously spared. The effects will range from ecological consequences in a strict sense to economic upheavals caused by wars and conflicts in other parts of the world, by terrorism and by the mounting pressures of migration. Another possible effect is domestic conflicts that result when future generations are denied the same opportunities in life that previous generations – the ones that caused the environmental problems in the first place – were able to enjoy. Nonetheless, this strategy can actually work just fine for a few more decades. For middle-aged people today – those, in other words, who are currently running the show – staying the course is more or less the most rational strategy. Plus, it's breathtakingly elegant: it confronts no one with moral dilemmas. It's the state, after all, a representational player, that's calling the shots, not the individual. And within this international context, personal behavior such as selfishness, ruthlessness and indolence are irrelevant. As a global player, each state can be a bastard without fear of losing any of its international bargaining power.

And yet, if we were superimpose the strategy of staying the course onto a single individual, we'd get a sociopath who doesn't have the slightest misgivings of earning 70 times<sup>2</sup> more than everyone else while consuming vast amounts their raw materials. This individual would devour 15 times the amount of energy, water and food while, compared to the less-advantaged, polluting the environment 9 times more. Moreover, this sociopath would be categorically uninterested in the welfare of his children and grandchildren and

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<sup>2</sup> In the year 2006, the gross domestic product per capita of over twenty African nations was under 500 U.S. dollars. In comparison, the Germans made on average \$35,204 and the Americans \$44,190. (Spiegel-online: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,grossbild-991373-510917,00.html>).

could stomach the fact that because of him and his ilk 852 million people around the world would suffer from hunger while 20+ million flee adversities.

According to all normative criteria we would consider such a person to be socially unintegrated – or, more bluntly, a dangerous freeloader that must be stopped at all costs. But since collective players aren't held accountable for moral actions of any kind –it's only the representatives of states, institutions, organizations and corporations who mobilize activity, and they are able to distance themselves from their actions at any time<sup>3</sup> - international politics aren't shackled by concepts such as amorality. That's why the introduction of the concept of “rogue nation”, deployed by the United States as an attempt to garner support for its option of “preemptive strikes”, is so untenable and inappropriate. In other words: as long as individuals cannot be held personally accountable for their actions, ethics will remain irrelevant. This explains how members of a society can live in the belief that they are acting morally, while at the same time the society as a whole acts amorally.

This disconnect causes the glaring asymmetries in equality and justice around the world to appear so inconspicuous and dull. It should hardly surprise us that someone who feels responsible for the misery of another person at the other end – that is, at the beginning – of the supply chain will be considered irrational in the West. In this respect, chances are slim that favored nations will jettison their strategy of staying the course.

Yet for those of us who find such a strategy to be unconscionable, whether out of fairness towards future generations or for the survival of the human race, there are three ways of improving the status quo. The first and foremost of these is to individualize the problem in order to overcome it. A recently published book on climate change entitled “Die Klima-Revolution” [The Climate Revolution]<sup>4</sup> supplies us with a list of one hundred tips on how we can save the world. These include teaching your kids about climate protection (Tip 10), not running the dishwasher until it is full (Tip 35), forming carpools (Tip 56), and separating your trash (Tip 95), which apparently also does some good against global warming.

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<sup>3</sup> Erving Goffman: Rollendistanz. In: Heinz Steinert (Ed.), *Symbolische Interaktion*, Stuttgart 1973, p. 260–279.

<sup>4</sup> Anchober/Ramsauer, *Klimarevolution*, (Note 82), p. 166 ff.

Such tips are not only a grotesque reflection of the dimension of the problems we face, but, by individualizing them, they also radically reduce the level and complexity of the duties and responsibilities that climate change demands. The phony, though highly seductive presumption that social change begins with you becomes ideological once it relieves corporate and political players of their duties. It is, furthermore, irresponsible when it claims that the problems can be rectified by changing one's own personal habits. When the oil industry burns off 150 to 170 billion cubic meters of excess natural gas per year<sup>5</sup> – the annual consumption of Germany and Italy combined – individual attempts to save energy are reduced to little more than a footnote.<sup>6</sup> In other words, it is politically negligent to give the impression that problems caused by the economic principle of growth through the exploitation of resources can be resolved by changes to one's behavior. It may very well be true that the cleanest energy is the one that remains unused, yet when looking at the rise in emissions of developing countries, it is readily apparent that such a statement distorts reality.

*Emissions of Emerging Nations*

<b>Emerging Nations</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>India</b>	<b>South Africa</b>	<b>Mexico</b>	<b>Brazil</b>
Total emissions (in millions of tons) 2004	5.253	1.609	453	487	905
(in parentheses: changes since 1990)	(+ 48 %)	(+ 50 %)	(+ 18 %)	(+ 30 %)	(+ 35 %)
Emissions per capita (in tons)	4.2	1.6	10.5	4.9	5.3
(in parentheses: changes since 1990)	(+ 34 %)	(+ 25 %)	(– 1%)	(+ 9%)	(+ 18 %)

Source: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung [Federal Agency for Civic Education]:

<sup>5</sup> Anselm Waldermann, "Profitdenken schlägt Umweltschutz", Spiegelonline, September 6, 2007: <http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/0,1518,504278,00.html>

<sup>6</sup> Aside from the dialectics of pollution reduction. One such example is nitrous oxide, which swells during the production of biofuels and thus neutralizes the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions.

The psychological effect of individualizing the consequences of global warming is, in turn, all the greater. The problem is thereby reduced to the realm of the individual. Everybody can pitch in, starting with the next time you run your dishwasher.

The second approach is on a national level. Since the IPCC Reports, many countries have introduced new measures – from the climate protection program initiated by the German Ministry of the Environment to the Australian proposal of exchanging all standard incandescent light bulbs in the country with energy efficient ones. Insulating homes has been proven to save energy, and the goal of the German government to reduce CO2 emissions by 40% by the year 2020 is ambitious, yet appropriate. Although ongoing international disparities concerning the environment and the fact that emissions aren't bound by national borders both reduce the possible effects that national solutions may have, they are still helpful. Innovative strategies of collective players alter, at least gradually, the relations among societies. And we shouldn't underestimate how compelling ideas can inspire others to act. The psychological effect is no less powerful as when it comes to changing one's own personal habits. Feelings of helplessness are reduced. Nonetheless, we have to bear in mind the limitation of such strategies. National solutions cannot bring about *the* great change to the environment. Their quantitative influence is too slight.

That leaves the international level, where the complexity is the greatest and the corresponding loss of individual control the most explicit. There is no supra-national organization that can force sovereign states to emit less greenhouse gases than they see fit. The same goes for polluting rivers, building dams and clearing forests. There is also no international body that can sanction sovereign states for any offenses they commit during their domestic resettlement drives or expropriation and seizure of lands, or for the human rights abuses caused by their reckless environmental policies etc. Domestic separation of power may exist, but no international one does. International criminal law is at present the only system in place providing for an initial framework of international regulations by which parties can be brought before international criminal courts or

tribunals for their roles in massacres, genocide etc.<sup>7</sup> The expansion of international institutions and, more importantly, the power to equip them with the authority to level sanctions – as the example of the U.N. demonstrates – still lie in the distant future, too late for the problem of global warming. We can still hope, however, that this problem sparks further initiatives which ultimately lead to the creation of such international institutions. Current international criminal law also began as a result of a social catastrophe, namely the Nazi crimes, defined as crimes against humanity at the Nuremberg Trials. For the time being, however, international agreements on the environment are limited to voluntary commitments. Violations can hardly result in sanctions from abroad.

We consider all measures undertaken on an international level to protect the environment to be fundamentally positive. At the same time, it would be misleading to believe that such measures alone can sufficiently reduce emissions by 2020 to a level that would stop global warming. In sum, these are the three social means of enacting change which we currently have at our disposal. As a result, we have to assume that the problem of climate change *cannot be solved* at this time. That means the warming trend will continue, and the world will get even 2°C hotter than it is today – thereby surpassing what is commonly believed to be the absolute manageable limit.

(...)

## The Good Society

First of all: the problem of global warming arose through the careless use of technology. Thus, any attempt to alleviate the problem through further use of “improved” technology is itself part of the problem, not the solution. Due to the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of the problem, nobody really knows which rescue strategy will actually work. For that reason, it’s time we start thinking in new ways. Freedom from the need to

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<sup>7</sup> However, it is the acknowledgment of the individual as a subject of international law that enabled the development of international criminal law to bring charges against individual politicians or military personnel. Conversely, national aggression against individuals is a necessary requirement for intervention into a sovereign nation. (Gerhard Werle: *Völkerstrafrecht*. Tübingen, 2003. p. 2 ff.).

contend with outside pressure is not only what distinguishes human survival, but it's also what makes taking action possible. Problem solving has always required people to explore new mental territory. Thinking too fast can be deadly for humans, and so it is always prudent to step back a moment when trying to come to terms with problems of such magnitude. It's only the sober-minded observation that will enable us to overcome the deathly logic of supposed impasses, such as those inherent in false alternatives. One such alternative is whether, for the sake of the environment, we should pin our hopes on either more efficient coal-burning power plants or nuclear power.

It's a false alternative because both energy technologies are based on limited resources, and the consequences of pursuing either technology remains unclear. The debate surrounding climate change is replete with such pseudo-alternatives. One example is whether societies in need of modernization should be granted the same rights to pollute as those countries inauspiciously had that modernized much earlier. The faulty logic is that at the time such countries were modernizing, nobody gave a thought to the environment. In our current situation and with our *knowledge of the consequences* of such carelessness, such a question is nothing more than a manifestation of artificial stupidity. There are certainly better opportunities for thinking about global justice than in the context of curtailing a people's hope for the future to an even greater degree. If anything, we need to address how to fairly divide the expenses which accrue when attempting to reduce energy consumption. Ethic commissions should be requested to develop proposals detailing how wealthy, high-tech countries can make technology for reducing or, better yet, avoiding emissions available free of charge to countries in need of modernizing. Unless, of course, we dare to pose the deeper question of whether it's even desirable for the entire world to reach the West's level of modernization.<sup>8</sup>

Another question that deserves to be classified under false alternatives is whether the rising numbers of refugees caused by environmental and climate catastrophes should be temporarily deposited in third-party countries or left to drown in the ocean. Here we see the totalitarian logic of a supposed impasse. We therefore wish to state explicitly that these people are either sent back or die because according to the Schengen Agreement

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<sup>8</sup> Curiously enough, neither critiques leveled at consumer, media-saturated societies, nor the acknowledgment of modernization's collateral damage, from child obesity to the erosion of social relationships, has done anything to alter the conviction that the West is the best of all possible worlds.

they are not welcome. That's not a moral statement, it's an empirical one. If, when it's time to discuss the implementation of new security measures, no moral dissonance is palpable regarding the treatment of these individuals, then it will be very simple to bar their entrance when the time comes.

One way of circumventing this logic would be to invest some brainpower not in developing strategies that make the exclusion of others look humane (while tying up a great deal of funds), but in seeking participatory avenues which in the medium-term will be unavoidable for industrialized nations anyway on account of several demographic trends. Why should societies aiming to overcome future challenges adhere to the ideal of an ethnically homogenous nation which, on account of modernization's ongoing demands, is already becoming obsolete?

And while we're looking for ways to bypass false alternatives, it may be a good idea to define the entire problem of climate change as *cultural*. This would present us with an entirely different view of the situation – and it would make sense, too, because climate change affects peoples' cultures and can be understood solely within the context of cultural technologies, such as agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, science etc. Fundamentally, ecological problems don't concern nature, which itself is impartial, they concern the human cultures that are threatened in their very existence because of them.

The question of possible forms of survival is thus a *cultural* one and, as such, should be framed with regards to one's own society and living conditions. It can be broken down into a series of questions. Can a culture succeed over the long-term if it is based on the systematic consumption of resources? Can it survive when it allows for the systematic exclusion of future generations? Can such a culture act as a role model for those who depend upon it for their own survival? Is it irrational when such a culture is viewed from abroad as being exclusionary and predatory and is thereby rejected?

Placing the climate problem within a cultural framework and taking leave of the often fatal logic of presumed impasses provides an opportunity for qualitative development, especially when the situation is as dire as ours currently is. Clinging to apparent impasses prevents us from thinking and acting in ways that are already at our disposal.

To illustrate, here are four different examples: Norway doesn't invest its national wealth, amassed through its oil reserves, in prestigious infrastructure projects or in increasing its citizens' prosperity. Instead, the nation pursues a sustainable investment strategy that will also allow its future generations to enjoy today's high living standards and benefit from the services provided by the welfare state. In addition, Norway's investments are selected according to ethical criteria. Companies engaged in the production of atomic weapons, for example, are rejected.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the country invests in green energy. The Norwegian town of Utsira, an island in the North Sea, already has a self-sustaining energy supply due to its duo wind and hydrogen plant. That is an example of sustainable use of economic resources.

Twenty years ago Switzerland already opted for a transportation concept that favors public transportation and guarantees the integration of every town into the public transport system. Thus, Zurich reinstated its tram line just as many German cities were getting rid of theirs. In other parts of the country new railroad tracks were being laid, while in other countries they were being shut down. Switzerland now has the most extensive public transportation system in the world, in spite of the difficulties it has had to overcome on account of its mountainous terrain. Even remote villages and tributary valleys are linked to the system via "Postautos". On average, each Swiss citizen boards a train 47 times per year, as compared to the EU average of 14.7.<sup>10</sup>

Estonia guarantees its citizens free Internet access as a basic right. Such comprehensive communication opportunities not only reduce bureaucracy and create potential for a more direct form of democracy, but it also spur modernization, something which especially appeals to the younger members of society.

In spite of the considerable pressure it faced from the international community, the refusal of the German government in the year 2003 to join the military alliance then forming against Iraq proved to be both correct and prescient. By calling to mind the negative historical role Germany played in the two largest wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this decision helped Germany's political community avoid an irreversible mistake with

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<sup>9</sup> Royal Norwegian Embassy: Exclusion of corporations from the national pension fund, in <http://www.norwegen.no/policy/politicalnews/Selskaper+utelukket+fra+oljefondet.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Informationsdienst für den öffentlichen Verkehr (LITRA). Report from July 6, 2004 in: [http://www.litra.ch/Juli\\_2004.html](http://www.litra.ch/Juli_2004.html)

unforeseeable consequences. Here we see a practical example of how we can learn from history.

These highly dissimilar political decisions have a common denominator: they each highlight identity as a political element. All four examples underscore how a political community identifies itself. It's not just about resolving a specific issue, it's about making a conscious decision of what kind of community it wishes to be: a just society for all generations in the case of Norway; a society that offers all citizens the same degree of mobility in the case of Switzerland; a republic with egalitarian communication opportunities in Estonia; and, in Germany's case, a society capable enough of learning from its past that it can reject fateful interventionist policies. The manner in which each of these decisions molds identity is likewise an expression of what kind of citizens these Norwegians, Swiss, Estonians and Germans want to be and under what conditions they want to live in their respective countries. To me, this also seems highly significant with regards to how we wish to approach global warming culturally. After all, we cannot pursue the questions of what we want to do and how we're going to do it until we have decided how we want to live.

Ultimately, it's impossible *not* to answer these questions. Even staying the course is a response. It expresses the wish to continue doing whatever it was that led to the problems we are now attempting to resolve. Such a decision also accepts that the current international and intergenerational asymmetries, inequalities and injustices inherent to climate change will worsen. And every decision precludes others.

How we actually want to live as a society in the future – that's a cultural question, indeed. It forces us to confront a myriad of issues, such as who should belong to the society, how we can participate in it, how material and immaterial goods, like income and education, are to be allocated etc. It makes us consider whether we want to subsidize the use of fossil fuels (as in coal mining) or, rather, the expansion of the education system; whether we want to support jobs in outdated industries or champion future potential, in the form of better schools. These are cultural questions which shed light on the kind of community we envision and whether our fellow citizens will be able to identify with it. The answers to these cultural questions should be measured against whether they limit or foster the *potential for development in the future*.

The foremost requirement for a participative and open social model, a society based on potential, is material wealth – which Western nations possess – and the international obligation that accompanies such wealth. Second, it will be necessary to think beyond the here and now – in other words, to think *politically*. It won't be enough to dwell aimlessly within a world stripped of meaning by globalized capitalism. That means we are going to have to take into consideration grand visions, concepts and even ideas that have never been put forth before. It may sound naïve, but it's not. Naïve is the idea that we can stop the ongoing mass destruction of the necessities of life for people around the world with anything less. You cannot change a train's speed and destination by riding it, even if you face the opposite direction. Albert Einstein once said that problems can't be solved using the same parameters which led to them in the first place. We have to change our entire course. And to do so, we first have to stop the train.