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The present eats up the future

The "natural disasters" of this summer show that our political and economic model has reached its limits
By Harald Welzer



Here is the good news from the summer of 2010: The economic crisis has been overcome in Germany; automobile sales are booming, especially of luxury cars; German exports are reaching high levels thanks to the weak euro, and skilled and specialized workers, especially engineers, are in demand; BP has supposedly capped the oil bubbling up from the Gulf of Mexico, the DAX and the Dow are at permanently high levels.

But then there is the bad news. The year is the hottest since recording temperatures began. Pakistan is living through the worst flooding in human memory, and 14 million people are affected. At least 170,000 hectares of land are burning in Russia and Ukraine. In the area around Chernobyl, radioactivity has been released by the fires, and as a result of the heavy smoke, twice as many people as usual are dying in Moscow. Due to the extreme cold in Chile a few weeks ago, people and livestock froze to death. Large areas in Poland and Germany have been inundated by floodwaters. In China, half a city disappeared under a landslide set off by heavy rains.

Good news, bad news – they are two sides of the same coin. The first describes the origins of the second. Climate researchers call the latter "extreme weather events" but until now, people thought they would only start around 2050. They have already begun.

A meeting of 2,500 climate negotiators in Bonn just ended in stalemate. And we already know that the next climate summit in Cancun will fail, too. The experts will fly there anyway – it's their job, after all. They will discuss which transnational

agreements are needed to address climate change, and why they will not come about. The meeting will end without result, and then they will all fly home again.

This tapestry of economics, environmental catastrophes and floundering, foundering politics indicates that a mode of life and a market model that has been extremely successful for 250 years has reached its limits. It functioned splendidly under other conditions, and led to unbelievable achievements: the rule of law, the separation of powers, security, education, affluence and unbridled consumption.

The conditions that allowed this meant that the entire planet was at the disposal of a small part of the world's population and of their particular economic system. With the aid of resources from around the globe, industrial nations could run a fantastic civilization machine. That machine runs on fossil fuels, and it generated the idea, and then consolidated it, that there could always be more of everything. More consumption, more health, more mobility, more years to live.

No one could have imagined that this machine would knock our climate system off balance. But one thing should have been foreseen: that this form of economic activity, which always needs an external source from which to draw resources, would collapse the moment it globalized.

Now this economic form is no longer unique but has become essentially universal. Soon, more automobiles will be driven in China than in Europe, and its middle classes will begin consuming and traveling at high levels. They will work as intensively at undermining the conditions for their own survival as have the industrialized countries that preceded them.

But a globalized world that follows the principle of the unlimited exploitation of resources has no external source from which it can draw the necessary fuel. That is why international competition over raw materials and their transport routes is increasing, and why oil companies are drilling not only deeper and deeper but also in ways that are becoming more dangerous.

It is shameless exploitation of the future of today's young people, and their as yet unborn children. The present is eating up the future, as the summer of 2010 graphically demonstrated.

"Extreme weather events" are not natural phenomena but socio-ecological catastrophes. Pakistan isn't just being flooded: the distress in the population and the failure of the government to help efficiently opens opportunities for the Taliban. Russia isn't just burning – it is a case study in the disastrous consequences of Putin's privatization of forest management.

In addition, the events of the summer show that environmental disasters have sequential consequences. Political eruptions follow on the heels of landslides, and it is not just houses that are swept away in the floods but also trust in institutions. That includes major companies and research institutions maintaining that the escaped oil in the Gulf of Mexico has somehow just disappeared.

What is most irritating, though, is that it seems to have no impact on people's consciousness. The sense of urgency evident in 2007 after the rousing IPCC reports appeared, calling for a serious, engaged climate policy, seems to have vanished completely. The discrediting of scientific climate research, resulting from the discovery of marginal mistakes, fell on enor-

mously fertile soil in public discourse. After the shockwaves unleashed by the financial and economic crisis, climate change barely raises concern anymore. Why not?

The answer is paradoxical. The closer the blows fall, and the faster the pessimistic scenarios that researchers have painted are proven true, the clearer it becomes that the changes needed in lifestyle and economic practices will not mean just a few changes in our consumption habits. Instead, they call for fundamental changes in our production and consumption patterns.

No one wants that, particularly because the financial crisis made clear how quickly the dream of eternal affluence can come to an abrupt end, and how fragile the financial system to which people entrust their welfare actually is. That engenders fear. After all, in every respect – from mobility to plans for the future – people have oriented themselves toward a comfort zone: the perceived human right to consume, have cars, travel, and to live in well-heated apartments.

This comfort zone will become more fought over as the consequences of climate change make themselves increasingly felt and the future will be worse than the present. The clearer this becomes, the more one clings to the status quo as long as possible. Reasonable and fair global government moves farther away.

Precisely at the moment when we are beginning to get an idea of what a world in the midst of climate change would really look like, we are behaving as if we were not really interested in transnational climate protection agreements. That is an indication that the post-globalization phase has already begun. Gaining an advantage in the tussle over the remaining resources takes priority over the future of the planet. ■

Hamburg shuts down 9/11 mosque

The prayer house was a magnet for extremists | By Paul Hockenos

In the planning and execution of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, Germany played a small but critical role: It was in the northern port city of Hamburg that the attacks' mastermind, the Egyptian-born university student Mohamed Atta became radicalized and committed to jihad.

Atta and a circle of fellow radical Islamists, several directly involved in the World Trade Center attack, met, studied and networked with al Qaeda operatives at the Al-Quds Mosque, a prayer house in the St. George's district of downtown Hamburg. The fact that German authorities only managed to shut down the infamous mosque, renamed the Taiba Mosque two years ago, and ban the cultural organization behind it this summer attests to the enormous difficulties Germany has faced in confronting radical Islam in its midst.

There are an estimated five million Muslims in Germany, less than one percent of whom are considered to harbor radical views. Yet most observers felt that the mosque's closure was long overdue and that the legal difficulties preventing its shutdown reflected Germany's conflicted approach to counterterrorism in general.

The Taiba Mosque had become a symbol of Germany's inability to tackle the problem. The Hamburg



Changing the locks on the Taiba Mosque.

raid, during which police also searched four apartments belonging to mosque regulars, highlighted the stark reality that jihadists continue to be active in Germany, even at a site as high-profile as the Taiba Mosque.

"We have closed the mosque because it was a recruiting and meeting point for Islamic radicals who wanted to participate in so-called jihad or holy war," said a spokesman for Hamburg's state Interior Ministry. He explained that about 45 supporters of jihad live in the Hamburg area and around 200 people regularly attended prayers at the Taiba Mosque.

A 2009 German intelligence report noted that the Taiba Mosque was once again a "center of attraction for the jihad scene." Militant members of the prayer house and its benefactor foundation, including German converts to Islam, traveled to Islamist training camps in Uzbekistan that year. The same year others headed off to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, where they were apprehended. The intelligence agency report concluded: "A very important factor for the radicalization of the group members was certainly their joint visits to the mosque."

The mosque's foremost holy man, Mamoun Darkazanli, moved in the same circles as the September 11 terrorists. The head of Hamburg's anti-terror department called him "a hate preacher" and "elder statesman of jihad." In 2004, Darkazanli, who has dual German and Syrian citizenship, was arrested in Hamburg on a Spanish warrant accusing him of financing Osama bin Laden's network.

But Germany's highest court blocked his extradition ruling it unlawful and he was eventually released. Two years later, German prosecutors ended their investigation of Darkazanli due to insufficient evidence. He lives in the Hamburg region.

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UPPER LEFT: UWE SIEMON-NETTO
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