

Wiehl, April 2023

Apocalypse begins in 2040

We are reaching the limits of growth says Rainer Ibowski



The headline sounds gloomy and pessimistic. I therefore want to start with something positive. The Dutch futurologist Gaya Herrington encourages us "... that we still have the choice to align ourselves with a scenario that does not end in collapse." But this would require slowing down growth to create a more sustainable world. And therein lies the problem of recognizing the real cause of unchecked growth.

For far too long we have been dividing the environment into sub-sectors: food, housing, transport, agriculture, industry. This nonsense must come to an end. We have to realize that our lives are a complex combination of desires and demands, which for most people can be traced back to their prosperity and possibly also to their education. The crux is that wealth and education are extremely unequally distributed globally and nationally. Who can blame the poor for wanting to have an adequate income? But do I also have to tolerate that the rich keep accumulating millions? In the long run, distribution wars between rich and poor are inevitable.

The wide-open wealth gap is often reported on, although usually more with a view to the world as a whole. National differences in wealth tend to be a marginal topic. But worse than the financial imbalance is the fact that the rich mess up our world - a crass word for a literal indifference or perhaps even deliberate disregard for social responsibility.

There is far too little information about the exuberant environmental pollution caused by the few rich people in the world and in our own country. Yet figures are available that are frightening *). According to the Climate Protection Act, Germany is to emit only 440 million tons of CO₂ in 2030 as an interim target. This is 5.3 tons of CO₂ per inhabitant and year. In fact, the poorer half of the German population emitted around six tons of CO₂ per year in 2019, the poorest even only three tons. The richest one per cent polluted the environment with 105 tons of CO₂ annually. If you take only the 800 or so richest Germans, the environmental impact is far more glaring. They give a damn that their CO₂ emissions are just under twelve thousand tons per year per capita. This is two thousand times more than the 44 million or so in the poorer half contribute. I will readily admit that this figure is an estimate. The super-rich like to disguise their lifestyles. However, it is probably close to reality when I think of huge estates, consumption, car fleets, yachts and private jets.

Between 1991 and 2019, emissions in Germany fell by about 34 per cent. This is mainly due to the poorer two-thirds of the population, who reduced their emissions by even more than 34 percent. The richer third, on the other hand, saved less than average. Instead, the richest 800 increased their emissions by a hefty 10 percent. The poorer Germans have thus taken more responsibility for climate protection.

Emissions inequality is even more pronounced worldwide. The global average of about 6 tons of CO₂ per person per year was significantly lower than the German average of currently about 11 tons. Globally, however, emissions have risen. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that the standard of living of many people in the Global South has improved during this time and thus their emissions have also increased. On the other hand, the rich have become even richer worldwide and have increased their emissions. The result: global emissions inequality has grown.

I am not driven by envy. It is above all about setting an example. What is the average German supposed to make of the fact that the Federal Minister of Finance and FDP leader Christian Lindner celebrates a three-day wedding on the island of Sylt with a few hundred guests? Did all the guests come by bicycle over the Hindenburgdamm? Did they all stay in collective hostels? Did they only eat and drink from the region around the North Frisian Islands? Was it even possible to save on clothing, since Sylt is known as a nudist paradise?

Why am I not surprised that Lindner and the FDP are vehemently in favor of motorway expansion and the preservation of the combustion engine? Lindner, by his own admission, loves fast sports cars that will probably have to continue using inefficient fossil fuel after 2035. Lindner's reference to as yet unknown technological developments and inventive spirit unfortunately strikes a chord with an overwhelming majority of Germans who would like to see themselves and German industry in such a role. This coincides with the assumption that 97 percent of the CO₂ emissions of the super-rich are caused by investments. Investment for what? More prosperity for all? Growth?

With more than eight billion people on our planet, quantitative growth is no longer possible. After less than six months, humanity has already used up all the resources that should have lasted for a whole year. This is where the Club of Rome came in 1972 with its report "The Limits to Growth". For a long time, the fundamental statements were misunderstood and only the limitation of oil reserves was discussed. In fact, the report warned mankind not to allow its ecological footprint to grow ever larger. Six out of twelve of the scenarios examined at the time ended in a complete collapse of the global system. The problems of human society have steadily increased until today: resource depletion, environmental pollution, climate change, injustice, social conflicts. If we do not stop the death spiral by all means, scientists see in a reassessment of the scenarios that the apocalypse could begin in 2040. While global growth is expected to

slow, a climate catastrophe in the middle of the 21st century is probably unavoidable. The population is expected to reach its temporary peak in 2040 at around 8.5 billion people. Energy consumption will be higher than ever before in 2040. Moreover, poverty will continue to increase in both rich and poor countries. As long as growth continues unchecked, the system will collapse sooner or later. If we simply continue as we are, it will mean the apocalypse. The chances for the long-term survival of our civilization are currently very poor.

In the Bible, the apostle John tells of the horsemen of the Apocalypse, who precede the end of the world. It is difficult for me to assign all of today's threats to the four biblical allegories. It seems to me that the number of apocalyptic horsemen has increased. The biblical horseman with bow and arrow stands for the abuse of power by the authorities and leaders. Modern despots and tyrants like Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump immediately come to mind. The rider with a sword comes with war, very likely given the radicalization in large parts of our population and the violent rejection of migration. The rider with scales brings dearth and famine. Billions of earth's inhabitants lack drinking water and sufficient food. The rider with death and pestilence means many things today such as climate change, pandemics, resource exploitation, population growth.

We don't need cosmic cataclysms like an asteroid impact, a super-radiation burst from the sun or a nearby passing black hole to destroy us. We make sure of it ourselves. We are the lemmings who knowingly jump off the cliff. The voles in nature, contrary to myth, do not jump to their death. However, there is a clear population dynamic among them. Years with many lemmings are followed by years with few. It is not a cliff they jump off, but the result of ecological changes. Lemmings cannot intervene in the ecology. But we can!



So, let's slam on the brakes of unbridled growth. Let's stop deceiving ourselves when we decide on nonsensical trifles as a remedy against climate change. Eating ten beef steaks less a year

may compensate for the CO₂ emissions of my flight to the Ballermann, but it is nothing other than stupid actionism. Nor is it about bans. It is about global insight into the complex interconnectedness of all human sectors. A first important step would be to eliminate inequality on our planet.

Sophocles said around 400 before the turn of time: "The saddest of all evils are those of our own making". Was he already thinking of our apocalyptic threat?

*) The figures cited in this essay come from the World Inequality Lab at the Paris School of Economics, 48 boulevard Jourdan, 75014 Paris. In autumn 2022, a study on this topic was published in the scientific journal "Nature Sustainability". Some conclusions from it were presented in an article in the Berlin daily taz of 25 March 2023, to be looked up in detail at <https://taz.de/Ungleiche-Emissionen-in-Deutschland/!5922585/> .

Photos: Holger Schué, Gerd Altmann, Pixabay, Public Domain

© Dr. Rainer Ibowski, Wiehl, 2023