



HARALD WELZER

CLIMATE WARS

WHAT PEOPLE WILL BE KILLED FOR
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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**WHY PEOPLE WILL BE KILLED IN
THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

HARALD WELZER

TRANSLATED BY PATRICK CAMILLER

polity

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The idea of writing a book about the link between climate change and violence goes back to the run-up to the Year of the Humanities in 2007, the eighth in a series of years officially named in Germany for a branch of the sciences. When the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* asked me to submit a programmatic text on the future of social and cultural theory, I took it as a welcome opportunity for an appeal that colleagues should pay greater attention to the far-reaching changes taking place in the life of society. ‘What we today call “climate change”’, I wrote there, ‘will be the greatest social challenge of the modern age, especially since there will be no way of escaping the question of how to cope with the masses of refugees who can no longer survive in their land of origin and wish to enjoy the opportunities available in better-off countries. We know from the study of past genocides how quickly an attempted solution to social problems can turn into sweeping definitions and deadly actions, and whether societies can avoid such things is a test of their ability to learn from history.’ Those lines, written with a certain ardour, soon turned into a strange challenge to carry my thinking further. So, in fact it was Elisabeth von Thadden at *Die Zeit* who gave the first impetus for *Climate Wars*. A further major stimulus was my collaboration with Tobias Debiel on a ‘Failing Societies’ project, in which I learned a great deal about the subject of our research. Some of the graphics in

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1

A SHIP IN THE DESERT: THE PAST AND FUTURE OF VIOLENCE

A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. [. . .] I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking.

This scene, from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, is set in the heyday of European colonialism, a little more than a hundred years ago.

The pitiless brutality with which early industrial countries satisfied their hunger for raw materials, land and power, and which left its mark on whole continents, cannot be seen in the landscape of the West today. The memory of exploitation, slavery and extermination has succumbed to democratic amnesia, as if the countries of the West had always been as they now are and their superior wealth and power were not built upon a murderous history.

Instead, the West prides itself on its inventiveness, its observance and defence of human rights, its political correctness and humanitarian stance when a civil war, flooding or drought threatens human life in some part of Africa or Asia. Governments order military intervention

to spread democracy, overlooking that most Western democracies rest on a history of exclusion, ethnic cleansing and genocide. Whereas the asymmetrical history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has translated into luxurious living standards in Western societies, its violence still weighs heavily on many parts of the second and third worlds. Quite a few post-colonial countries have never made it to real statehood, let alone achieved prosperity; many have continued to experience the old exploitation under different conditions, and the signs often point towards further decline rather than significant improvement.

Climate change resulting from the insatiable hunger for fossil fuels in the early industrial countries hits the poorest regions of the world hardest – a bitter irony that flies in the face of any expectation that life is fair. Figure 1.1 shows the remnants of the *Eduard Boblen* steamer, which were dug up after almost a hundred years from the sands of the Namibian desert. It played a minor role in the history of major injustice. On 5 September 1909, it ran aground in thick fog off the coast of the country that was then called German South-West Africa. Today the wreck lies 200 metres inland, the desert having gradually inched its way out to sea in the intervening period. Since 1891 the *Eduard Boblen*



had made regular stops in South-West Africa, carrying mail for the Woermann Lines based in Hamburg. But during the German colonial war against the Herero people, it was converted into a slave ship.

In this genocidal war, the first of the twentieth century, a large part of the native population of South-West Africa lost their lives, while concentration camps were built to house prisoners of war sold off as slave labourers. Right at the beginning of the war, the German colonial authorities offered Hewitt, a South African dealer, 282 captured prisoners, whom they had placed on board the *Eduard Boblen*, not knowing what else to do with them until the Hereros were defeated. Hewitt jumped at the opportunity and managed to drive the price down to 20 marks per head, arguing pertinently that, since the men were already out at sea, he should not have to pay the normal price and customs duties for finished goods. So, on 20 January 1904 the *Eduard Boblen* left Swakopmund bound for Cape Town, where the men were put to work in the mines.¹

The Herero opened their campaign against colonial rule on the night of 11–12 January 1904, destroying a railway track and several telegraph lines and killing 123 German men in raids on farms.² After talks to suspend hostilities led nowhere, the imperial government in Berlin sent out an expeditionary force under the command of Lieutenant-General Lothar von Trotha, who immediately declared a war of extermination. His aim was not only to defeat the Herero militarily but to force them to fight in the wastes of the Omaheke desert, where he controlled the watering places and could simply watch them die of thirst.³ This gruesome strategy was so successful that the Herero were reported to be cutting their animals' throats and drinking their blood, then squeezing the last drop of moisture out of the stomach contents. But they died all the same.⁴

The war continued after the Herero fighters were wiped out. The Nama, another native people, were to be disarmed and subjugated once German troops had established a presence in their area. The Nama, unlike the Herero, did not opt for pitched battles but resorted to guerrilla warfare, which presented the colonial army with considerable problems and impelled it to adopt measures that would find frequent application as the bloody century progressed. In order to rob the Nama guerrillas of support, the Germans murdered their women and children or herded them into concentration camps.

Violence occurs when there is pressure to take action that will produce results. If these are not forthcoming, new forms of violence are devised – and, if found to be effective, are repeatedly applied. Violence is innovative: it develops new forms and new conditions. Nevertheless, it took the German colonial army more than three years to crush the Nama people. The concentration camps, by the way, were not all under state control; private companies such as Woermann also ran a line in forced labour.⁵

This war was not only an example of the ruthlessness of colonial power but also a blueprint for future genocides; its strategic intent was total extermination, by working prisoners to death in concentration camps. At the time all this could be written of as a success story. The History Department of the General Staff proudly reported in 1907 that ‘no trouble, no deprivation was spared to rob the enemy of the last remnants of his capacity to resist. He was driven from water-hole to water-hole like a beast hounded half to death, until, having lost all will, he fell victim to natural forces in his own country. The waterless Omaheke would complete the task begun by German force, the annihilation of the Herero people.’⁶ That was a hundred years ago. The forms of violence have changed since then, and even more the ways of speaking about them. The West now uses force directly against other countries only in exceptional cases; today’s wars involve long chains of agency, in which violence is delegated, reshaped and invisible. The conflicts of the twenty-first century are post-heroic, seemingly waged against the will of their actors. And since the Holocaust it has been impossible to speak with pride of exterminating whole peoples.

The *Eduard Bohlen* rusts away in the desert sands, and perhaps the whole Western social model, with all its democracy, freedoms, liberalism, art and culture, will appear to a historian of the twenty-second century as an equally strange relic from another world. If there are still historians in the twenty-second century . . .

This social model, so remorselessly successful for a quarter of a millennium, is becoming global and even drawing once-communist (just barely communist) countries into the intoxication of a standard of living complete with cars, flat-screen TVs and travel to faraway lands. But, at this very moment, it is also running up against operational limits that scarcely anyone has allowed for. The emissions caused by the

energy-hungry industrial heartlands, and increasingly also by emerging economies, threaten to knock the climate out of kilter. The consequences are beginning to make themselves felt, but it is impossible to predict what lies ahead. The only certainty is that the unrestricted use of fossil fuels cannot continue for ever – not so much because they will eventually run out (which has been assumed for a long time) as because the climatic effects are uncontrollable.

When global warming due to atmospheric pollution rises above 2 degrees, the Western model will reach its limits of controllability. But there is more. An economy based on growth and resource depletion cannot function globally, since it logically implies that power is accumulated in one part of the world and applied in another. It is in essence particularist, not universal: everyone cannot exploit everyone else at the same time. Astronomy has not revealed any other planets within reach that might be colonized, and so the conclusion is inescapable that Earth is and will remain an island. Humans cannot simply pack up and move on when the land has been grazed bare and the mines have been phased out.

As resources start to run out, at least in many parts of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, South America, the Arctic and the Pacific islands, more and more people will have fewer and fewer means to ensure their survival. Obviously this will lead to violent conflicts among those who wish to feed off the same area of land or to drink from the same trickling water source, and just as obviously, in a not so distant future, it will no longer be possible to distinguish between war refugees and environmental refugees. New wars will be environmentally driven and cause people to flee from the violence, and, since they will have to settle somewhere, further sources of violence will arise – in the very countries where no one knows what to do with them, or on the borders of countries they want to enter but which have no wish at all to receive them.

This book is concerned with the question of how climate and violence go together. In some cases, such as the war in Sudan, the link is direct and palpable. In many other contexts of present or future violence – civil wars and simmering conflicts, reigns of terror, illegal migration, border disputes, unrest and insurgency – the connection between global warming and environmental conflicts is only indirect; it

makes itself felt mainly in the impact of climate change on global inequalities and living conditions, which varies enormously from country to country.

But, whether wars in the twenty-first century are directly or indirectly due to climate change, violence has a great future ahead of it. We shall see not only mass migration but also *violent solutions to refugee problems*, not only tensions over water or mining rights but also *resource wars*, not only religious conflicts but also *wars of belief*. A hallmark of the violence practised by the West is an effort to delegate as much of it as possible to mercenaries or private security companies, or, in the case of border control, to agencies operating in economically and politically dependent countries that are the source of likely immigration. Security policies designed to catch criminals before they commit a crime – to shift the offence ‘upstream’, as it were – are part of this increasing trend towards the indirect use of force. Whereas the West prefers this to the kind of open war it has had to fight in Iraq or Afghanistan, social conditions in other countries are such that violence is a permanent and central factor that people have to face in eking out an existence. All this is an expression of the asymmetry that became decisive for world history two and a half centuries ago and has been deepened by the processes of global warming.

Crystal ball gazing at future wars and conflicts would be an idle pursuit, since social processes do not develop in linear fashion. We cannot know today which migrations will cause the Siberian permafrost to thaw, or which outbreaks of violence will trigger the flooding of a megacity or a whole country. Still less can we know how people will react in future to perceived threats, or what effects their reactions will unleash. The same caveat applies to scientific attempts to understand climate change and its likely consequences. It is all too easy to overlook the fact that the arguments employed by climatologists – for example, when they use precisely datable ice or rock layers to measure carbon dioxide concentrations in the air or water – usually highlight processes of change that can be shown to have occurred in history.

The future scenarios of greatest concern to the public therefore rest upon data from the past. Similarly, this book will not so much speculate on possible futures as analyse how and why violence has been exercised in the past and present, in order to gauge what future lies in store for

us in the twenty-first century. Since violence is *always* an option for human action, it is inevitable that violent solutions will also be found for problems that have their origin in environmental changes.

The following pages will therefore not only offer accounts of climate wars but also investigate how people decide to kill others in war, or how their perception of the environment itself changes. For it is not objective circumstances themselves that determine how people behave, but the manner of their interpretation. It also needs to be asked why there are some wars that no one is interested in ending, and why increasing numbers are willing to trade their freedoms for promises of security.

The book starts by presenting a case that problems push for solutions when they are perceived as threatening. After a three-part investigation of killing – yesterday, today and tomorrow – it describes the ‘shifting baselines’ – that is, the fascinating phenomenon that people change their perceptions and values along with their environment, without even realizing that they are doing it.

The book naturally ends with a consideration of what might be done to prevent the worst from happening, or – put more loftily – to draw some practical lessons from history. Chapter 11, the first concluding chapter, examines the possibilities for cultural change that might permit an escape from the deadly logic of unstoppable growth and limitless consumption, one which does not make people feel that they have to sacrifice something. Optimists should stop reading at the end of this chapter and reflect on how a start might be made with the concept of a *good society* that is developed in it.

The second concluding chapter, chapter 12, outlines my own view of how things will shape up in the wake of climate change – a rather bleaker view, it must be said. The consequences will not only change the world but establish different social conditions from those we have known until now; they will also spell the end of the Enlightenment and its conception of freedom. But some books one writes in the hope of being proved wrong.

CLIMATE CONFLICTS

THE WEST – I

In 2005 a ‘European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union’ was brought into being. Behind this cumbersome, bureaucratic-sounding name lies a highly dynamic institution, which is supposed to make the EU’s external border controls more robust and effective. At present it has a staff roughly a hundred strong and is planning for a pool of 500 to 600 border police, drawn from the member states and – a legal novelty – empowered to take on functions *outside* the EU. The agency also has at its disposal more than twenty aircraft, thirty helicopters and over a hundred ships, as well as elaborate equipment such as night vision devices and state-of-the-art laptops.

Since the official name is obviously too unwieldy, a catchier and evocative abbreviation has now been agreed upon: Frontex (from the French *frontières extérieures*). It works closely with other agencies such as Europol, advises local border police at key areas of illegal migration, and assists in ‘joint removal operations of third-country nationals illegally present in the Member States’.¹ Such persons are those who, having somehow reached an EU/Schengen country and been

refused asylum, are liable to be shipped back or, in official parlance, 'repatriated' to their country of origin.²

The Schengen Agreement, which came into force on 26 March 1995, has concentrated the frontier problem in states on the outer edges of the EU, passport-free travel now being the rule within the Schengen area. The 'country of origin regulation', however, requires asylum-seekers to give proof of political persecution if they come from a country classified as 'safe'; and the 'third country regulation' provides that individuals who have, for example, managed to reach southern Spain from Sierra Leone and then moved on to Germany may be summarily sent back to Spain and refused the right ever to apply for asylum in Germany. Not surprisingly this has stepped up the pressure on the EU's Spanish and Portuguese as well as East European frontiers, while applications for asylum in Germany have fallen by a quarter since 1995. But it also raises the question whether, in view of the rising numbers of refugees (set to rise even more as a result of future climate change), it will be possible to secure the EU's external frontiers as effectively as this is done at present.

Frontex, established by a decree of the European Council, chalked up some early successes – for example, a major cut in the number of refugee boats landing in the Canary Isles. The refugees who make the 1,200-kilometre journey, mostly by dinghy, across the open sea from West Africa to Gran Canaria or Tenerife come from countries where the existing conditions make life virtually impossible. Displaced by dam projects or civil war, they have drifted into megacities like Lagos, where 3 million people live in slums and there is neither running water nor a sewage system. There they pay smuggling gangs an exorbitant sum for a place on an overcrowded, barely seaworthy boat, with no return ticket and a high risk of not surviving the trip.³ Even so, some 30,000 made it alive to the Canaries in 2006, posing considerable problems for the authorities and the tourism industry there.

Other refugees try the Straits of Gibraltar, which, though only 13 kilometres across, have strong currents and dense traffic that make them no less hazardous. Many fail to reach the shores of Spain or Portugal, and those who do are usually shipped straight back; it is estimated that some 3,000 drowned in the attempt in 2006 alone. Frontex takes account of this, by defining one of its important tasks as 'preventing illegal entry in life-threatening conditions'.⁴

Since the reasons why refugees want to reach Europe at any price remain the same, and since their routes become more dangerous as Frontex increases its efficiency, the ideal form of control is to project the EU's borders outwards, preventing refugees from ever leaving the African continent. As long ago as October 2004 Otto Schilly, then German interior minister, suggested building reception camps in Africa and verifying there whether an asylum application was valid or not.⁵ Most other EU interior ministers were not at all keen on the idea, and it also ran into protests from human rights organizations. The search for other solutions has been tough, as have negotiations with the African Union, so that there is still no alternative to the further tightening of border controls if such people are to be kept out of Europe. The situation in the Spanish exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla perfectly symbolizes the problem: border installations are continually being reinforced there, while refugees take ever more desperate measures to climb the fences; a mass storming in September 2005 involved approximately 800 people.

In the medium term, innovative technologies have given affected countries some relief: for example, a \$2 billion system on the US border with Mexico will make it possible to locate intruders by GPS and to livestream the information to the next police patrol, dramatically reducing the number of illegal entrants. In 2006 no fewer than 1.1 million people were arrested in this frontier zone. In September 2006, the House of Representatives approved a plan to build a 1,125-kilometre high-tech fence to bolster security further. It is true that the total length of the frontier is 3,360 kilometres, but it is assumed that such measures will deter many potential violators, since the remaining areas consist of barely negotiable desert or mountain; the shortest distance across on foot is 80 kilometres. Between 1998 and 2004, a total of 1,954 people died along the US–Mexican border.

America and Europe will have to do more in future to protect themselves from the inrush of the millions of refugees who are expected to follow climate change. Hunger, water problems, wars and desertification will exert incalculable pressure on the islands of West European and North American prosperity. The German government's Scientific Advisory Committee on Global Climate Change (WGBU) has pointed out that '1.1 billion people currently lack secure access to drinking

water in sufficient quantity and quality'. This situation 'may grow worse in some parts of the world, because climate change may lead to great variations in precipitation and water availability.'⁶

In addition, some 850 million people around the world are undernourished – a figure which experts think will grow considerably in the wake of climate-induced shrinkage of farmland. The ensuing distribution conflicts point to a greater risk of violent escalation, since further population movements will increase the number of so-called migration 'hot spots'. In this light, the WGBU urges, the promotion of development should be understood as a form of 'preventive security'.

Such trends give a foretaste of what will happen when climate change boosts the flow of refugees. Space and resource conflicts due to global warming will fundamentally alter the shape of Western societies in the next few decades; Frontex is a nugatory harbinger of things to come. Climate change is therefore not only an extremely urgent issue for environmental policy; it will also be the greatest social challenge of the modern age, threatening the very existence of millions of people and forcing them into mass migration. The question of how to cope with such flows will become inescapable as refugees of whatever provenance seek to enhance their survival chances by moving to better-off countries.

THE OTHERS

Over the past forty years, the desert in northern Sudan has moved 100 kilometres towards the once fertile south. The causes are, on the one hand, steadily decreasing rainfall and, on the other, the overgrazing of grassland, deforestation and ensuing soil erosion that makes the land infertile. Forty per cent of Sudan's forest has been lost since the country became independent, and at present a further 1.3 per cent is vanishing each year. For many regions, the United Nations Environmental Programme foresees total deforestation within the next ten years.

Climate models for Sudan point to a temperature rise of 0.5 degrees Celsius by 2030 and 1.5 degrees by 2060, while at the same time rainfall will decrease by an annual average of a further 5 per cent. This would mean a decline of 70 per cent in the grain harvest. Some 30 million people live in northern Sudan, and to appreciate what these figures

mean we need to bear in mind that the country is already one of the poorest in the world; it also faces major ecological dangers, and a civil war has been simmering for the past half-century. There are 5 million so-called Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs), who have been systematically driven out of their native villages. Hostile militias not only kill people but also burn villages and forest, in order to prevent the return of those they 'displace'.

Most IDPs live in camps with virtually no infrastructure: no electricity, no sewer system, no running water, no medical care. The food supply is largely provided by international aid agencies. In order to cook, people there have already cut down all the forest for as much as 10 kilometres around. The bare land is dangerous: many women are raped and killed on their way to fetch wood. They are not robbed, because they have nothing anyone could take.

The Darfur region in the west presents a similar picture, perhaps even worse since fighting has spilled over the border from Chad and the Central African Republic. There are another 2 million IDPs in Darfur, most of whom live in rough and ready camps on the edge of large settlements and towns. In some areas the population has swollen by as much as 200 per cent since the outbreak of open war. The United States and the EU have been unable to agree whether it should be described as genocide, but somewhere between 200,000 and 500,000 people have been killed so far.

Sudan is the first case of a war-torn country where climate change is unquestionably one cause of violence and civil war. It used to be assumed that the violent effects of climate change were indirect, but where survival is at stake even small shifts can acquire explosive force. Then it is a question of struggle for existence. In a country where 70 per cent of the population lives on and from the land, there is a real problem if pasture and arable land begin to disappear. Nomadic herdsman need pasturage for their animals, just as small farmers need land to grow cereals and fruit for themselves and their families. When the desert expands, livestock breeders use the land of farmers, or vice versa. There is a critical threshold below which survival interests can be asserted only by force.

From 1967 to 1973, and again from 1980 to 2000, Sudan suffered a series of catastrophic droughts, which were one reason for the major

population movement and thousands of deaths from starvation. Of course, apart from ecological factors, there are many other causes of conflict – so many, in fact, that an attempt to present a historical overview leaves one feeling helplessly confused.⁷ Varying in intensity and geographical location, war has marked the country's life throughout the half-century since 1955. Only between 1972 and 1983 was there a fragile state of peace. An agreement was finally signed in 2005 that ended hostilities in the south, but since 2003 war has been raging in Darfur, in the west of the country. Everyone agrees that the war situation is disastrous – though little or nothing is said about the shortage of drinking water, the catastrophic floods, wastewater contamination and rubbish mountains, or the environmental destruction caused by expansion of the oil industry. There is a direct link between climate change and war. To look at Sudan is to look into the future.

THE WEST – II

In Western countries, the public agitation that followed the three reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in early 2007 has since subsided. Yet, if anything, the global scenarios have become grimmer. We now know that some parts of the world will be winners as a result of climate change, since they will become more favourable for agriculture and more attractive as a holiday destination. Hotel managers on Germany's North Sea coast are happy enough, and the potential for wine-growing is expanding ever northward. The Stern Report, which considered the economic implications of climate change, seems to have caused a moment of horror, only to be rapidly followed by contemplation of the new economic prospects for the technologically advanced countries.⁸ Lord Stern, the World Bank's former chief economist, calculated that the costs of unrestricted global warming would amount to between 5 and 20 per cent of world income (probably towards the upper end of this range), whereas the stabilization of CO₂ emissions until the year 2050 would cost no more than 1 per cent of GNP, well within the capacity of normal economic development to absorb it.

Naturally there are variations between branches of the economy: producers of renewable energy would benefit, while ski tourism would

lose out. But all in all an immediate change in climate policy is thought to offer an economic opportunity for the West. Improved energy production, more efficient appliances of every kind, hybrid vehicles, biofuels, solar panels and much else besides promise a rosy future. There is even talk of a 'third technological revolution', although this overlooks the fact that the first and the second are the causes of today's problems.

Citizens show an environmental awareness when they use aircraft with a bad rather than a good conscience. But thinking about climate change can lead to unexpected reactions. Car drivers might go for a more powerful model than they originally intended, for the simple reason that the time for twelve-cylinder SUVs with 500 HP might soon be over.⁹ So-called climate and sustainability funds advertise themselves with the argument that climate-related lines of business fare better in the long run than the equity market as a whole. Nor are the benefits only financial; it gives investors a good conscience to feel that they are doing something ecologically useful.¹⁰

What do such examples show? They show that people adapt to new environmental conditions – and that the adaptation may be rooted not in a general change of behaviour but in a modified perception of the problems. A study was published in 2005 on how fishermen relate to the continual decline in fish stocks in the Gulf of California. Despite sharp falls in the fish population and massive overfishing, the younger men tended to be less concerned than their older colleagues, because they no longer knew how many kinds of fish used to be caught in abundance off the coast.¹¹

One can see the coming climate problem as an opportunity here and now, as a vague distant possibility or as a matter of no consequence, positioning oneself accordingly in relation to the diffuse threat. As in the case of the southern Californian fishermen, people's perceptions change within the changing present of which they are part, and when, nonetheless, dissonances arise there are many and various ways to overcome them. For that it may well be enough to have an awareness of the problem, which creates the sense that one is not indifferent, heedless or powerless in relation to it. One then changes one's attitude to the problem, not to its root cause.

We also need to realize that attitude and behaviour are two different things, linked to each other only loosely, if at all. One can have