

Taking sides in the climate fight

Jac Nijssen, 2025

Climate is becoming a huge concern for humanity. We are in danger of losing essential living conditions. Thus, since the Kyoto climate conference (1997), and certainly since the one in Paris (2015), we have been making binding commitments to each other to start stringently reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Yet we are not getting that done. Emissions continue to rise, and [so does](#) the annual CO₂ increase in the atmosphere.

Crucial question: Have we declared war on the right cause so far?

Such a fallacy is not uncommon. The war on drugs is aimed at dealers, transporters, and producers, not at the social and economic misery that drives people to use drugs. The war on cancer targets the tumor, not the pesticides, the diet, and air pollution. A mother beats her daughter (her target) because she is the darling of her husband who no longer wants to hug his wife because she has grown too fat. In the current war on climate, in my opinion, the real cause is also overlooked and thus left alone. It is not the climate that is going to kill us, but the game we have played with each other so far. For, the way we interact with each other is the root cause why we have become increasingly **addicted** to energy, and started exploiting coal, oil and gas resources in a totally unrestrained way after peat extraction.

Our societal rules with regard to economic exchange and around how we apportion income and property to each other are the only reason why we no longer fit within the earthly boundaries. After all, the hunger for energy is generated between us. Right there, in the way we make porridge, trade and distribute (apportion among each other). That way of doing (our economic game) makes that hunger insatiable and has gradually addicted us to that stuff to such an extent that the fact that our economies are demanding and absorbing more and more energy now feels self-evident. So we should start tinkering with those rules of the game in the first place rather than mere emissions.

No, we don't tinker with those essential social rules about how we treat each other, and about how we give each other access to means of livelihood. No way! We are so touchy and scared of each other – which is why we have based our game on distrust, every man for himself, and limitless grabbing – that we continue to dodge the rules-issue and instruct the youth that we must attack the climate, while it is precisely this being at each other throats in our economic game that has led to the blind race for 'more' in which we keep running like headless chickens. Our hectic pace is driven by the possibility (freedom) of bringing in more porridge than another, and by the fear of coming home without porridge. By ever faster updating, innovating, purchasing, expanding, we try to satisfy the energy junk in ourselves. And we increasingly struggle with the side-effects that come with every addiction: our knowledge becomes impoverished; our field of vision narrows; we duck the troublesome, cherish illusions, cling to the rosy; and our actions focus purely on scoring; everything else is to be forgotten.

To be completely honest, I estimate the chance that this junkie can still be saved at less than 10%.

Unfortunately (or fortunately!), the hour of truth is now rapidly approaching that we can no longer side step the explosive rules issue. Why? Because when climate disruption becomes a matter of life or death for the entire human race, and we really have to start applying radical brakes to emissions, **the current rules will make any quick rescue attempt impossible**. And so we have to work on them. We need to radically reform them because they seriously constrain our leeway to rescue ourselves from the grip of the fossil energy addiction. They prevent us from surviving without emissions; i.e. from making and distributing the porridge without emissions.

But of course that vision (of radical transformation) obviously finds no hearing in the power column that controls and exploits the current economic game. On top of this, the fiercest defenders of the current rules (i.e. conservatives and liberals) have, more or less out of anger that access to their drugs (coal, oil, gas) could be barred, lately narrowed their view on the climate problem once again

and are increasingly declaring climate change to be a no-problem – see the imbecilities that many political parties and leaders are currently mouthing around global warming. So we should radically reform – see also the increasing [call](#) for systems change by climate [scientists](#) – but hardly anyone has ears for it. So what next?

Let's take a closer and deeper look at the current dynamics of the climate-political battlefield in order to assess more clearly what's going on there, and which sides are choosable in the global climate fight.

The battleground parties

Let's first scrutinize the battle-field. Which are the main parties fighting each other on climate solutions?

1. The business-as-usual proponents (in short: the **Usuals**). This group consists largely of the owners of capital machinery and businesses. They have only one daily concern namely how do I keep my machines and service-infrastructure working tomorrow. The motives behind this? Could be anything, but they revolve around making money, debt repayment, consolidation of positions, employment ideals, etc. Their money and effort and family history, their entire wealth is in those hardware and companies. So they want them to be able to work full time, their industrial manufacturing & processing machinery, stackers, trucks, planes, ships, tractors, milking robots, crane shovels, mine excavators, servers, semiconductor printers, etc. etc. That is their rock-solid orientation, and they have backing from banks, insurers, governments and unions, because they are all in the same game of exchange that ensures everyone's existence. At the moment they are somewhat alarmed by climate change, so their main reaction consists of greenwashing proposals (such as green hydrogen and green kerosene), and of investing their personal capital in risky start-ups and in insane futuristic projects (rocket projects, satellite projects, artificial intelligence, non-aging, revitalization, and building survival bunkers on artificial islands), all so as not to have to think about future shit. In addition, a wave of [fending off](#) climate alarms has been taking place in these circles since 2024. See this recent example of deliberate climate [blindfolding](#) in the United States.
2. The green growth proponents (in short: **Green Growers**). This contingent mainly consists of future-oriented executives of progressive companies on the one hand (e.g. [M&M](#)), and on the other hand of workers in sectors that in one way or another are profiting from business-as-usual (governments, support services including the fast-growing circuit of sustainability specialists, NGOs including many environmental protection organizations). These people prefer to see the current dynamics perpetuated, and want for whatever reasons or fears allow the current economic rules of the game to find a way out. In the meantime they tolerate incremental green-washing. See this [quarrel](#) between Usuals and Green Growers about the acceleration of the energy transition of ships. At no time in that discussion, there is a moment where the scale of shipping and container fever are discussed. No lids (i.e. volume restrictions) are needed on anything. The international transportation show must go on. Green Growers have a sheep-like trust in the solution capacity of science and technology, and thus wallow from one fable (i.e. bio-gas, ethanol, and bio-mass would produce emissions gains) in the other (green hydrogen, methanol, and green kerosene are clean), whereas if you [look more closely at](#) the litany of operations and mountain of industrial installations you need to produce, distribute, and use them, and fill in every energy parameter in those production functions with the energy mix (with less than 20% renewables) that is available (and thus will be used) in the 2025-2040 trajectory, then all of those fables fall deep through the clean emissions basket.
3. The back-to-basics proponents (in short: the **Basics**). Note that both Usuals and Green Growers enter the battlefield with more or less definitely fixed attitudes and goals with

regard to mitigating emissions, and don't plan substantial changes to societal rules. For the basics, this is both much more diffuse and much more radical. As such, I am going to explain this in a bit more detail.

Ignoring for a moment backgrounds and past (such as Georgescu-Roegen), this camp is currently developing at lightning speed via reflection within the climate movement (post carbon, deep adaptation, regenerative economy); within critical economics (Daly, Jackson, Goudzwaard, Robeyns, Sinai, Raworth, Paech, Parrique) and journalism (Watts, Kempf, Hens, Gameau); and within transformative social theory (see Treu, Hickel, Latouche, Heinberg, Shiva, Faburel, Anderson, Batho, Newell, Thunberg, Norberg, Kallis, Chatterton, Steinberger).

These lines of thought sail under many different flags, such as degrowth, *décroissance*, [post growth](#), local futures, simple living, system change, post-urban, [bioregionalism](#), or even transformative mitigation.

What are more or less **steady elements** in the draft (plan) of the Basics for a survival path out of the current critical situation? Well, their wide range of proposals focus above all else on a targeted (deliberate) reduction of overconsumption and overproduction. For example, one French proposal reads: “*C'est un processus de sobriété organisé pour aller vers des sociétés écologiquement viables et socialement souhaitables et vers une relocalisation des activités productives au sein de bio-régions autonomes*”.

Now let's try to illuminate crucial contours and details of that path by listing the **core aspects** that many Basics-authors mention and partially agree on. (Sorry, I won't mention names in order to keep the path clear and short, and to give it some coherence).

- Maximize **decoupling** of subsystems (such as continents, countries, regions, cities, and villages). This strategy has traditionally (also in control engineering) been the key method of preventing a self destabilizing complex system from crashing. Minimizing the inter-flows between sub-systems at the causal operational level (see [Mesarovic](#) et al) – and thus strongly increasing the autonomous functioning of sub-systems (i.e. as much self-sufficiency as possible) – is necessary in the first place to minimize transport emissions, and to curtail the current trend of lengthening production chains for abject reasons (low wages, absent environmental policies). But secondly, decoupling minimizes the coordination problems above the subsystems, and thus the decision-making stratum (i.e. management, governments and local authorities, and all administrative services) becomes considerably lighter and emptier. The latter is a key element to successfully regulate jointly ‘*shared limited natural resources*’. See the main points of Elenor Ostrom's governing-the-commons [theory](#).
- Rapidly **reducing energy demand**. This can only be achieved by restricting essential aspects of the capitalist market economy – in particular the freedom of enterprise (i.e. taking the initiative, setting up new productions with the help of reserves and expanding them at one's own desirability) – because they are by definition (freedom!) unable to integrate the public interest in emissions safely into their decision-making. The applicability of private money and power (banks, stock exchanges), and thus the steering from massive private reserves, becomes as a consequence more restricted, and this steering must necessarily be taken over by collective decision-making bodies.
- **Collective steering** of productions. The chief benchmark for that collective steering of productions – e.g. via carbon tax on inputs/outputs, or via carbon budgets on consumption inputs, or via spending limits – aimed at a drastic reduction of energy demand, will be an assessment of the superfluous consumption space in the lifestyles. It is clear from the outset: lifestyles have to be cut substantially. [Heinberg](#): “*Rich countries have to give up a lot of prosperity*”. [Oxfam](#): “*Ten days after the start of the year, the richest one per cent of the world's population has already used up its fair share of a sustainable carbon budget for*

2025". We have to retreat to a lifestyle in which we can certainly stay alive, but also certainly stabilize the climate. It leaves very little room to set the bar high. But stripped down to what? Undoubtedly to basic needs. Nobody goes on holiday if they have to choose between food and holiday. Food, shelter, energy, safety and love are priorities. And there – at that elementary level of what is most needed – only one distribution key is socially acceptable and thus implementable, namely an equal potential for the fulfillment of basic needs for all. Sharing poverty can only be achieved without constant revolt and crime (murder and mayhem) if you level the playing field (the room to maneuver in order to stay alive) for everyone. If not, implementation of every restrictive policy will fail.

- **Agricultural activity** must become the focal point of the economy. Because (a) food is the primary necessity of life, (b) agriculture (= dealing with nature) plays the main role in keeping earth's respiration intact and optimizing it, (c) people can survive on land, it is their most nearby means of production, and so minimizes trade, storage, packaging, and transport emissions. (See also [Paech](#): Kleinräumige Versorgungsstrukturen). By continuing the decoupling (i.e. disconnection) of subsystems down to the level of the individual (or family), the physical capacities of human beings are brought closest to the agricultural means of subsistence. There, food, housing, clothing, and renewable energy can be produced locally to a sufficient degree without many high-emission inputs (such as energy from elsewhere). This arrangement – making people directly responsible for (and dependent on) the functioning of their own part of the earth (their space) – keeps people busy, keeps them healthy, and directs their values in the same direction (through equal worries), prevents addiction and crime, is emancipatory and socially just, eliminates the dichotomy between caring and being cared and between intellectual and manual labor, and to a large extent circumvents income generation and distribution (because the basic income consists of the fruits of one's own interaction with the space). Leveling the playing field, especially in the agricultural sector, also complies with the necessary lifestyle steering (see above), i.e. assigning everyone an equal potential for the fulfillment of basic needs.
- **Low-tech** setup. Drastic decoupling also imposes tailoring of technology to local production possibilities and user needs. It is plausible (desirable!) that the production of food, clothing and houses can be somewhat mechanized – for example, tractors for mowing, mills for grinding, and cranes for digging – and also that each community should have a bus and bicycles at its disposal, some (solar) energy, and iron for making tools, pans and stoves, and lime for fertilizing and construction. These centralized productions (e.g., in parts of the country where there is a lot of wind energy) may be highly standardized and limited, but the inputs (raw materials, labor) must be able to be paid for by the productions of the local communities. In theory, this should be achievable once a lot of administrative government and management functions no longer burden budgets. The low tech technology must align with manual power, be able to operate on locally producible energy, and above all not constantly undergo uncontrolled innovation.
- Safeguarding **education** and **healthcare** services, and decelerating **procreation**. Only the footprint movement signals the latter, but it is of course an essential aspect that can only be implemented humanely under conditions of great mutual value convergence on emission limitation and on accessibility to resources, otherwise having children will remain a weapon in the mutual struggle for porridge.

Two scenarios

What will unfold between the three parties described above as things get serious and our house really starts to burn? There is conflict matter of immense magnitude, and the stakes are unprecedented. Both lifestyles and survival are at stake.

In my view, **three battles** will be fought on this battlefield in the coming years, which can ultimately merge into each other in such a way that the third battle can be won by the Basics (= scenario 1) or can completely stop the third battle in its tracks (scenario 2).
Let's unwind scenario 1 first.

Scenario 1

The **first** battle is the fight between Green Growers and Usuals to make all economic processes emission-free in time to keep climate change below 2 degrees. However, it already appears that we are approaching 2 degrees right now and heading straight for 3 to 5 degrees, partly because fatal positive feedback loops have already been activated that will start to significantly deteriorate CO2 uptake capacity.

Such an overshoot will immediately start the **second** battle, between central governments and Usuals. Governments have so far been very supportive of owner decisions. They put some taxes in the way here and there, but that's just tickling. However, the moment (= the moment it is foreseen that the first battle will be lost) that the climate bear turns out to be absolutely unstoppable (not even by future carbon removal), governments will start to tighten the thumbscrews on emissions. This recent international initiative (i.e. Global Solidarity Levies Task Force) provides a preview of what those thumbscrews might look like. As a consequence, the international flows (long chain production, trade, transport) will dry up, and governments will take over the ownership decision around the local production of services and products applying rationing to meet the basic needs of the population (for whose well-being they are totally responsible) with minimal emissions.

Meanwhile, the **third** battle will then be able to push the outcome of the second battle in a certain direction. The third battle is that between Basics and governments. and owners. It consists of the ongoing struggle of young people – already for years, but now in an increasingly fierce and massive way – to organize their own living and working environment as emission-free and as basic as possible. It is a battlefield because most of them run into the wall of establishment requirements (technical standards on education and equipment, social security charges, compulsory insurance) and financing (im)possibilities, time after time.

The speed of unfolding of this third battle will depend to a large extent on the size of the human escape from the cities and from climate-hazardous areas (coasts, fire danger, inundation danger, heat danger). In particular, a strong increase of urban Green Growers jumping over to the Basics side – because they see that the first battle is a lost one, and thus they themselves proceed to amputate their innovation function within the Usuals sector – may put high pressure on local authorities (through elections, protests and uprisings) to provide Basics-proponents (and the population in general) with accessibility to local resources with which basic needs can be met (land, buildings and markets in particular). Under such (favorable) circumstances, it is plausible that the second and third battle can then jointly (supporting each other) **intertwine** into a force that culminates in a central (constitutional) intervention on freedoms – in particular the freedom to build up unlimited reserves and to spend them as one pleases – and the transfer of possessions (assets), in such a way that the current rules are finally abolished and the total society, up to every corner, can transform into a low-emission, low-tech, short-chain economy by means of new rules on acquisition and use of property (especially real estate).

Scenario 2

In scenario 1, the most prosperous part of humanity (say 20%) is set back considerably in order to save the survival of everyone and all living species. But another plausible scenario might be that those 20% – who, after all, have seen the blame coming for some time – will help the Usuals win the second battle via their capital power (and political power thus acquired). In that case, international flows and (fossil) production will continue to expand unhindered. This will accelerate

climate change even more (and worsen CO2 absorption capacity) with [the result](#) that 80% of humanity and of all life forms will [not make it](#) to the year 2100.

The rich won't care, I'm afraid. [Nesrine](#): "*Might is right. Always and at any price.*"

They're not interested in life; only in power. Plus their [AI programs](#) will provide them with robots to do their corvee and quieten their possibly gnawing conscience.

And so: No problem on their side of the Mississippi.

However, in this second scenario, there's a very good chance that the third battle will be nipped in the bud by, on the one hand, the untenable climate misery that will plague and ravage local life, and on the other hand, insufficient influx of Green Growers taking sides with the Basics because business-as-usual continues to flourish. That upward business trend will suck most Green Growers ("*Whose bread one eats, whose word one speaks*") into the forceful production waves and streams of the Usuals.

What stance to take in the climate fight?

The preceding assessment of the current situation gives limited guidance, I admit. But perhaps a clue as to an stance that can do no harm for any age namely positioning oneself somewhere at the weak point of the third battle. By which I mean?

Look, in any specific basics strategy, main element is that we limit productions and consumptions. So that strategy requires mutual rapprochement and mutual guidance. This rapprochement is not about wedging each other ideologically into one doctrine, but about finding satisfaction and security in each other's presence; learning to deal with each other's instabilities and capacities. So a **first main point** we should work on is turning back to each other. On waves of cheap energy, we sailed apart. We greatly expanded our habitats and really no longer need neighbors as a source of power and support. But now we not only have to withstand severe weather events together (see how at the Los Angeles fires prisoners helped to extinguish the fires), but also resist climate extremists – who want to keep emitting – and bring them into line. A great deal of improvised organization is required to get that done. When we're committed to each other, we can do it. Through thick and thin. Also find moderation, and restrain ourselves.

So I see **working on social connectivity as a starting pass** to launch a very long triple jump. By that starting pass, do I mean more intensive participation in social media? No, precisely not. Far better is to engage in intensive interactions with each other around our primary concerns *deep under the radar* (i.e. recording capacity) of all public and supposedly transparent channels, media, cameras, and mirrors.

Because of today's wonderful screen and web culture (full of temptation, appearances and slick pretentiousness), there is an atmosphere of confusion, sweat and fatigue around serious physical conversations in which you have to be honest about what you really want, what you think is possible and feasible to do yourself, what is hard to accept, what you don't know and what is holding you back or don't dare. The amusement park full of distractions on the internet has lured us to escape that real reality in ourselves, our friends, neighbors, and loved ones.

Yet, in our history, we have repeatedly had to run away from such a feast in order to find each other's **voices** and **hands** again, and to reorganize our daily interactions with each other in order to save ourselves from very difficult situations. In the Middle Ages, in response to a growing number of abuses throughout Europe, monastic communities arose, where men and women voluntarily distanced themselves from the prosperity of nobility and bourgeoisie and their exploitation of the lower classes.

Another example: Hundreds of small affinity groups – all operating under the radar range of media and governments – each consisting of 10-12 people who met weekly, [energized](#) and empowered the abortion movement, the peace movement, and the anti-nuclear movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Through their group, people were informed, kept their appointments and showed up [in large](#)

[numbers](#). They had their own transmitters and connections. The same thing happened in France during the Algerian War of Independence (1956-1962). The Algérie-Francaise Front (OAS), despite their atrocities, was slowly morally broken by [demonstrations](#) organized from communist grassroots groups in French cities, which became increasingly massive and didn't shy away [from anything](#).

Such a growing popular uprising is of all times and places. See how during the decision-making on [Pierson-straat](#) in Nijmegen (1978), every day more Nijmegen citizens of all backgrounds [intensified](#) the protests, and through mass demonstrations overturned the municipal decision-making. Social housing came in place of the planned huge multi-storey car park. Developing this trust between people – creating security – takes a long time but is the only way to whatever comes next.

Such a corporeal (physical) approach is also actively practiced within current climate activism, for instance in the local groups and working circles of XR and Letzte Generation, and in climate [conversations](#) of, for instance, [climate coalitions](#). But the themes that are discussed in these contacts are more anti-conservative (i.e. criticism of fossil investors and government plans) than giving substance to system changes that would make back-to-basics (degrowth) feasible. They do not clearly choose to rapidly phase out the superfluous in the supply of products and services by pursuing a more local and much simpler lifestyle, and therefore do not participate in the third battle. They do participate in the first and second, of course, by rushing green growers and governments in their fight against the Usuals.

So a **second main point to work on** is to focus the theme of intensified local gatherings more strongly on the tangible practices (processes and conditions) immediately around us. Saying no to unnecessary junk, and finding satisfaction in collectively (at a small scale) inventing and living a simple lifestyle. By building up local social bonds towards a more local economic organization of productions, and together practically tugging and pulling on local mores, habits and conventions, you will be building up something. This does not have to exclude participation in large actions and protests. On the contrary, because in the meantime a reliable army is also forming.

Really, degrowth ain't complicated; it is a matter of producing and marketing basic products (food, clothing, tools, shelter, transport, energy, love) locally, as well as cutting out unnecessary consumption. In areas (FR, DE, ES) where degrowth thinking has been around for a while, weekly meetings (climate cafés) are active in local catering establishments in many small towns, mostly under the radar of media, watchdogs, inquirers, and supervisory authorities. Such get-togethers are more or less small-scale editions of [this metropolitan](#) version. But they take on much trickier issues in mutual trust. It is about making and maintaining close contacts around local food security and self-sufficiency, as well as discussing how young people can be financed who can enrich the local supply on markets and complete the local supply of craft services. Tangible and graspable themes that can gradually give local existence a solid foundation, and slowly but surely sideline the global dealers.

All this (i.e. such a **first** step) can breathe essential life into the third battle. Why? Mutual trust will have to bear (like a beating heart) every **next** step in the thorny process of transforming the highly sensitive crucial coexistence rules and laws (around acquiring and accumulating income and assets) that make our controllability of emissions now next to nil.

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