

The real challenges of climate change: Five arguments and seven twists

A) Five arguments that call for a radical and broad approach of climate change

1 – Harmony: the purpose and the means

In a nutshell: Climate change is not a problem of excess of CO₂ and of substitution of our present energy sources by more sustainable ones. This is only the symptom and we would not heal the cause if we would only erase the symptoms. In a broader perspective climate change is indeed the consequence of overproduction, overconsumption and hope for infinite growth on a limited planet, which translate themselves by two main consequences:

- 1) not only exhaustion of rare resources (fossil fuels, minerals, destruction of our natural environment and biodiversity) but also exacerbation of our greed and need for control,
- 2) and not only production of too much wastes which cannot be reabsorbed and recycled by nature without changing drastically the general equilibrium (CO₂, plastics, toxics) but also destruction of our social quality of human relationships.

We, the main consumers, need hence to go back to harmony in our relationships with the environment and with one another. This is not a question of means (how shall we do better what we already do?) but of purpose (what do we want to do? what is meaningful in life?). This is indeed a search for meaning, for the right purpose. The means then will follow.

2 – The role of technology: necessity for a change of way of living

In our state of illusion we believe that technology will provide the solutions which would be sustainable and would allow us to continue to live with the same standard of life. Wind, solar, thermal, hydro energies can be parts of these solutions. This reconversion is absolutely necessary but it is evident that it has its very narrow limits: how can we supply 7 bio people with enough energy when we know what is needed for that purpose in terms of special resources (rare earths) and energy (part still inevitably fossil) to produce the necessary turbines, captors, batteries, network, etc. Like for biofuels we would need to have many planets to sustain our needs in food, energy and resources. For instance electric cars seem at first glance to be an interesting solution at the individual level but they cannot be the solution for 7bio people, not even for 1bio.

We have to awake: we dream today of alternative energies and technologies but none of them is capable to produce today the amount of energy or the technical solutions we need, if we want to sustain our present standard of living, and to remain at the same time completely renewable. It happens also that we still dream of technologies to be invented or developed such as hydrogen, but these are only pies in the sky. This severe consideration does not mean we should not rely on technology. It means only – but it is essential in the choice of our future – that technology can only provide an accessory help but that it is evidently not the solution. It would indeed be strange if it were the case because technology - or rather the excess of our trust in it – has been the real cause of our present demise. How could then the harm become the solution? We are slow to learn: we still believe it can save us.

The corollary of this conclusion helps us to discern the true teaching of the present crisis; it involves much more than just our way of handling our environment. The crisis shows how the main dimensions of our social life are narrowly connected one with another: ecology (decay) and economy (collapse) and sociology (injustice) and democracy (disempowerment) and all values which rule them. It reveals the true impact of our present false priorities in life, or rather of the priorities which rule the system of our western societies and which we have to transform: material wealth vs human relationships, individualism vs community, competition vs cooperation, exploitation vs sharing, ownership vs usage, etc. Luckily, although we have let the former terms of these dualisms dominate our social life, most of us nevertheless prefer the latter terms!

3 – The main issue: wealth and equity

One aspect of the present crisis is rarely mentioned or it is twisted: this fundamental aspect is our relationship to wealth. The last report (concerning 2019 data) of the Credit Suisse (which is hard to consider as a rebellious institution!) says that 10% of world population (546mio adults who own more than US\$100'000.-) own 83% of world wealth and that more than half of world population (57%) own only 2% of world wealth (less than US\$10'000.-/cap). As Australians we situate ourselves (in average) in the upper part of these top 10%. This privileged tenth (super-rich and rich) includes roughly most Americans, Europeans, Japanese and Australians, less the poor of these countries (about 10-15% depending on the country), plus the rich elites of the BRICS, Emirates and poor countries. This means that we, as Westerners (the 10%), are the problem, even if the super-super-rich (the 1% with the many yachts and private jets) are still more noxious than us. Our own ecological footprint is far too excessive and needs to be reduced by a factor 4 or 6, if not more. Climate change is then the responsibility of only 10% of world population. This is not a demographic problem but a wealth problem!

It is necessary to consider here shortly how wealth generates more needs and desires: if I have money, I can think of flying to London because planes are available for people who have money. Means generate needs and needs generate means, through money. There are basically two ways to satisfy one's needs:

- 1) Either I produce myself what I need or barter what my neighbours can provide. We all rely on what we can produce according to the time which is available to us (time of everyday) and to our skills and available resources. Barter can bring the necessary complement without changing the ratio between needs and time or skills. Money can play here a role but only as a support for the value to be transferred, i.e. not as a value as such or as an investment that can bring money. This is the case for local currencies such as LETS.
- 2) Or I rely on money as a financial means to buy what I need or increase my wealth. On one hand there are the resources, on the other hand there are my needs. In-between there is money as a fluctuating yardstick that changes its value and quantities through different means of management that are all based on speculation (playing with the conversion between independent values): evolution of exchange rates, interest rates, stock exchange benefits, creation of new credit (= new money), printing of new cash, playing with budget deficits, devaluation, variation of prices, difference of costs of the same item in different countries, etc... The quantity of money involved increases ceaselessly in order to generate more profit which participates then in increasing wealth. In contrast with LETS, official money has the power to multiply by itself without producing anything else than more money. The share of national wealth generated by the profits from investments (or speculation) increases constantly and the share of wealth generated by the income from work decreases proportionally since many decades. The global wealth (GDP) is said to grow, but for whom?

Despite this increase in cash flow, the quantities of available resources have not changed and the daily time available to me or my skills have not grown but I can yet afford to get much much more stuff.

On the other hand the money I have allows me to pay for slaves:

A) I can buy energy slaves: I can afford to use more energy than my own physiological human power can provide (power of my own body estimated at some 11 kWh/week) because I can buy energy (fossil or renewable energy) under the form of heat, electricity, mechanic energy, or incorporated in goods (the part of energy which was necessary to produce these goods). An American exploits in average 110 energy slaves, a European 60, a Chinese 8, a Bangladeshi 1 (himself).

B) I can also buy the workforce of working slaves: Because I have money, I can, on top of the energy I can buy, also acquire the workforce of others, and use their time and skills for my own satisfaction. The GDP of Switzerland is some 200 times bigger than the GDP of Mali. It means a Swiss can buy 200 more workforce (slave power) than a poor farmer of Mali. An Australian 142 slaves. A Chinese 18. A Malian only one (himself).

It is evidently a short and simplified explanation. These numbers are probably not rigorously exact but they reveal nevertheless a reality which is highly active in our world and is probably the true source of climate change: our ability to play artificially with resources (natural and human) and to change the relations of power between us and the environment (both natural and social). They show also how my wealth increases my needs because it develops my power to use resources which would not be available to me without it. The poor Malian fellow is not less clever than me. How then may one explain that we have, he and me, very contrasting respective potentials to use the workforce of others? This challenging question demonstrates how the financial power of money needs to be mastered in an equitable way if we want to find true solutions to climate change.

This new awareness helps us to focus our attention on the real issues of equity and justice, on the many treacherous ways we manage our financial power and on the way our democratic system truly works and on how we need to implement new forms of social life and local economy. Voluntary simplicity (our standard reduced by a factor 4-6) is the solution. It is important to emphasise here that simplicity is not a reduction of our life style; it is a qualitative transformation (radical improvement) that relies on the priority of human relationships over material accumulation. This is indeed what most of us aspire to. The new way of life is indeed not a loss but a gain, even if it relies on less.

4 – The urgency: our local empowerment as main actors

A change of way of life and a choice for human priorities to lead this change are the conditions for a true answer to climate change. This cannot be imposed from the top. No totalitarian system can do that because it has other priorities than the common good, and a democratic system is blocked by its own dependence on large public approval which is a very strong obstacle to change. Yet this blockage becomes also our own strength when many of us decide to regain our empowerment. Transformation can only happen bottom up. No government, no corporation, no church, no wise leader will do it for us. We are the main actors.

This means that we, as citizens-workers-consumers, have to initiate and implement change on the local level, where transparency exists and makes mechanisms visible and understandable for all. Locally we know then who produces what and how and at which price. We see the local impact of what we do. We can ask the producer to adapt to our needs the service he provides; he can also repair the goods he has provided for us.

We may create local citizen councils which may debate which kind of society we wish to organise locally. Consensus becomes the necessary rule which teaches us to let go of accessory wishes in order to agree about the main issues. All aspects of our present and future which are not included in local consensus will be handled by external actors for their own benefit.

Only a clear stand of citizens-workers-consumers can provide the change. Social sciences say that only a 3% of the population needs to take a strong stand in order to redirect the political context. Governments can only respond when they are under the pressure of their electorate. When citizens act (the 3%), governments will follow and have to implement the necessary structural transformations which are beyond our grasp.

5 – A local sustainable and resilient economy

The first condition for reducing our standard of living is to rely on local production, supporting each other, and making everything more transparent. When one sees what one does, one manages it better and keeps control on its purpose, impact and social meaning.

Financially we have the basic means to withdraw our funds invested in harmful activities and invest them in local productive initiatives.

Despite the fact that the processes of climate change and of what provokes it are very complex, the solution is very simple. Simplicity is the key. When we have two apples, it is easy to eat only one and give the other away; much easier than to get a second one when we have only one, as our market system suggests it constantly. It is also easier to create simple and efficient local structures than to master the complexity of globalisation. Less is easier than more.

The last obstacle to start a move towards change is the lack of will to implement it. We are indeed addicted to our present way of life: consumption, comfort, mobility... The past events of the bush fires and of Covid-19 have shown us yet how urgently change must and can be implemented. This is simply a question of survival. Covid-19 was a direct and immediate threat and everybody has more or less understood this reality and has complied with the instructions of social isolation. Rich of this new experience we can now do the same for climate change, which is a threat destined to be much more extreme and which is meant to kill much more people on the long term if we don't react now and here.

Time is for action: not just with the involvement of new technologies but with a new mind that sees the world differently: as it is truly in front of our eyes and not as a play for speculation. A beautiful world indeed, much more fascinating than the world we have artificially tried to create.

B) Seven twists to be inverted

In the implementation of change at local level we need to concentrate on reversing seven twists that our modern society has generated and which work against the force of life.

1) Money has replaced relationships and kinship

In our individualistic perception of life we do not feel we need each other although we all depend on one another for our daily survival. Money gives the illusion we can afford everything by ourselves. Traditional reciprocity, on the contrary, used to call for more exchanges and more relationships between people. Money exchange puts an end to relationships (I do not need you anymore); reciprocity calls for more intensity (I always owe you some work or care).

2) Technology has replaced meaning

Technology is accepted as the solution for all problems. The problems generated by technology call for more technology. We escape the question of meaning because we solve problems on the level of mere practicalities. What about the purpose, the adequate means, the right impact, the social collective gain? Meaning helps us to decide what matters most.

3) Domination (power) has replaced adaptation and care for one another

We try all the time to adapt our environment to our so-called needs. But we need to learn how to adapt to the laws of nature and of life, because they are ruling the universe and are much more powerful than us.

4) Search for profit and growth has replaced the equitable satisfaction of our basic needs

The economy is no more concerned by the satisfaction of real basic needs (material and immaterial) and by the practice of equity, but it speculates in order to increase a sterile individual wealth which is accumulated at the expense of the common good and of human values.

5) Virtuality has replaced reality

We are less and less in direct contact with matter, distance, weight, effort... Our computers and social media generate a fiction that cannot be checked. Truth has vanished, replaced by diversity of opinions. Yet it is evident that Trump's opinion has not the same depth as the opinion of the scientist who has worked all his life studying climate change. Reality and Truth exist: the earth is not flat, the earth run around the sun, climate change impacts on our environment, etc. We need to take a firm stand.

6) Individualism has replaced the Commons

We are obsessed by ownership. Yet most goods belong to the Commons: natural equilibrium, biodiversity, air, water, life, resources, knowledge, wisdom, justice, peace... What matters indeed is how we contribute to this common wealth which is the true source of well-being for all when everybody can access it. Work and relationships matter more than wealth because they are an expression of our creativity and generosity. They are what truly provides subsistence and nourishes life.

7) Passivity as spectators has replaced empowerment

We spend so much time in front of a screen (computer, iPad, phone), observing passively what other people do, think, say, create. Activism by one click of the mouse has spread: one click to save the koalas, one click against the war in Syria... But too much talk on Zoom generates only digital bits and do not change the world. Smooth talk has replaced truth; it has softened the expression of most acute practical, social, ethical or spiritual challenges we are confronted to, in high urgency, and transformed these challenges into nice topics which can be eternally described and debated with a few pictures and graphs on Powerpoint. This soft and convenient twist of truth into something pleasant and so far from reality is probably one of the worse dangers we face now. It disfigures our future in order to protect our immediate privileges and disguise our lack of courage and imagination. It is a lie!

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