

Foreword

This book is on climate, but not on climate dynamics or physics, but instead about climate policy and democracy. The author, the Norwegian policy analyst Jon Naustdalslid, argues that the best response to man-made climate change is through democratic will building, which allows for critical debate and discussion about options and science. He disagrees with the claim that governance should be taken over by experts with knowledge of the “climate catastrophe”, as he believes democracy’s openness to critical debate is its key advantage over authoritarian systems.

Despite originally being written in his native Nynorsk language, Jon Naustdalslid’s book should not be dismissed as parochial due to Norway’s small size and remote location. In fact, this characteristic of the book is actually a strength. Naustdalslid is not simply another voice from the dominant anglo-saxon world, but rather an independent thinker who has travelled extensively and experienced a variety of cultures and policymaking systems. He presents the issue from both a global perspective and a uniquely Norwegian perspective, making his book a valuable contribution to the discourse.

Naustdalslid acknowledges the severity of the climate problem. But, although the climate problem is a significant and threatening issue, it is not the only challenge we encounter, nor is it more important than all other problems. This perspective is not yet mainstream but is gaining attention in works like Mike Hulme’s “Climate Change Isn’t Everything” and my own German book “Der Mensch-Klima Komplex,” as people begin to recognize the importance of addressing climate change in a broader political context beyond a purportedly scientific dictate.

Climate change is intertwined with all other problems, it is a “wicked problem”, and cannot be dealt with as a solitary issue that overshadows all others. There is no “silver-bullet” solution to dealing with climate change. The focus of present climate policy is mostly narrowed down to reducing emissions, and policymakers engage in a competition to demand the most stringent emission reductions. However, this approach may not be sustainable in the long run: The interests of the well-off middle class in developed countries are often prioritized over the underprivileged and poor parts of the world.

Climate change is no longer a neutral issue but has become politicized, and it is unlikely that this trend will reverse. This politicization has given rise to various challenges, including changing risks, conflicting perceptions and the construction of “us” versus “them”. The configuration of climate change as a political issue is better suited for democracy than authoritarian systems since democracy is designed to handle multiple challenges, options and interests simultaneously.

The frequent belief that the climate issue takes precedence over all other matters is often associated with the claim that capitalism and economic growth are the primary threats to humanity’s future. This has led to calls for reduced consumption and economic output, also known as “degrowth.” However, even moderate measures to reduce fossil energy are met with resistance, particularly among economically disadvantaged groups, as demonstrated by Naustdalslid’s Norwegian examples. This resistance is interpreted by some as evidence that the general population is insufficiently informed or too stupid to adopt the necessary climate protection measures, which leads to the call for coercion. Coercion may take the form of forcing people to become informed or accept climate protection measures. Such an approach, known as eco-dictatorship, is similar to Lenin’s lecturing style.

The proposed solution of “degrowth” entails a sustained recession. This approach would also limit the technological possibilities of mitigating and adapting to climate change. It is a viable option only for a well-fed post-material class in the wealthy regions of the world who want to show the rest of the world the supposedly right way. Instead, addressing climate change must be both environmentally effective and economically viable, resulting in growth and job creation. The green deal should not reduce energy but provide more energy for a carbon-free economy.

Naustdalslid emphasizes two points, namely that economic growth is needed to support a carbon-free economy, and second, that adaptation to warmer conditions and unpredictable climate change is just as important as limiting emissions. Climate adaptation was a taboo topic for a long time, and it only entered the public agenda in Norway in 2010. Even today, many Norwegian municipalities do not include adaptation in their planning.

Environmental administrators tend to overlook the social dimension. Consistent with the old insight that sovereignty over truth is essential in a war, also in case of the “climate war”, a “great narrative” is proclaimed to be “truth”—namely that the existence of humanity as a whole is threatened by emissions. In this regard, doubt is seen as immoral, as stated by Gro Harlem Brundtland. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of current climate protection policies is at best uncertain, as despite the significant growth of renewables, the majority of energy consumption still comes from burning fossil fuels.

A challenge for climate science is the way politics consistently refers to “the science” as the basis for decision-making, when decision-making is portrayed as a direct implementation of ostensibly scientific necessities, while not taking into account the complex social dimensions of climate change. This approach, often presented as a way to avoid criticism of politics, actually undermines democracy, as it seeks to prevent open social debate. While climate research may provide important insights and frameworks, it cannot provide all the answers to the social challenges of

climate change. This is because these challenges are multifaceted and involve issues of power, which are beyond the scope of natural science. Therefore, while science can help to provide a framework for addressing these challenges, it is ultimately up to society as a whole to engage in open and democratic debate about the best way forward.

Given the current state of our world, with a population of billions, many of whom are striving to escape poverty, there is a pressing need for massive amounts of energy. Despite efforts to increase renewable energy by 8% in 2021 and 6% in 2022, as suggested by the International Energy Agency, this will only meet half of the growing energy demand, with the remainder being met by fossil fuels. Solving the climate problem is a complex societal issue that cannot be tackled with simplistic solutions. The term “climate crisis” can give the impression that the problem is temporary and can be solved with quick fixes, but in reality, the issue will persist in different forms even after appropriate measures are taken. Therefore, it is essential to approach the problem with a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of its complexity.

Naustdalslid’s book concludes with the “dream of paradise” that many climate activists yearn for—a return to the Holocene era, where humans and nature lived in harmony. However, this vision is unrealistic, as demonstrated by the greater environmental impact of pre-industrial Norway and the growing global population. Additionally, the accumulation of knowledge in today’s world cannot be ignored or undone, as Naustdalslid points out—“We ate from the tree of knowledge—and we know how that went the first time. People were thrown out of paradise. This time, too, the paradise of innocence is lost—and we can no longer escape this knowledge, the Anthropocene”. Naustdalslid draws a parallel between this harsh analysis and a scene in Holberg’s plays, where a patient dies from a medicine, and the bereaved widow is told that “Your husband is dead, but the fever is conquered”.

A truly insightful and skillfully written book.

Hamburg, Germany

Hans von Storch