



The Stockholm Series of Public Lectures on Climate Change and Democracy



Defending democracy, safeguarding our planet - A dual imperative and how to win it

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The Stockholm Series of Public Lectures on Climate Change and Democracy (“Stockholm Series”) is a cooperation between renowned Stockholm-based institutions with a particular focus on climate change and democracy from different perspectives, including the Stockholm Environment Institute; the Stockholm Resilience Centre; Future Earth; the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung’s Nordics Office; LSU – The National Council of Swedish Children and Youth Organisations; and We Don’t Have Time. It aims to inform, inspire, and engage experts and the general public alike by providing high-profile public lectures on the interlinkages between climate change and democracy, followed by debate.

Luisa Neubauer’s lecture **“Defending democracy, safeguarding our planet - A dual imperative and how to win it”** took place on Thursday, 5 December 2024, at International IDEA’s Headquarters at Strömsborg in Stockholm, Sweden.

Today, defending our climate means defending democracy. It is no coincidence that the enemies of democracy are denying climate change and attacking climate action. More climate catastrophes mean more chaos, which benefits the fascists that are building—and thriving on—a world of fear, exclusion, and division.

Democracies need cohesion, social peace, and spaces where there is no need to constantly fight crises. An escalating climate crisis offers no such space; instead, it accelerates disruption. Ecologists must not only oppose this reality but move forward, creating a world worth fighting for and dreaming about. The fight for climate justice is inherently a fight for a just, unified, and hopeful society.

The lecture was followed by a conversation with **Dr Kevin Casas-Zamora**, Secretary-General, International IDEA, as well as by questions and comments from the audience, and a reception.

**Stockholm,
5 December 2024**

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak here today, it is a real honor.

I have been working as a climate justice activist for the last six years now, and I would say it has been a bit of a journey. I was part of the green wave of 2019, I met with presidents and chancellors, together with many others I fought for climate laws that were considered impossible a decade ago. With many others I was part of a generation that built climate movements larger than anything seen before. I witnessed what hand-made change can look like.

And I, like so many of us, have witnessed the downfall of an ambitious climate discourse, I have witnessed how a pro-planet era erupted, was hit by a pandemic, followed by a time where many of the dominating forces around the world are much less pro-planet, pro-democracy and pro-future and much more against almost everything.

We talk about solving today's crises more and more and more, and yet we listen less and less and less.

So, in recent times, I have gotten a bit weary of public talks on climate, simply because I feel we talk about solving today's crises more and more and more, and yet we listen less and less and less.

Not wanting to upset anyone, yet it almost appears as if the climate discourse has transformed into a stream of muttering, a global self-help group that is desperately trying to pretend that more talking about climate will magically translate to more action on climate. It appears for parts of the climate discourse these days to serve to the single reason of keeping the illusion alive that we know how to navigate towards the future. And even more worryingly, the unbroken routine of undisrupted talking about all the things going wrong, and all the solutions we could apply, might trick even the most educated minds into believing, that we are not in the midst of something I would call a Crisis of Reason.

So instead of providing answers, it might be time to take a step back and raise some questions again. It might be time to disrupt the convenience of climate conversations not bringing the results we need to see. It might be time to break out of our habits of drowning our existential problems in an ocean of panel discussions.

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This talk is titled *Defending democracy, safeguarding our planet – a dual imperative and how to win it*. And just to warn you, it is not as easy. If I or we all knew how to “just” win it, I very much hope we still wouldn't be sitting here. To win again, which we desperately need to do, I suggest acknowledging what we do not know yet, or at least cannot be certain about.

So for today's lecture I briefly considered ending this talk now and invite all of us to go out in silence, hug some trees and spend the hour reconnecting with mother earth. (Then I remembered it's December in Stockholm.)

So instead, what I have brought to you today, is something I find missing a lot of these days. I brought answers, but much more, I brought questions and “open” thoughts, hoping to create a space for reflection. I call it *Ten Theses on the Age of Collapse*. Consider them to be food for thought, consider them worth reflecting on but more than that—feel invited to challenge or question them.

1. It is not 2019 anymore: We are in a new era that demands new answers.

For anyone involved in the climate space, you might recall there was a time when everything seemed possible. This was in 2018, 2019 and 2020. Climate was winning elections, climate was winning minds and hearts, climate science was for once a hot topic in every sense so on and so forth. Obviously, this wasn't the case everywhere, but for many, this brief period was the most of a climate period they had ever seen. Ever since then, the big question I am being asked is this: How do we get back to 2019. And the very brief answer is: We will not. Just like we cannot travel time, 2019 will not just repeat itself. That climate wave was an exemption, it was, what scientists call Social Tipping Point. They are rare, they are never the same, and they are only possible because of lengthy periods of preparation. Whatever happens in these windows of opportunity is possible because people work hard, in times, where none of those windows were in sight.

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I understand the longing for those days like the year 2019, when for once it seemed the presence of the climate in our politics and discussions was matching the presence of the climate crisis in all of our lives. Yet times have changed. We live in a different world, in many ways, and that is the world we have to work with. Democracies and livelihoods are under attack virtually everywhere.

2. We are in a planetary crisis, a crisis of democracies—And a crisis of hope

My time as a public climate activist can be divided into two phases. One in which my main job as an activist was to make people angry about climate inaction. And there is a second phase, in which I find myself to be much less of an activist and much more of a public therapist not wanting any more anger in such an angry world, but rather the opposite, wanting to make people consider hope.

And in this second phase (that is the phase we are in right now) I understand why the despair is real: The despair is real, and it is realistic, because for decades we have told each other that “people will act” once the climate disasters strike. Today, not a day passes without yet again another unprecedented climate catastrophe, in virtually every single corner of planet earth. 2024 is set out to be yet another record-breaking hot year.

The despair is real and realistic because for decades we have told each other that it is just too cheap to wreck the planet and sustainability is too costly. Today we find the damages attached to fossil fuels outnumber any of the revenue, we find solar energy to be the cheapest source of energy by far, and yet fossil fuels are being expanded, paid for by taxpayers, powered by democratic and autocratic governments alike.

The despair is real, because as six of our nine planetary boundaries are hit, as scientists are losing words to explain what is happening to our livelihoods—our democratic ability to act against these dangers are under attack. These attack no longer come simply from anti-democratic forces, they come from fake news, from artificial intelligence set out to destruct and destroy, they come from some of the best funded election campaigns we have ever seen. The [International IDEA Global State of Democracy](#) has again identified a decline in the quality of global democracies. As the only planet we have at hand is deteriorating, so are many of our democracies

The despair is real, because in a way the human project was always led by the assumption that reason will—eventually—win. And now we are finding ourselves in a time, where each one of us carries the condensed knowledge of millennia inside our pockets, we live in times in which more educated adults live on this planet than ever before, and yet it is reason, it is the truth, it is the science that is under constant attack. To make things worse, we have apparently decided that your peer-reviewed fact is just as relevant as my gut feeling on whatever you talk about.

That should be taken seriously, people who stop hoping, stop caring, and if those who technically care are leaving the scene, what will be left are the ones willing to destruct and destroy whatever they find. The majority of [global youth today feel betrayed by governments](#) over their climate inaction, a majority feels anxious, frightened and helpless. Global dissatisfaction of democracies is at a record high.

So the season of cynicism has arrived, and one of our greatest enemies might no longer be disinformation or denial or fascism, but the struggle for hope. This is not a trend but an existential moment. They used to say Knowledge is Power. Today we might find Knowledge is Powerlessness.

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One might however differentiate between convenient and inconvenient hope. Convenient hope is mistaken as something you can order just like you order pizza, convenient hope is something you expect to receive at the doorstep, to then take it back to your couch, to sit there just like you did before, except you feel a little better. The outside world has not changed a bit, and just like a pizza, this kind of hope never lasts long. Convenient hope is the promise that all will be fine.

Inconvenient hope in contrast is nothing you can just order. It means not expecting the world to just be fine, it means expecting yourself to do something about this world. As

[the philosopher Rebecca Solnit says](#): This kind of hope is a promise you give to the world, that you will keep trying. That you will look closely for the unlikely windows of opportunities. Inconvenient hope only exists in the context of your own actions. To accelerate action on the protection of climate and democracies, we do not just need sustainable and feasible solutions. We need people to feel that they are possible, that it is worth fighting for them. People who have given up on the possibility of positive change will not see, acknowledge or engage in it—even if it would really turn up on their doorsteps.

Hence, democratic governments, companies, institutions, communities, schools, movements, organizations and initiatives are asked to consider their role in The Crisis of Hope. Are they contributing to it, or are they part of the next wave, not willing to give up to cynicism. I am not talking about cheap promises that all will be fine. But about real acknowledgements of the depth of the crisis and all it takes to create light in dark times.

3. Apocalypse is still blinding.

This fall, I traveled through the United States to find out how climate movements navigate under the pressure of extreme weather events on the one side, and the pressure from the extreme right on the other side. My time in the United States coincided with the peak of the presidential campaign. The upcoming presidential term will be the last one until we reach 2030. This year is—under overwhelming acknowledgement of the scientific community—considered a crucial moment in time for humankind. By 2030, that's the plan, we as humanity shall have cut emissions by half compared to 2010. While being in the United States, two historic Hurricanes hit the country, causing billions of dollars in damages, destroying family homes and lives in several states. Scientists across the board acknowledged that those hurricanes and in particular the heavy rains attached were significantly intensified by the climate crisis. And yet, climate remained to be not discussed in a meaningful extent throughout the election, which ended with the majority vote for an outspoken climate denier.

In the 1980s, [the philosopher Günther Anders attested](#) humanity to suffer from a phenom that he would name “apocalypse blindness”. According to Anders, the peoples' ability to produce futures has grown disproportional compared to the peoples' ability to imagine futures. We can manufacture apocalypse, but we struggle to envision them. And this is why we don't stop “apocalypting”: if we know that we have produced a crisis that could force the extinction of humankind, but we cannot comprehend what we are doing, meaning we have also not established a moral that holds the capacity for today's despair—how could we possibly change our behavior to make sense again?

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Apocalypse blindness appears, where people hope that autocratic regime changes will produce progressive movements powerful enough to establish justice and democratic order again. Looking closely however, this is rarely what happens. Looking the

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apocalypse in the eye means understanding, that a key asset of autocracies is to disable protest, movements and initiatives. It is no surprise that under Donald Trump, non-governmental organizations fear losing their status as an organization, it is no surprise that at the climate conference in Baku many of us spent days of valuable time to protect ourselves against cyber espionage instead of organizing for climate politics, it is no surprise that anti-democratic forces spend

enormous amounts of time and money to run campaigns against activists, women and minorities in order to delegitimize and criminalize them. Anders proposes to engage in stretching exercises to extend our moral to the size of the catastrophes we lit up, he also proposes to introduce a practice of imagination and opening our eyes' to apocalypse.

Overcoming apocalypse blindness does not mean drowning in despair, it means looking the dangers in the eye in order to prepare and to advance. It means breaking up with the fairytale of a world that is steadily moving towards the right direction.

4. Protecting climate and democracy increasingly means: Protecting the truth.

It struck me in the United States how easy it was to end up in a social media rabbit hole, where people convinced each other that Hurricane Milton was in fact planted by the Democratic Party. It was then very easy of course to proclaim that Hurricane Relief Funding designed to help those affected was illegally sent to the United States. I read of people who would refuse to evacuate because evacuating warnings under democratic authority would be considered crooked all along. At some point I found myself being surprised and humbled by the sheer existence of anyone left willing to “believe” in any kind of climate science, given the sheer amount of denial in all shapes and forms.

This denial, interestingly enough, is as mentioned above, rarely about twisting messages. It is first and foremost about twisting messengers. It is about delegitimizing anyone who would speak up for the climate, claiming for them to be up to something.

And that is something that we in Europe know very well. Climate denial is not as extreme as in most places here, but it exists—and it is on the rise.

Why? [Bruno Latour considered](#) climate science to be of “prescriptive potency”, meaning the facts alone would be understood as something of a to-do-list. Hence, those wanting to fight back any kind of climate action, or, God forbid, climate justice, will have an increasing interest in demonizing the science. Combine this with the emergence of social media tunnels, Russian interference into anything one could think of, cuts of public broadcast and whatever TikTok algorithms are up to.

Protecting the planet and people and defending democracy might be more about protecting the truth against the lies—than ever before.

The denial of realities doesn't start with multibillionaires buying up social media platforms. It starts with our everyday language. It starts with voices claiming one

shouldn't talk about climate, but maybe focus on "green energy" to not trigger anyone. Next they propose to not say "green energy" but to better speak of "clean energy" and so on and so forth. For one moment that seems strategic, yet this means signing up to cover up parts of our reality. Of course, we need any possible entry point into climate debate, for some that is green jobs, for others it's clean air or healthy diets. But to uninvite "the climate" from a debate on climate is a slippery slope. It means those who tend to have no interest whatsoever in a real climate debate get to make the rules about that very debate.

It starts with us, every day, when stopping to discuss controversial issues at dinner tables, for the sake of a comfortable night. It starts with governments underfunding public schools and institutions of education, which would be places where people get training in fact-checking and the difference of facts and feelings. It starts with the decline of local newspapers and small radio stations, opening up doors to large media cooperations, monopolizing on their viewpoint.

It starts with the harassment of activists like me and so many others who ought to be silenced for speaking up. It starts with fake news and hate posts forcing me and many others to build a security infrastructure around our work, instead of doing our work.

Protecting climate and democracies increasingly means protecting the truth, protecting science, protecting spaces of public discourse, it means protecting reason so that at some point, that very reason can shine again.

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5. The climate crisis and the crisis of democracy are a dual imperative.

In the summer of 2020, I met with Angela Merkel to discuss her climate politics. You might imagine, we had some disagreements. One of the points that stuck with me was her remarks on climate and democracy. She would explain to Greta, me and our activist colleagues that "too much" climate action would "overwhelm" the people and spark right-wing radicals to rise. In very short, climate action is nice, but might bring fascism as a side effect. Before I explain why I heavily disagree, I'd like to highlight that I do not blame Angela Merkel for this understanding, this is to date a popular misunderstanding of the nexus between climate and democracy.

Why is it that climate action is associated with triggering right-wing radicals? What I suspect lies behind this understanding is a deep mistrust between the government and its people. It appears governments are scared of their own people, in the sense that they seem to not be able to handle change without freaking out one way or the other. And in a way, this makes a lot of sense, change is exhausting and demanding people to adapt to new rules or realities can overwhelm them. I understand why governments are hesitant to ask for too much.

What I—frankly—do not understand is the assumption, that less climate action will force less change on people. Isn't the very climate reality telling us day in and day out that less climate action will lead to more climate change, which will not ask people to adapt in an orderly, democratic way but in a chaotic and catastrophic one? Protecting democracies without protecting the material foundation of those democracies is fairytale work that is doomed to eat itself up.

Really caring about democracies must mean protecting what they consist of: That is trust between people and government to be real and honest about the world we are navigating in. That means preventing catastrophes, that can be prevented. And maybe most importantly, that means allowing us some time to rest. Some time to breath. To care for each other, to listen closely, to take time to grow together and grow up.

None of that is given, in times of unprecedented climate disasters. When catastrophes are piling up, when heatwaves, broken supply chains, climate-fueled conflicts and climate migration are defining the agenda, when energy crises mix with increasingly broken infrastructures that are not designed to live up to the new climate regime we have created, when climate damages are costing damages and costs that no political budget plan can simply ignore —then democracies do not have time to breath. They do not have time to grow. They do not have time.

Protecting democracies without protecting the material foundation of those democracies is fairytale work that is doomed to eat itself up.

Protecting the planet and protecting our democracies are part of the same imperative. There will not be stable democracies in a climate chaos we have never seen before.

6. Fossil fuels have no interest in stable democracies

One key supporter of the Trump presidency were fossil fuel companies. Together, they [donated as much as 14.1 million dollars to the Trump campaign](#), and this does not even account for the variety of further support mechanisms. In a way it makes sense for fossil fuel industries and fascists to bond, but it is crucial to look closely and understand why. After an embarrassing phase of 20 years of climate negotiations, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) finally agreed to the shared goal of transitioning away from fossil fuels. In a world of unprecedented climate disasters everywhere and millions of people at risk of having to relocate permanently, this is obviously a very poor agreement. In a world that for the past 250 years has turned into a pyrotechnical party, a world that runs on burning stuff, first and foremost fossil fuels, a world that has vast majorities of its industries, many of its jobs, and investments closely tied to fossil fuel productivity—this agreement is close to a revolution. We know of course that agreements agreed to at COP tend to be forgotten the day after, yet the world has moved on and on an average day more than 1000 climate litigation cases are discussed in some legal space, where lawyers and activists are making sure that promises made at climate conferences are turned into binding national and international legal targets.

In 2021, I was part of a group that did just that in Germany, forcing the country for the first time in its existence to tighten up a climate law based on a defeat at court.

We see both democracies and climate regimes under attack and this is no coincidence. It is the result of things finally moving towards the right direction.

So what does this mean for the average fossil fuel company? It is public knowledge that 95 % of oil and gas companies globally plan to expand their business. This is—and there is now denying—a direct contradiction of international climate targets. We do also know, that on average, the most stable and safe democracies are the places decarbonizing the fastest, Costa Rica and Switzerland are examples of that. It is also no secret, that fossil fuel

autocracies such as Azerbaijan have no interest in the implementation of international climate laws, as it would undermine their state's business model.

If you were an average ton of coal, a very normal oil pipeline or gas field—you would have little interest in international justice and democratic order, simply because that very order has just decided to break up with you in the long run. It is no surprise that fossil fuel fascists and autocrats do not intend to democratize. It should concern the global public, however, that also among fossil fuel industries, first and foremost in those industries openly boycotting any transition away from fossil fuels, new bonds between those industries and authoritarian politicians are arising everywhere.

If we are trying to figure out how and why democracies are under pressure, one might as well zoom in, into coal, oil and gas.

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7. We do not have time for Greenwashing and Democracy-washing

Greenwashing is a concept that has been quite vocal everywhere. We see greenwashing being discussed in many places, companies covering up their actions that are associated with fossil fuel industries and fossil fuel emissions to appear more shiny and more green, more future-ready or whatever. I would assume greenwashing today to be—quite frankly—one of the most destructive activities you can do because you don't only imply that things are better than they actually are, but you also imply that more action is not necessary because everyone is moving towards the right direction. You're creating another fairytale of a different state of the world that we are in. You're disengaging others who would maybe go out and actually fight for something.

Greenwashing means disengaging those who would be doing something, for the sake of your own dirty business. Maybe the automobile industry of Germany is one of the greatest examples of how criminal networks build up in one of the most powerful industries that we have, just for the sake of not having to stick to international values, to international climate agreements, to European emission standards.

The interesting thing about greenwashing is that it's closely connected to what you can call “democracy-washing”. What we see increasingly in the last years is that under the apparent protection of democracies, climate movements

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and climate players are being oppressed. In countless democracies, like the German one, but also in British democracy and in places quite liberal like Switzerland, we see laws oppressing public mobilization and public protest in the name of protecting the rule of law. We see climate activists being criminalized in the name of our Constitution in places like Germany. We see funding being cut to organizations that are involved with peaceful civil disobedience, while political scientists show us that a strong democracy must also have space for peaceful and democratic civil disobedience.

So, what we're seeing is not only the climate being under attack from fossil fuel industries, from autocrats, from fascists, but also from greenwashing industries alike. We are seeing that those who are set out to protect our climate and our livelihoods against a very backlash are also under attack, ironically in the name of our democracies.

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This isn't just something that has to do with laws being put in place to crack down on protests and make it harder and harder for organizations to find funding or legal support.

It also starts again in our very language. Who is a terrorist in the climate crisis? Who is a criminal in the climate crisis? Who is the one imposing danger on society and who is the one we can trust in society? We are quite a few months ahead of a big German election, and it is very interesting to witness right now—and obviously quite scary—that our very fossil fuel industries are the ones that shall be protected from change while virtually everyone around them—society's movements, institutions alike—are expected to adapt to whatever that means for society. So we protect a status quo in order to imply peace and calmness and steadiness in society while expecting everyone around to adapt to more chaos, more destruction, more uncertainty in these days. Again, this has to do with the idea of democracy-washing.

Democracy-washing also means implying that a democracy is always at a stable stage and everyone proposing change risks crippling their democracy. This stands in interesting contrast to the political science behind democracy, which tells us that democracies have always been evolving. Democracies that are put in place to not move are at most risk—not being resilient enough to live up to today's challenges. Here again, however, we see who apparently has a right to change and who doesn't have a right to change in order for fossil fuel industries to maintain their business for as long as we can think. Government budgets are expected to put more and more subsidies on those very industries to help them stay where they are, which means again funding is being taken away from other institutions that would be willing drivers of change. We do not have time for that.

Democracies that are put in place to not move are at most risk—not being resilient enough to live up to today's challenges.

I'm making the point to ensure we talk about these issues because both greenwashing and democracy-washing have long been implied to be this nitty-gritty side-effects, an Instagram problem—like someone putting too nice words on something that isn't so

nice; a bit of an overly green presentation for a dirty business. Yet both of those things are very much connected to the issues I mentioned before: to the attack on truth, honesty, and science, because both imply that we can create detached realities that exist in this well-being space where things aren't changing as they actually are. Coming back from a kind of newly defined love for the apocalypse.

8. The time of singular crisis is over. So the time for singular solutions must end, too.

There was a case recently that I found very interesting—a Swedish situation where an onshore wind park was set to be built in Indigenous reindeer land. For those living in Sweden, you may be more familiar with this context. To me, it's a crucial reminder of the quality of solutions.

As the climate crisis, the crisis of democracy, the crisis of hope and of truth meet in this beautiful world, one should challenge which solutions we are fighting for.

The story of the 20th century—according to Walter Benjamin—was a story of progress, that was eating itself up. Progress was great, yet it created so many problems, that ever more progress was needed to address the ever more arising problems.

Whoever claims to protect the democracy to the expense of a few more climate disasters, whoever claims to protect the climate at the expense of our biodiversity, of human rights, of Indigenous rights—might have to be asked to think again.

Today, there is no singular crisis anymore, for climate in particular. What does it tell us about the solutions needed? It gives us a very clear idea about the solutions we need to look out for. These are not the ones that propose to solve one issue, at the expense of fueling another crisis. Whoever claims to protect the democracy to the expense of a few more climate disasters, whoever claims to protect the climate at the expense of our biodiversity, of human rights, of Indigenous rights—might have to be asked to think again.

The beauty of today's solutions comes with synergetic thinking, finding answers that solve multiple crises at the same time, that think long-term.

That means creating jobs around solar energy, that means strengthening Indigenous rights around the protection of nature, that means investing in youth and education to support democratic spaces and so-and-so forth. The more you think about it, the more beautiful it is: It means we can stop claiming that some of our worries do not matter, we can stop proclaiming certain groups as dispensable, it means we can fight for solutions that are truly sustainable. Sustainable, because we'd fight for them not just because of a crisis ahead, but because they deliver for people.

9. Tech bros won't save us.

When I started organizing as a climate activist, there were many voices in politics that were truly confused. Out of everything they would come across in their career, they did not expect to be challenged by angry teenagers over their political legacy.

As long as we consider change as something that happens to us, and not something that we collectively create—it is just very unlikely that we will rise up to make that very change.

that goes like this: Change or innovation—that is usually a machine, there are men and there is money involved. To think of change as something that isn't part of a stock market, or a tech pitch or a business plan, but that is hand-made, that is born in communities and grew up on the streets—that thinking seems to almost have disappeared in many places.

Yet change can also be a self-fulfilling prophecy, as long as we consider change as something that happens to us, and not something that we collectively create—it is just very unlikely that we will rise up to make that very change. If we stop expecting change to rise from the streets, we won't notice it's coming even when it's standing right in front of us blocking a road.

The history of humanity is an accumulation of change brought from the peripheries, from the most unlikely alliance in the most unlikely moments in time. Maybe this is a good time to reconsider what we believe change to be. And raise some uncomfortable questions about our own role in this.

So how does change-making work? First, the above-mentioned acknowledgement of the diversity and nuance of sources of change. Second, the divestment from the idea that the most powerful thing we can do is producing powerful tech bros, who can sell us solutions that tend to produce more damages than we can count. This is by the way no argument against technical innovation, it is just the claim that technical innovation needs political innovation, social and cultural innovation, innovation of thought and leadership to thrive. We are well advised to watch out for the unlikely change makers, the climate litigation cases and Indigenous movements, the youth, the queers, the women, the oppressed and overheard. And this is where the science comes into play: The Club of Rome together with its partners just recently showed again that inequality and poverty fuel climate destruction. The more unequal and poor a society is, the more unlikely it is that it grows the capacity to implement a sustainable and just transformation that serves people and planet. In places where climate debates are held in exclusive spaces, where people do not have access to policymaking and the rebuilding of our homes and neighborhoods—there tends to be a lack of social creativity and diversity that is required to explore new solutions. On the other hand, when billionaires and big oil go untaxed, societies lack the funds to move ahead.

And I sympathize with that, who could have known.

Yet their confusion also tells us quite a bit about a common misconception about change. In the era of tech bros, and fossil fuel production and heroes that come in suits, some collective understanding of change has emerged

The more unequal and poor a society is, the more unlikely it is that it grows the capacity to implement a sustainable and just transformation that serves people and planet.

10. Utopia is not a state. It is a practice.

I started with Apocalypse and we are ending of course, as you do with Utopia.

There is so much to talk about when it comes to utopia.

I proposed to get very real and honest about the apocalypse and what is blinding us to see unexpected change that is no longer unexpected because we've all seen the reports telling us that this change is coming. On the other end, I think we must ask ourselves very honestly and very precisely, what are we expecting to see at the end of a tunnel? And I worry that Hollywood hasn't done us a good job here, in creating a utopia that I think is a bit of a misleading idea.

To me, utopia doesn't mean that we will end up in this equal, environmentalist, happy democracy fairytale country fair, where all of us are dancing together to the rising sun. But what I find way more hopeful and realistic is to understand utopia, not to be this set in stone stage, but for us to acknowledge or to understand utopia as a routine, as a practice, as a mode.

What does it mean? To give an example in climate: it wouldn't mean that every single day in and day out, climate is on all headlines, every single day, all of us have to stand on the streets to prove that we actually care. But in climate, it would mean that we introduce an ecological routine to our lives, to our governments, to institutions, to our politics, saying, whenever we make a decision on what we do, how we go ahead, how we make plans, climate plays a role. The emissions play a role, ecological justice plays a role, introducing a routine so we can stop freaking out at times and calm down a bit.

Same for democracy. When talking about budget cuts, talking about government, talking about our community management, talking about how we set up school systems, where do we train our democratic muscle? Where do we train to negotiate to have uncomfortable discussions? Where do we train to acknowledge discrepancies between the world we live in and the world we'd like to live in? Where do we train our democratic understanding of how we act and react to the world ahead? It would also mean we can stop being the annoying ones in the room because we know we've introduced a practice that thinks about the protection of democracies, even when there's no one standing up and shouting and screaming. And that for us means, that is the beauty that utopia, or ideally something we are working towards, is something that has the capacity to constantly reflect itself, to come back and to think how we could do it better, which would

take away so much of the pressure that we now have to put on the single solution because we must expect it to deliver in all and every single sense. What possible solution could there be to live up to those standards?

It means we allow ourselves to fail because we have the capacity to still try again because we haven't bet on that single card that must be everything for everyone.

Utopia, or ideally something we are working towards, is something that has the capacity to constantly reflect itself, to come back and to think how we could do it better.

Utopia as a practice would mean we can calm down on that end as well, because we know if it doesn't work out we come back, we reconsider and we bring up something that works out in a better sense. It means we allow ourselves to fail because we have the capacity to still try again because we haven't bet on that single card that must be everything for everyone. But we know that eventually we have that sense of newness, the uniqueness of the times ahead, offers us to also be new in the way that we deal with that. And for me, it is a quite promising approach.

Thank you so much.



Luisa Neubauer is a climate activist and key organizer of the German climate movement. She has mobilized millions for mass protests, leading to Germany's coal exit and the first national climate law. Under her leadership, the movement showcased the power of youth-led activism and pushed for a European Green Deal.

In 2021, Luisa was the lead plaintiff in the landmark 'Neubauer vs. Germany' case. The court ruled that insufficient emissions reduction violates the liberties of young people, marking a pivotal moment for civil rights in climate policy. Her advocacy has brought her into discussions with leaders like President Macron, Angela Merkel, Barack Obama, Ursula von der Leyen, and the Pope.

Currently, Luisa is building climate alliances between union workers and youth. In autumn 2024, she sued the German government again to strengthen social security during the climate transition.

TIME listed her in the TIME100 Next 2022. She received the Sermon Prize for 'lifetime achievement' for raising environmental awareness in the German-speaking world. Luisa has published four best-selling books on justice and climate, one of them is available in English: *[Beginning to End the Climate Crisis. A History of Our Future.](#)* Her [Ted Talks](#) have over 4 million views, and she won the national prize for 'Speech of the Year' for defending local villages against coal mining.



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