

Shows featuring Hermann Scheer

Just weeks before his death, Hermann Scheer was interviewed by journalist Amy Goodman, one of the two hosts of Democracy Now! the national, daily, independent US TV / radio news program. They met in Bonn in September 2010 for what turned out to be one of his final interviews. This is the rush transcript of the broadcast 15 October 2010.

AMY GOODMAN: We're broadcasting today from San Francisco. And we were planning to spend the hour today with the author and philosopher Derrick Jensen, here in California for a big event - just before a big event he was having tomorrow here in California. But just before we went on air, we learned of the death of Hermann Scheer. He is a pioneering German politician and economist who helped make Germany a renewable energy powerhouse. Hermann Scheer died last night in Berlin at the age of sixty-six. To listen/watch the full-length interview of nearly 60 minutes, please follow this link

Scheer had been member of the German Parliament for three decades and was the president of EUROSOLAR, the European Association for Renewable Energy. He was also the general chair of the World Council for Renewable Energy. His books on solar energy include *The Solar Economy: Renewable Energy for a Sustainable Global Future* and *Energy Autonomy: The Economic, Social and Technological Case for Renewable Energy*.

In 1999, Hermann Scheer won the Right Livelihood Award for his, quote, well, "indefatigable" -tireless-"work for the promotion of solar energy worldwide." When he received the award, he described solar energy as "the energy of the people." Jakob von Uexkull, the founder of the Right Livelihood Award, said today, quote, "Hermann Scheer has been the world's most powerful advocate for renewable energy during the last two decades. His personal commitment and his incomparable campaigning spirit will continue to encourage many policy-makers, experts and citizens around the world to fight for a world without fossil fuel or nuclear.

TIME magazine named Hermann Scheer "Hero for the Green Century."

Well, just a few weeks ago, I had a chance to sit down with Hermann Scheer in Bonn, Germany, at the thirtieth anniversary of the Right Livelihood Awards. Oh, I mean, the interview was cancelled several times. First he missed his plane, and then he was being interviewed by one person after another. But finally, we sat down with the member of Parliament from Germany, with Hermann Scheer. It turned out to be one of his last interviews. He began by outlining what he sees as the defining problem of the current energy crisis.

HERMANN SCHEER: The tragedy of our present civilization is that it became dependent on marginal energy sources. The marginal energy sources are fossil sources, fossil resources and nuclear, based on the raw material uranium. The gigantic energy potential is the renewable energy potential always all coming from the sun, including its derivatives, like wind and the photosynthetic-produced - photosynthetically produced materials, organic materials, plants, hydro-base. And the sun offers to our globe, in eight minutes, as much energy as the annual consumption of fossil and atomic energy is. That means to doubt - the doubtings if there would be enough renewable energy for the replacement of nuclear and fossil energies, this argument is ridiculous. There is by far enough.

And therefore we are in a situation running into a conventional energy trap in two directions at the same time. First, we are in a process of the coming depletion of conventional energies, faster than many people imagine - or want to believe. And the second limit is an ecological limit, because the negative effects of conventional energies, of nuclear as well as fossil energies in different ways, overstress the ecosphere. That means the life conditions. And it is an open question, and it is not necessary to give an answer to that. It is an open question which limit of the conventional energy systems is closer to our time. Even if there would be much more potential, much more conventional energy reserves, it would not help, because we would arrive at the ecological limit, and we are practically at the bottom crossing this ecological limit. Therefore, we can only recognize, and we must recognize, we have to replace the conventional energies consumption not only in the future at a specific time, we have to recognize it in the run of the next twenty to twenty-five years. This is the main challenge of civilization, to do that.

AMY GOODMAN: How do you do it?

HERMANN SCHEER: The big mistake in the energy debate is that most people think, because they believe that there is a monopoly and the expertise for all energy activities in the hand of the existing energy players. Many people, including governments, including many scientists, who get their orders for studies from them, they believe and think that the present energy suppliers, the present energy trusts, the companies, they should organize the transformation. And this is a big mistake - a big mistake - because this part of the society is the only one who has an interest to postpone it. The only one. All others, all the others, have an interest to speed it up. But as long government think that it should be left to the energy companies, we will lose the race against time.

AMY GOODMAN: The Financial Times says German photovoltaic cell installations last year amounted to more than one-half of those in the world.

HERMANN SCHEER: Right.

AMY GOODMAN: How did you make that happen?

HERMANN SCHEER: With the Renewable Energy Act. The Renewable Energy Act was one of my initiatives, together with only a few colleagues in the Parliament. And it was not a draft of the government, because the government was against. We mobilized the measure - it was the Parliament - against the will of the government, to introduce this law and to adopt it. It is a law which gives investment autonomy for all who want to invest for renewables. Without any obligation for them to ask the power companies if this is, let's say, compatible with their energy investments, they could do it. The full name of this law is Law for the Priority of Renewable Energies.

And it constituted a special renewable energy market with priority and with three elements. The first element is a guaranteed access to the grid for all - for each kilowatt hour produced by renewables, apart from the question who is the producers. The second element is a guaranteed fee for that, because without that, there could not - there would be no investment security. That means we made an obligation to give them a fee, and we enumerated this fee, very precise, and - in order to avoid discrimination. The third element is no cap. No cap for that. And this created the investment autonomy, and more and more individual persons, owners of houses, companies, individual companies, cooperatives, local municipalities, local utilities, they became the investors. And in the run of ten years, there was the total installation by such investments of 45,000 megawatt renewables - all renewables, PV, wind power, photovoltaics, wind power, biogas, small hydro, independent power players, many of them, and with a total investment of more than a hundred billion euro. And to make a comparison, in these ten years the big power companies invested less than ten.

AMY GOODMAN: German economist and member of the German Parliament for the last thirty years, Hermann Scheer. We spoke to him just a few weeks ago in Bonn, Germany. Hermann Scheer died unexpectedly last night in Berlin at the age of sixty-six. And so, we are bringing you this interview with him for the hour, one of his last.

This is Democracy Now!, democracynow.org, the War and Peace Report. We'll be back with Hermann Scheer in a minute.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: We're on the road in San Francisco. I'm Amy Goodman. And we just got word that Hermann Scheer has died. He was a member of the German Parliament for the last thirty years, known as a great ecological force. We weren't planning to bring you this interview today. We had told you we would be interviewing the philosopher, the environmentalist Derrick Jensen, because Derrick is having a major event tomorrow called "Earth at Risk" at Seven Hills Conference Center at San Francisco State University. But when we got word just before this broadcast of the unexpected death of the German parliamentarian Hermann Scheer - he died last night in Berlin at the age of sixty-six - we knew we had to bring you the Scheer truth. We had to introduce you to, if you haven't already know him, Hermann Scheer. TIME magazine called him the "Hero] of the Green Century." When we interviewed him in Bonn, first he cancelled, then he missed his plane, then we sat down with him.

AMY GOODMAN: Why was the government so opposed? Why did you have to take on the corporations and the government?

HERMANN SCHEER: The government behaved like all the governments behave. They feel themselves and they act as partners and assistants of the conventional power structure. This has many reasons. Some believe - some politicians believe that there would be no alternative. They believe the arguments. Others are very closely linked, personally linked, with the power companies and in different ways of corruption. The most comfortable way to corrupt a politician is the method, illegal method, to pay them later, after office - after office, after leaving government, then hiring him for the board. And this is very popular here, a very usable way of, let's say, legalized corruption. And the thinking of all governments that they are dependent from the work of the energy supplier, because no economy can work without energy. And the monopoly of the conventional power, even in the thinking that there would be no alternative, this monopoly gave them so much influence, so much influence, that many governments are puppets, governors are puppets in the hand of these power companies.

AMY GOODMAN: Would you put the United States into that category?

HERMANN SCHEER: In the same category. Look what happens when a governor tried to touch this sphere, how many conflicts he had. I know the American history very well. The most successful one to fight with these energy trust interests was Theodore Roosevelt. He destroyed Exxon and separated it in different parts.

AMY GOODMAN: He broke up the Standard Oil cartel, the predecessor to Exxon.

HERMANN SCHEER: Yes, Standard Oil. He broke up the Standard Oil Company. He fought against, because this endangers the society. This endangers the public interest, yeah? They become too strong, stronger than government, and this is not tolerable. And he was totally right.

And all who followed this example - the next who tried to do it was Clinton, but he gave up very early - very early - because he wanted - his first step was to introduce a kind of eco-tax the first year of his presidency. And Big Oil and others and Big Coal, they tried to influence the Congress members of the Democratic Party in their electorate - "If you vote for that, then we make a campaign against you in your next election campaign," and so forth. In different ways, they tried to influence them, and therefore Clinton didn't get a majority for that. And the same happens now. I believe President Obama, that he wants to organize a shift, but the resistance against this is very brutal. Very brutal.

AMY GOODMAN: Small, perhaps, symbolic thing in the last weeks - well, Jimmy Carter in 1979 put photovoltaics-

HERMANN SCHEER: Jimmy Carter, the same. Jimmy Carter, yeah. Jimmy Carter was the same story. Jimmy Carter tried to do it, but then he got so much opposition against this in the - by the energy cartels and their influence into the political structure in the Senate, in the House of Representatives, that he could not push it through, really.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, he did put solar panels on the White House at the end of the 1970s.

HERMANN SCHEER: Yes.

AMY GOODMAN: Reagan took them down.

HERMANN SCHEER: Not at the end, it was. He installed solar - solar -

AMY GOODMAN: Panels.

HERMANN SCHEER: Not - yeah, solar panel. He installed the solar panel. It's the Solstice Day in 1977, in his first year as president.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, students now, together with Bill McKibben, the environmentalist, tried to bring those solar panels back to the White House.

HERMANN SCHEER: Yeah, I know.

AMY GOODMAN: Your reaction to that?

HERMANN SCHEER: I believe that he wants to have this energy change. I believe that. I trust him. I trust him, but I think the only method to succeed to - to succeed over all the opponents, over all the conventional, selfish interests, the big interests, is to fight with them in the public, to win the public for that. You can - against this power structure, the best alliant is the - are the people.

AMY GOODMAN: Herman Scheer, you said in your Right Livelihood Award acceptance speech, "Solar energy is the energy of the people. To use this energy does not require big investments of only a few corporations." What does it require? And who benefits? In the United States, you raise solar power, and many people just say, "I mean, that can take care of such a small amount of our energy needs. Let's get real."

HERMANN SCHEER: Yeah, this is only like a fantasy, because one panel is small. If you need more energy, you make more panels. Where is the problem? Where is the problem? It is very easy to show how it can work, and it could work, and with a mix of available energies. And the benefit for the national product, for the shift to renewable energy, is tremendous. And besides the unique political advantage to come to energy independence, it is - not to mention, this would be my argument, and I speak about it in this way when I give speeches in the United States, including speeches in the - or having talks with congressmen - the big democratic state like the United States, the first power, political power, in the world now, must behave like a beggar when they go to the king of Saudi Arabia, who is - who represents a feudalistic regime of the Middle Age, in order to have good relations for getting all this oil. This is - I think this is against any dignity. This is against any dignity pragmatically, and it's against any rationality in practice. Such a dependence from - and without energy, nothing works. It must be a political - a main topic, political topic, to come to energy independence, to overcome this irresponsible dependency, which would cost a lot. More than one-third - more than one-third of the American defense budget is only given for protecting the oil and the energy importation lines. Only for that. The Gulf War would not - would not have -

AMY GOODMAN: Happened?

HERMANN SCHEER: - happened if - and even not the Iraq war, if there would be the plantation of bananas in Iraq instead of the extraction of oil. There is no doubt. There is no doubt. And this kind of relation to very dubious regimes in the most oil-promoting countries, most of them are not democratic, is, again, against any values we have.

AMY GOODMAN: You talked about the power of the governments together with the power of these oil companies. What about the media? In the United States, much of the media is corporate media, and every five or ten minutes you've got a commercial for another oil company or car company.

HERMANN SCHEER: Yeah, but they have the same influence here. They make the big advertisements and give, by this way, money to the medias. But nevertheless, because of the acceleration - of the politically initiated acceleration with Renewable Energy Act in Germany, so many people can see the results. And they ask themselves, "Why not everywhere? If it's there, why not here? Why not everywhere?" And -

AMY GOODMAN: Has the government turned around?

HERMANN SCHEER: Yes, it turned around. Nobody speaks anymore against renewable energies. Some behave in the way as - to do as if they would do it, but officially they speak all for that. It is the greenwashing strategy for many. But people want to have this. Against all the disinformation campaigns, 90 percent of the people here, based on the visible - on the visible results and inspired by the and encouraged by the visible results, ten - 90 percent want to have a general change to renewables. Seventy-five percent want to have this in their district, not far away in their district. Less than ten percent accept new coal power stations. Less than ten percent would accept new nuclear power stations. And only 30 percent will tolerate, let's see, a longer working time for the existing power station.

AMY GOODMAN: And yet, Hermann Scheer, you have German Chancellor Merkel deciding to extend the lifespan of the seventeen nuclear reactors by twelve years.

HERMANN SCHEER: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: She just did this earlier in September.

HERMANN SCHEER: Yeah. And people don't accept that in the majority. They don't accept that.

AMY GOODMAN: President Obama, after thirty years of no nuclear power plant - no new nuclear power plant being built in the United States, is now pushing forward for billions in loan guarantees for new nuclear power plants.

HERMANN SCHEER: Yeah. Yeah, he did it because only then he could - he could introduce some new, let's say, promotion programs for renewables, because he has, for a real energy shift, no majority, even not in his own party. Even not in his own party, because in some states like North Carolina with the coal interests, and the two Democratic senators would never vote for a renewable energy program for replacing coal. Never.

AMY GOODMAN: Even when you have coal explosions, like the Massey plant that killed so many.

HERMANN SCHEER: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, but the two Democratic senators of this state, they will never vote against this, and they belong to the Democratic Party, and therefore - and there are several other examples where the influence of these power groups is so strong that the behavior of the congressmen - of their congressmen is not really independent. And this is a situation that means the energy change in the United States must come from the local and the states level. One should not wait in America for the federal level. It should be in the states and in the cities.

AMY GOODMAN: How have you become such a scholar of American history and politics today, as a German politician?

HERMANN SCHEER: Because - yeah, because America has its special role in world policy. But this is not the only thing. America is a country in which all developments are - all developments are possible. All good and all bad developments are possible. And it is very important that an energy change in the United States happens. Very important, not only for America. And the -

AMY GOODMAN: Why?

HERMANN SCHEER: Because of the strength and the influence of the United States of America and its role in world economy and world politics. And therefore it is - but I'm sure that shift can only come by - in no way by the present energy companies. It must come from the local level, from the regional level, from the states level, from the municipal level, and - because it is in fact a revolution, a technological revolution.

There is an example, very actual, which gives the picture, which could be the model for that. This is the information technological revolution, because the energy experts, the big information technology companies, like IBM, they thought, twenty-five years ago, the future of information technology is in highly centralized computers. They were the experts. Like

our energy experts. And they underestimated totally what happens if there is a shift caused of the technological possibilities from few demanders, who order big computer stations, too many, to millions. This changes all. And the same will happen, and must happen, with renewable energies.

It is a fight. This is a structural fight. It is a fight between centralization and decentralization, between energy dictatorship and energy participation in the energy democracy. And because nothing works without energy, it's a fight between democratic value and technocratic values. And therefore, the mobilization of the society is the most important thing. And as soon as the society, most people, have recognized that the alternative are renewable energies and we must not wait for others, we can do it by our own, in our own sphere, together in cooperatives or in the cities or individually. As soon as they recognize this, they will become supporters. Other - this is the reason why we have now a 90 percent support against all the disinformation campaigns. They have much more money and possibilities to influence the public opinion, but they lost this. They lost this conflict. In the eyes of the people, they lost the conflict. They are the losers already.

AMY GOODMAN: German parliamentarian, environmentalist, economist, Hermann Scheer. He died suddenly yesterday at the age of sixty-six in Berlin. We'll come back to our conversation, one of his last, in a minute.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: We return to our conversation with Hermann Scheer, the German parliamentarian, economist and environmentalist. He died suddenly last night at the age of sixty-six.

AMY GOODMAN: How could a green economy stimulate jobs and the economy overall? Because President Obama seems to have lost that or lost his way.

HERMANN SCHEER: He has lost his way because he has no majority. He must fight for majority, in various fields. And therefore he cannot really - he cannot act really autonomously. And this is the situation in the United States, where you have a strong president but also a strong parliament - not a strong parliament, a strong Senate and a strong House. And this is - that means, in such a structure, many developments can become blocked.

AMY GOODMAN: You're a federal politician in Germany. You have - half your life you have spent in the German Parliament.

HERMANN SCHEER: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: Why, if you talk about everything being at the decentralized state and local level?

HERMANN SCHEER: Because that's what happened in Germany, required before that in the fields of legal frameworks it was necessary to open the space for that, that the people can act. This was not possible before. The main work, political work, for the support and help for the energy revolution to renewable energy is to open the space to create investment autonomy for renewables to overcome so many direct and indirect administrative, bureaucratic barriers, which hinder the people to take renewables, which hinder that and therefore don't give permission for windmills in the counties or don't - or don't give permissions for solar roofs and so forth. And so, there are so many, so many hidden - hidden rules favoring conventional energies and blocking renewable energies in a decentralized way. So many. And to overcome this requires political decisions. Yeah. What we need is a liberalization of renewable energy introduction.

AMY GOODMAN: One of your first books was called Solar Manifesto. Your new book, just coming out now, is called?

HERMANN SCHEER: The Energethical Imperative. An energethical -

AMY GOODMAN: The Energethical Imperative?

HERMANN SCHEER: Energethical. In German, we say energetische in German. And in English -

AMY GOODMAN: So, "energy" and "ethical."

HERMANN SCHEER: "Energy" and "ethical" combined in one word.

AMY GOODMAN: What is that?

HERMANN SCHEER: Yeah, I show that they are not only economic reasons, heavy economic reasons, to shift to renewable energies. It is an ethical - an ethical must. An ethical must, if we want to keep human society, human civilization.

AMY GOODMAN: How?

HERMANN SCHEER: Yeah, because it is - it will become impossible, if mythic - all the consequence of the conventional power structure and system, not only the climate conferences, they ask, if we want to have to keep and to disseminate democratic human values, it is - it becomes impossible to do this on the basis of nuclear and fossil energy, because nothing works without energy. And energy dependency like now, from big democratic states, from some feudal regimes in some places in the world, means America is not independent. It's not independent. Not really independent. Yeah, and the European democracies are not really independent. Yeah, they are - they must follow, inevitably, or they must conquer these states. Yeah? Occupy the states or follow them - or take care about them, about such relations. This is an unbelievable situation. It endangers democratic - this situation of energy dependency endangers democratic constitutions. Democratic constitution means self-determination of a society, political self-determination of society. How can a society self-determine in itself if the lifeblood of all activities is coming from - is coming from another one and creates existential dependency.

AMY GOODMAN: You write that a solar-based economy will overcome global economic disparities -

HERMANN SCHEER: Right.

AMY GOODMAN: - and the ongoing ecological crisis.

HERMANN SCHEER: And just look to the third-world countries, the same situation. They are - they have to pay with, let's say, possibly a grand national product of five percent rebated to Europe or to United States, five percent per capita. They have to pay for the importation of oil, the same like we. With which money? They don't have the money for that. The reason is poorer and poorer people - no, the result is - excuse me, the result is poorer and poorer economies. More than forty countries in the world, more than forty in the third world, have to pay more for the importation of oil than their total export earning is. That means it's over. It's over. If they want to promote their economy, they need more energy. If the energy bill eats all the coming revenues by the promotion of the economy, they are in a dead-end street. And therefore, until the situation goes down and down and down, who speaks about third-world problems and forgets this energy point doesn't know about what he is speaking, really. And therefore, this shows it - and it is an ethical problem. To help them, to come from these imported energies to indigenous renewable energies, this is the only economic chance for them, the only economic - otherwise, they will become poorer and poorer. And therefore, it is not only - not only a question for energy consumption. It's a question for economic development. It's a question of a democratic - for the survival of democracies. It's a question for overcoming the third-world rises. And it is a decision to keep the human values.

AMY GOODMAN: Finally, Hermann Scheer, what gives you hope?

HERMANN SCHEER: That I could set an example in the political structure. Besides all what I have done to enlighten people, to take this opportunity to go this way and to organize pressure for that, to create a movement in the society that is - it was possible to show a fast energy shift is possible. We have now, encouraged by that, inspired by the first big steps, by the first many steps, that nowadays more than a hundred cities and counties in Germany have decided to shift to 100 percent renewable energies in the run of the next five, sometimes ten, sometimes ten, sometimes fifteen years. And the number of cities who want to go this way increases from month to month. Now, this is a real democratic revolution.

AMY GOODMAN: The US is losing its manufacturing base, yet Germany is perhaps the leading country, if not the only one, that has increased its manufacturing base.

HERMANN SCHEER: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: How have you managed to do this?

HERMANN SCHEER: Yeah, this was - we created the market. With the Renewable Energy Act, we created energy investment, investment autonomy for renewable energies. That means more and more demands for solar technologies and wind power technologies were there. And this enabled the industrial bases for that, growing industrial companies for the producing, for the protection of these technologies. Therefore, one element pushed the other. One element pushed the other and widened it up. And a new move started, ecologically, economically, a new democratic move, and a new enthusiasm, because the perspective of going to 100 percent renewable energies is motivating many people, because as long people think - as long people think nobody can overcome this power structure, nobody can do it. They lose their hope. And you can only motivate people in the society with a perspective which is handleable and which is not dependent on the question if there are coming new decisions at the global level, at the summit, at the G8 summit, G20 summit, or at the world climate conference.

AMY GOODMAN: Will you be there in Cancún?

HERMANN SCHEER: No. I never expected - I wrote it before, fifteen years before - that there could come breakthrough by world climate conferences. We should not give hope for them.

AMY GOODMAN: Because?

HERMANN SCHEER: This is globally talking, nationally postponing. What happens there? It is more than a minimum, at this level - at this level, more than a minimum compromise is not possible. It's not - and this minimum level is combined with the emission trading concept. That means the minimum level becomes the cap, and the minimum level is by far behind the real challenge. That means if they come to a solution, to an agreement, it creates - this agreement will be, in any way, an agreement which gives an economic incentive not to do more than the minimum. This is not the way to solve the problem.

And, by the way, it reduces the challenge for the society to the climate problem only. But if the climate problem would not exist, would be there no change anymore to shift to renewable energies? No, it would - it is not the only reason. And as long all things are focused only on climate change questions, they come to wrong answers. They come to wrong answers in the method, how to do that. And this was used and abused for a nuclear renaissance, because nuclear powers have other problems. They have nuclear waste for 100,000 years, but they don't have CO2 waste. Therefore it is a kind of - it is - the reasons for shifting to renewable energies are far more than, alone, the climate, the climate crisis. The climate crisis would be a reason enough, but what have they created? Concepts, emission trading, that each investment, far away, could be involved into the calculation. It is totally anonymously. Totally anonymously. That's what - this is not the way. This is purely technocracy. It is exactly the contrary what we need - the mobilization of society to organize their energy change, their energy shift, not waiting what others are doing. Only then, movement comes.

AMY GOODMAN: German parliamentarian Hermann Scheer. We spoke last month in Bonn, Germany. It turns out it's one of his last interviews. Hermann Scheer died unexpectedly yesterday in Berlin. TIME magazine called him "Hero of the Green Century."