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Cultural anthropologist explores climate research

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News from Climate Science: Once a month, climate researchers report on their latest findings in the newspaper "Hamburger Abendblatt". Cultural anthropologist Dr. Werner Krauß is a fellow of the Cluster of Excellence in the project "Understanding Science in Interaction".



Rainy Hamburg: "Are thunderstorms growing exceedingly violent?"



Dr. Werner Krauß investigates how researchers go about investigating climate change.

Looking out of the window, I am glad to be inside. A severe storm is hitting Hamburg. At the same time, I start wondering: "Is this still a normal thunderstorm or proof that the likes are growing exceedingly violent?" When I was young, such questions and fears were still uncommon. Today, climate change is ubiquitous. Humans all over the world are dealing with climate change impacts on nature—global and local politicians, regular people as well as researchers working for the Cluster of Excellence CliSAP, myself included.

As a cultural anthropologist, I am particularly interested in tracing our climate knowledge back to its roots and in assessing the meaning of global change for humankind. I am neither developing computer simulations nor measuring the thickness of the Arctic sea ice. Instead, my focus lies on the researchers occupied with these tasks. I am a participant observer at a birthplace of climate studies and have learned that the object of investigation poses major problems, in particular for the natural sciences.

Global change is a complex issue. It upsets the masses, harbors uncertainties, and is highly charged in political respect. Take, for instance, the pause in global warming: when comparing the global temperature curve of the past fifteen years with predictions based on climate simulations, a single discrepancy arises. Immediately, climate skeptics embrace this as definite proof that current changes are by no means human-induced. Scientists, by contrast, grow all the more curious and continue testing, measuring, and comparing. They aim to integrate new insights into climate model adaptations in order to create more realistic simulations.

The problem is that computational models are employed as vehicles for political agenda-setting. Although a great number of natural scientists would prefer to do research without becoming entangled in politics, this is hardly possible. The UN climate council IPCC collects research studies from all around the world and prepares the scientific basis for governance talks such as the Paris World Climate Summit in December. This year's goal is a new climate change agreement superseding the Kyoto Protocol.

Against this backdrop, researchers have become political actors. Some draw up disaster scenarios, while others rightly emphasize the vagueness of models and numbers. Contradictory messages, however, stir up the general public and undermine the credibility of science.

As a countermeasure, the ideal of the honest broker helps researchers establish their role in the cross fire between politics, the media, and the public. In determining, for example, the possible impacts of the sea level rise or future flooding on coastal protection, honest brokers also point out inaccuracies. They are arbiters providing facts and arguments for coastal dwellers, local politicians, and administrators without making decisions themselves. Hamburg's climate researchers aim to act as honest brokers.

Still an exotic notion today, in the future, cultural anthropologists with the ability to analyze climate facts and their meaning to society will be in greater demand. My colleagues and I already provide interdisciplinary workshops and a blog called Die Klimazwiebel (the climate onion). Our initiatives respond to the current developments because one thing is for sure: climate change will remain a political hotbed.

Author: Dr. Werner Krauß

More information

- > [Blog: Die Klimazwiebel](#)
 - > [Personal Website: Werner Krauß](#)
 - > [Research group: IA 4: Understanding Science in Interaction \(USI\)](#)
 - > [News from climate science: All articles at a glance](#)
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