

Climate Skeptics and the rise of right-wing parties: A field report from the blogosphere (Manuscript; please quote only with permission of the author)

The rise of the German right-wing party AfD was closely linked first to their fight against the Euro and later on to the one against migration. After the migration issue seems to lose traction, the leader of the party, Alexander Gauland, recently announced that climate change – or climate hysteria, as he names it – will become the new mobilizing issue. In this presentation, I will trace the genealogy of far right climate skepticism and denial on the Internet, in the blogosphere. Between 2009 and 2017, I was one of the editors of an interdisciplinary climate blog, Die Klimazwiebel – the climate onion. On this blog, we posted comments about current climate issues and were open to discuss them with our readers in the comment section, among them a group of climate skeptics. Furthermore, I followed some other climate blogs, international and German ones, with a special focus on climate skeptics.

Climate as an issue for far-right policies does not come as a surprise, and it is not for the first time that right-wing populists address climate change. President Trump, Orban in Hungary or Bolsonaro in Brazil already have successfully demonstrated the enormous potential of the climate issue in election campaigns. In doing so, the far-right populists use climate to attack an assumed green agenda in general. They address the green lifestyle, the supposed elitism, political correctness, gender equality or veganism. These issues clearly indicate that they use climate change to initiate a cultural war. But each of these climate denials or skepticisms have a history of their own, national and global ones. Some are rooted deep in national history, others adopt neoliberal strategies, and in-between there is climate science, the holy grail.

The most popular weapon used by climate activists to fight climate denial is Science, made even more popular by the FridaysforFuture or ScientistsforFuture movements with their battle cry: listen to the Science. But this is a risky strategy. Science cannot carry this burden alone, even less because the attack against climate activism is culturally. Furthermore, not every skeptic is an “enemy of science” or a denialist. Skepticism is part of science, which makes things more complicated.

The climate debate has gone online pretty early; the climate blogosphere is one of the main arenas where the toxic rhetoric of today's debates on the Internet originates from, and it serves well as an archive for research on the origins of the current climate debate. Where and how did skepticism meet far-right populism? In the following, I revisit some of the skeptical blogs and our own, Die Klimazwiebel.

Returning to the blogosphere reminds me of the idea of the state as a nervous system, in the way the anthropologist Michael Taussig described it: „I am working on the Nervous System, and it's turning out to be hard labor indeed. Sometimes I suspect it's working even harder on me than I am on it.”
(Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* 2001)

The climate blogosphere as a nervous system is in a permanent state of alarm. Here the climate crisis is really a crisis, as a fight for the survival of your personal integrity, your discipline or organization, your professional reputation and, of course, the survival of the world at large – climate crisis. There is a hardly any safe place, there are only friends or enemies – an atmosphere where conspiracy theories grow. Even science is infected by the nervousness of the system. The philosopher of science, Jerry Ravetz, once stated that the

Internet does to science what once Gutenberg did to the bible. The far right existed before climate change, and they will exist after it – if there is an after-climate change. But climate skepticism is one driver of change in the political climate, for good or for worse. It is better to have a closer look at it.

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Content

In the following, I will present three different types of skepticism. The first one is scientific skepticism, as adopted by us, the editors of the Klimazwiebel. The second one is skepticism as denial, which is a stronghold in the far-right. And finally, there is the neoliberal climate skeptic, who easily accepts scientific skepticism and flirts with skepticism light or with far-right populism, whatever it fits him well.

I will begin with two myths of origin. It is possible to identify the beginning of the politicization and the polarization of the climate debate, which is identical with the beginning of the climate blogosphere.

The climate blogosphere

Foundational myths: Climate skepticism is a phenomenon that is virtual from the beginning, when scientists and lay people started blogs on the internet. As an anthropologist, I understand the climate blogosphere as a cultural phenomenon. While the debate itself is about science, the context of the debate is cultural. There are two myths of origin:

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The first one is the debate about the so-called hockey stick; a graph which shows the temperature of the last thousand years in the Northern hemisphere, with the blade going up since the beginning of the industrial revolution. The hockey stick curve turned into a symbol for the reality of global warming, for the IPCC: The headline reads: Human effect on climate 'beyond doubt'. The

originator of the curve is Michael Mann, one of the most famous and most combative scientists.

Steve McIntyre, a retired and curious mining engineer, wanted to test the curve's methodology. He asked for the data, but as a lay person he had no access to the scientific world, and his requests were not answered by Michael Mann. According to his calculation, there was something wrong in the methodology of the curve, especially the shaft, the long period of a more or less stable climate. In order to make this public, he started a blog on the Internet, Climate Audit, and it was a huge success and gained a lot of publicity. This is how climate skepticism was born.

Michael Mann and other scientists were furious. They considered this as an attack and founded a blog of their own, RealClimate, in order to correct McIntyre and to educate the public about the climate emergency. This was the beginning of the polarized climate blogosphere as we know it – alarmists vs skeptics, scientists vs lay people, and deniers and far right populists jumping on the bandwagon. It is here where the climate debate lost its innocence. Steve McIntyre, by the way, is to my knowledge not a denier. He was just curious. This was about 2005.

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Foundational myth #2

There was a second wave of blogs in 2009. Shortly before the climate summit in Copenhagen, COP 15, the server of the university of East Anglia – a hub of climate science – was hacked. This incident was dubbed Climategate.

Thousands of private Emails of climate scientists were published on a skeptical blog and caused suspicion: Did climate scientists build climate cartels? Are there unofficial agreements to exclude skeptical scientists from publications and conferences? This is not the place to go into that, but Climategate served, as the Guardian wrote correctly, as a game changer. Ever since, the IPCC not

only mention consensus, but also highlights inherent uncertainties. Like the hockey stick before, Climategate caused a new wave of climate blogs, among them our blog, die Klimazwiebel.

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Klimazwiebel – honest brokers

Die Klimazwiebel was originated by Hans von Storch, a renowned climate scientist, who had helped to verify the existence of climate change. Far from being a climate skeptic or even denier, he was himself a critic of the hockey stick methodology and a subject of derogatory Email conversations among climate scientists, which were published in the course of Climategate. With good reason, he asked himself what was going on in the climate debate. At this time, he was the main subject of my own anthropological research on the tribe of climate scientists. But this is another story. He asked me, two sociologists and another climate scientist to make a blog of our own. Out of curiosity. Here you see the team, which never had an editorial meeting: we were two climate scientists, two sociologists, and me, the anthropologist.

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As a motto, we had adopted the term “honest broker” from Roger Pielke jr. It served well to position our blog right in the middle, between alarmists on the one and skeptics on the other side. We were both observers and actors. We tried to reclaim skepticism from the skeptics, and we discussed issues like the politicization of science, the inflation of scientific studies and their apocalyptic rhetoric and the role of culture in the climate debate. And, of course, we followed the news, followed the stories and scandals, added our own expertise or opinion, took sides in the battles or started new ones. We asked ourselves: does alarmism provoke skepticism? Is the skeptic or denier the flipside of the alarmist? Are they bound by a Faustian deal? Or did we ourselves support climate skepticism with our own critique of alarmism? The latter is possible,

too: Skeptics loved especially Hans von Storch, the famous professor, who shared some of their criticism, except that he did not deny climate change.

We were interested in the climate skeptics, and some of them liked to discuss with us on a regular basis. In turn, I followed some of the skeptical blogs, some of them German, others from the US.

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Denialists

The most famous German denialist blog is Eike, the European Institute for Climate and Energy, which serves as a think tank for the AfD party. Their slogan is “freedom, not climate is endangered”. Eike is a fake institute, it is likely supported by American denialists, but they are influential in the far right. This website, which is from this Thursday, shows “holy Greta”, as they sarcastically call the icon of the FridaysforFuture movement. But I want to turn your attention to the background, which displays a summer postcard landscape. Nature conservation plays an increasing role in the far-right agenda, as an antidote to “the madness of climate protection”, as the leader of the AfD, Alexander Gauland, recently argued. Nature conservation is deeply rooted in German history, National Socialists had created the first laws for Nature conservation in 1932, strictly as a means to exclude others and to protect *German blood and soil*. Eike considers mass migration and globalism as a threat for nature destruction and to the integrity of *Volk and Heimat*. The Greens, they argue, try to subvert nature conservation through climate protection, which they denounce as a substitute for religion, the religion of climate. The heads of Germany’s oldest nature conservation NGOs already raised alarm that the AfD is trying to take over nature conservation. In Eastern Germany, there are organic farms owned by neo-Nazis.

Eike mostly denies the influence of greenhouse gases on climate and consequently rejects the energy transition. They argue that greens are

hypocrites, who preach water and drink wine; who say you shall not fly but take a plane to the next conference. Who make a career in politics, riding on climate change. Many of them grew up in Eastern Germany. They see a new eco-dictatorship coming, including a green Stasi as secret police and mind control. In short, Eike acts as a think tank that supports the far right with arguments, which are repeated in an endless loop. They activate the latent potential of right wing ideology still persistent in Germany. There is no rise in far right thinking, but it is made explicit in public. We had to block them on our blog; they repeated the same message in an eternal loop.

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The neoliberal skeptic

Here he is, in a nutshell: Entrepreneur, engineer, easily accepts that there is climate change and that it is human-made. If it has consequences, these are individual. He is critical of climate alarmism, of the apocalyptic rhetoric, and he never ceases to list the failure of climate measures, such as the energy transition. He thinks that the climate alarmists want to transform society, and they do so in using climate as a vehicle.

He closely observes the climate debate and its protagonists. He has a strong aversion against moral discourses and alarmist interpretations of the results in scientific studies. He even reads them.

Neoliberal skeptics do not see themselves as part of a group. It is just the rejection of climate politics that unites them. They believe in the free market and the invisible hand.

The free market will provide technological solutions. There will be other forms of energy, of mobility, and technological adventures. He does not believe in state socialism. He wants to be left alone.

This is the modern skeptic, in a nutshell. They were interesting interlocutors and often engaged into sophisticated discussions. They were the ideal partners

for the dialog between science and skeptics, which we were interested in, and they played this role pretty well – and easily understood subverting discussions and taking them over.

Hans von Storch, as the head of his Institute at the Helmholtz Research Center, invited the most eloquent of the skeptics for a public discussion in Berlin about climate change and what we know about it. Following an agenda of discussing climate change and not politics, there were no critical questions, and the discussants agreed on the state of art in climate science, including the skeptic. Inadvertently, Hans von Storch had helped this neoliberal skeptic to achieve a new level of public acceptance, to my disgust. Hans von Storch and I, we strongly disagreed in this point. The pitfall is, in my opinion, the separation of climate change and politics, because climate change is political. Otherwise, it is a fascist.

Conclusion

On their own blog, over the years I could follow the skeptics on their search for a political party that shared their skepticism, but for a long time, they did not find one in Merkels Germany, not even the liberals. This changed in 2017. Even the smartest of the skeptics endorsed the AfD. Finally, there was a party that shared their skepticism. Of course, their latent brown agenda was disgusting, but he did not care; instead, he made suggestions to update their agenda. They also welcomed the election of president Trump, both the denialists and the neoliberal skeptics. I was shocked about how easily they adopted the anti-migrant, anti-globalism and anti-Euro politics, and how skepticism worked as a link between the old brown and the new neoliberal agenda.

After nine years, our blogging experiment ended. We were worn out, some of us were frustrated about the climate debate, and our common understanding had ended in dissent. Did alarmism wake up the phantoms of the past,

disguised as skepticism or even denialism? Or did we help to make climate skepticism socially acceptable?

Die Klimazwiebel, our blog, is an incredible archive of the recent climate debate, between Climategate and the presidency of Trump, between the Paris Agreement and the rise of the AfD in Germany. Bruno Latour has recently addressed the current dilemma between localism on the one side and globalism on the other. He argues for a terrestrial politics, which is climate friendly, earthbound and cosmopolitical. Don't try it on the Internet.