



Panel report :

Klimawandel in der Diskussion: Natur-Zeiten vom 19. bis 21. Jahrhundert

Geneva, June 29, 2022, 6^{èmes} journées suisses d'histoire

Organizers : Falko Schnicke, Benjamin Beuerle

Participants : Falko Schnicke, Karolin Wetjen, Benjamin Beuerle

Comment : Elke Seefried

Report by : Sabrina Sigel, University of Geneva

The panel studied the complex and diverging debates and interpretations of climate change from the 18th century to the present. Throughout all presentations, press articles served as the main primary source for capturing past knowledge and public debate about climate change's future impact. The presentations followed a chronological order, demonstrating a large variety of views on the topic.

FALKO SCHNICKE (Linz) argued that the historical views on the climate depended greatly on the world views of an era and the extent to which humans are thought to affect it. He presented two contrasting articles to illustrate his point. An article written in 1786 observed variances in climate in central Europe, which represented a potential threat to agriculture. Reflecting the religious beliefs at the time, the article concluded that climate change could be reversed only if God wanted. In contrast, an article published in the *Augsburger Postzeitung* in 1874 perceived climate not as a religious, but rather a technical issue, that humans can influence actively. Hence, the article discussed the potential long-term climatic consequences of large-scale infrastructure projects, namely the Panama Canal, and a project that sought to create a huge lake in the Sahara Desert. Based on a Eurocentric perspective, the author was concerned that these projects would cause an ice age in Europe because they allegedly modified air and ocean currents.

This ambivalence between technology euphoria and criticism was also visible in the articles presented by **KAROLIN WETJEN** (Kassel). She focused on articles from three newspapers with high circulation in the first half of the 20th century: *New York Times* (United States), *Vorwärts* (Germany), and *Neues Wiener Tageblatt* (Austria). She argued that the debates on climate depended on contemporary perceptions and current daily politics. One example are the debates on the definition of the "perfect climate". A key contribution of climatology was its focus on specific applications. In the German speaking press, climatology helped describe the German colonies and discussed the influence of climate on human performance. *New York Times* articles explained how technology such as air con-



ditioning had enabled buildings to maintain the “perfect weather condition”. In addition, Wetjen noticed that climate change risk assessments were predominantly oriented towards the immediate future, with little consideration of longer-term consequences. For example, the fear of a human-induced cooling of Europe through a redirection of the Gulf Stream by the United States appeared regularly in times of political tension and shows the influence of politics on debates on climate change.

BENJAMIN BEUERLE (Berlin) presented a case study of climate debates in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), in contemporary Russia (1990s–2020s). Although the Russian government has participated little in the international efforts to limit global warming, Russia is extremely important for the climate due to its geographical size. Because Sakha is covered by permafrost, its infrastructure is particularly threatened by global warming. Beuerle analyzed how climate change has been discussed in two newspapers of the region: the *Echo Stolicy* (2007–2021), subsidized by the city of Jakutsk, and *Ilken* (since 2005), a newspaper of indigenous people in the North of the region. He showed that there is an awareness for the devastating consequences of global warming. National politics influenced the regional press, as a peaking of articles mentioning the keyword ‘climate change’ can be observed between 2008 and 2012, which coincides with Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency. The qualitative analysis showed that climate skepticism has been rare. No article in *Ilken* questions the anthropogenic origin of climate change explicitly. This must be nuanced, however, because the majority of articles discuss the consequences of climate change, and the necessity of adapting and preparing for it, rather than its origins. An interesting outcome of his study is that Sakha is perceived as part of the international arctic, and regional and international debates play a larger role than national discourses.

In her comment **ELKE SEEFRIED** (Aachen) emphasized four common themes among the papers and offered suggestions for further research. First, newspapers play a significant role in forming public opinion on climatic issues. To better pinpoint how close the newspapers were to climate knowledge production, Seefried recommended a refined categorization of the press, as well as the identification and contextualization of controversial topics and areas of debate. Second, newspapers are important co-producers of climate knowledge. In order to qualify their independent role in the process of knowledge production, the participants should ascertain the extent to which the newspapers only copy-pasted scientific contributions, or presented their own opinions. Third, the climate debates contained implicit representations of geographical spaces. Regional climate change received more attention than the ‘global’ one. The question remained whether the articles reflected the geographical focus of climatologists, or the political preferences. The Russian case raised the question of whether politics restrained free discussions in the 19th and 20th centuries, translating in the impossibility to publish on climate change. Last, Seefried highlighted the dimension of time, namely the visions of the future as an important component of climate debates. According to her, it would be helpful to specify whether these visions were short- or long-term, and whether the topic was considered urgent. Furthermore, she wondered how the results presented in the panel can be incorporated into the general periodization of the topic’s historiography.



The concluding discussion centered on Seefried's comments, with each panelist focusing on one specific theme. According to Schnicke, it appears the media added a new function to the way they present scientific knowledge by adding speculations about the future, and he plans to investigate this further. Wetjen focused on the spatial dimension, highlighting the strong focus on the application of research about the 'tropical climate' in Germany and Austria. Hence, it almost exclusively focused on the German colonies in Africa. In the New York Times, debates concentrated on the climatic differences within the United States, leaving out the South American continent for instance. Beuerle stressed the fluidity of the spatial dimension in his research, since international knowledge and networks have played a large role in the discussions on the effects of climate change on Sakha. Indigenous knowledge has gained in importance, as indigenous representatives have participated in international conferences.

The panel thus combined three informative and convincing papers that demonstrated the rich opportunities of newspaper analyses for the history of climate change debates. The case studies were complementary and covered a large timeframe in a chronological order. However, an overview of the most recent historiography would have been helpful to clarify to what extent the case studies allow for generalizations on the chronological evolution of the debate. As the common theme was the choice of sources, it would have been important to present the methodological approaches in more detail. In spite of that, the panel was successful in generating interest in the ongoing projects of the participants, which include more extensive datasets than those exhibited.

Sabrina Sigel
Sabrina.Sigel@unige.ch

Panel overview :

Falko Schnicke : Natur-Wissen als Zeit-Wissen: Diskussionen um den europäischen Klimawandel im 19. Jahrhundert

Karolin Wetjen : Das Klima der Moderne. Beobachtungen des Klimawandels als Zeitdiagnosen in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts

Benjamin Beuerle : Klimawandelfolgen in der regionalen russischen Presse (1990er-2020er)

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