

Die Klimafalle: Die gefährliche Nähe von Politik und Klimaforschung

[The Climate Trap: The Dangerous Distance between Politics and Climate] Hans von Storch and Werner Krauß. Munich, Germany: Hanser Verlag, 2013. 248 pp. €19.90 cloth (ISBN 97803-446-43507-0).

Reviewed by Arne Harms, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany.

Among recent studies on the workings of climate debates, the book by Storch and Krauß stands apart for its tone and its approach. In accessible prose interspersed with irony and personal recollections, the authors manage to step beyond narrow scientific analysis, historical overview of discourses, and apologetics. What they offer instead is a critical appraisal of the current predicament that globalized debates on climate change find themselves in. Although this certainly is not a new endeavor, the strength and value of the book lie in the vantage points of its authors. Hailing from different scientific backgrounds, both are in various ways what has been called “odd persons” in these globalized debates (p. 20). Hans von Storch, on one hand, is meteorologist and among Germany’s most influential climate scientists, and Werner Krauß, on the other hand, is a cultural anthropologist who has long worked on environmental issues. Both began working together during Krauß’s field work among climate scientists hosted by Storch and the book is the latest outcome of this collaboration. The anthropologist’s “oddness” among meteorologists is, furthermore, mirrored in Storch’s intermediate position within the largely polarized landscape of climate debates. Embracing science and technology studies, ethnography without letting go of a sound understanding of



meteorology, they engage this very polarization and its discontents and propose a way out.

At present, they argue, global debates find themselves in what they call the “climate trap.” The first six chapters of the book aim at unravelling this predicament, and two further chapters are devoted entirely to strategies of undoing it. The climate trap is characterized by what they understand to be a detrimental proximity of climate sciences and politics. It is constituted, furthermore, by several interlocked dynamics. First is the way climate change has emerged as a contested problem in the post-Cold War scenario. Filling a political vacuum, it rose from being the object of scrutiny among natural scientists to a highly charged issue,

which in turn awarded a class of scientists a rare amount of publicity and influence. Dragged into the center of media attention and being invested with the authority to judge Western lifestyles, climate sciences not only began to wield considerable influence far beyond disciplinary boundaries, but it was increasingly entrapped by the seductions of its new role. Not only has this, the authors argue, contributed to a particular alarmism, but also to the denial of critical voices and uncertainties on the very object of scientific knowledge.

To illustrate these claims they turn, among others, to the controversy on the famous “hockey stick graph” used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in an iconic fashion to illustrate global temperature increases. Far from questioning the overall trends illustrated by the graph (and its emphasis on the urgency to take action), the authors argue that debates surrounding it emerged as sites where climate scientists and climate politics became entangled too closely and, consequently, suffered mutual

damages. Reflecting on genealogies and discussions of the graph, peer-review procedures that silenced critical engagements therewith, and the dislocations brought about by the massive leaking of e-mails during the so-called “climategate” affair, they offer interesting insights into the workings of academia and its “gatekeepers.” Yet their main interest lies in the management of “climate knowledge” as a highly sensitive commodity (p. 105). The twin moments of anticipating an impending climate catastrophe and, thus, of conferring significant powers onto “its” class of specialists (i.e., climate scientists), made the debates on the hockey stick and beyond the fraught matter they became. The skirmishes inflicted damages, they argue, due to the interest to uphold both the message as much as the messenger and claiming thereby a position and capacity for climate science to dictate political decisions.

Yet this leaves the authors at a difficult, somewhat perplexing juncture: Although they convincingly argue for a separation of (climate) science and politics, they embrace the inherent social nature of scientific knowledge and the entanglement of nature and culture in its object of scrutiny. They argue, thus, that the “blending of apocalyptic rhetoric with politically instrumentalized science has proven to be little effective as basis and propulsion of climate politics” (p. 119). To take refuge in an imagined objectivity or seclusion in “pure science” is certainly not an option. Rather, they propose embracing uncertainty as a dynamic around which climate politics might be tied to local life worlds as much as to the processes of political decision making.

The dubious powers of climate scientists rest too often, they argue, on a zeroing out of uncertainty that is an integral part of climate sciences on both a regional and global scale. Yet although they claim that there is ultimately no excuse to take action on anthropogenic climate change as the uncertainties on its actuality have become far too insignificant, they still argue for the embrace of uncertainty, if only to immunize the debates on climate change from the dangers of the climate trap and tie them productively to social practices. One way to do so, they argue, leads into the so-called blogosphere: They invest a great deal of potential in it as a tool to engage uncertainty, to embrace dissenting publics, and to enhance the debates (possibly toward a softening of polarization into alarmists vs. skeptics), not least because they see them as counterpublics and as powerful nodes of what has been framed as postnormal science; that is, the production of scientific knowledge for which popular perspectives remain decisive, which remains risky and not beyond (an imagined) immunity to “lay” criticism. Consequentially, the authors

emphasize, second, the role of cultural perspectives on environment, society, and climate change. The quantification of climate as envisioned by climate science has, they argue, not replaced cultural constructions, but only reworked them. Similarly, do the invocations of massive migrations, demise of populations, and disappearance of entire landscapes deny social agency that will contribute to mitigations. They deny, in other words, change and the ability to change among affected populations and thus particular patterns of agency that allow to step beyond mere victimization.

To further concretize the ways climate science could and should involve itself in political debates, the authors point toward recent developments in the Wadden Sea region in northern Germany. Looking back on decades of research and practice along the fault lines of a proposed conservation project, they show that environmentalism (broadly defined) can become accepted when it is allowed to be debated and negotiated by a local population rather than imposed by governments. It furthermore can become an opportunity for local populations in the process. Although this has already been widely shown, they underline a process of multidimensional decision making involving diverse actors—and call for the inclusion of science into the hodgepodge as nothing more than a supplier of “facilitating knowledge ... which allows to reflect different solutions with regard to efficiency and acceptance” (p. 212). Particularly in the ultimately successful inclusion of the local populace into a protracted, contingent debate and the disempowerment of science as a producer of definitive knowledge, the authors understand the developments around the Wadden Sea natural park to be a possible blueprint to manage necessarily localized conflicts around climate change.

In highlighting these possibilities and encounters, they argue for an active repoliticization of climate change debates and the negotiation of conflicts entailed therein. It would therefore be a misunderstanding to take their book as a call for a neat distinction of science and politics as the subtitle and parts of the book seem to suggest. It rather turns out to be a call for the active reworking of the relationship at the critically important juncture humanity finds itself at. Although the ways out of the climate trap might not perhaps be fully convincing—particularly under conditions of uneven development and the unaddressed concerns of subalternity, subject, and speech—the call for a democratization of climate politics has to be lauded. For this reason alone, but also for its genealogy of a crucially important subdiscipline and its transatlantic perspective on relevant debates, the book deserves a wide readership.