

Laudatio for Mike Hulme 2021

Mike Hulme and Eduard Brückner share a similar academic career. Starting as scientists with a deep knowledge of climate have expanded their field of knowledge and pioneered our understanding of climate and its relationship to society Mike Hulme has studied geography at the University of Durham and he received his PhD at the University College Swansea in 1984, with a thesis on “Secular variations in Sudan rainfall and water resources”. As a lecturer at the University of Salford, Mike Hulme has aimed at understanding African climate change and variability and its significance for ecology and society. At the same time, he has developed a deeper reflection on the role of culture in understanding climate and human response. An example of this is provided by a paper on the adaptability of a rural water resource system in central Sudan.

In 1988, Mike Hulme moved to the University of East Anglia, and he became a member of the internationally renowned Climate Research Unit. He compiled and analyzed large-scale observational climate data sets, in particular on precipitation, which was, and is, one of the most comprehensive gridded precipitation datasets in the world. But Mike Hulme is not only a data person, he was also involved in model evaluation, and he made numerous contributions to Integrated Assessment Models. In 2013, he became professor of Climate and Culture at King’s College in London, and since 2017, he is professor of Human Geography at the University of Cambridge.

During his time at the University of East Anglia from 2000 to 2007, Mike Hulme was the founding director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, a distributed virtual network organization headquartered at the University of East Anglia. As the director of the Tyndall Centre, Mike Hulme became more and more exposed to climate policy and to the communication of climate change science. He became increasingly uneasy about some of the ways in which climate science was being presented and deployed in public debates, and he developed a more critical view on the relation between climate change science, public knowledge and discourse, and policy development. In an article for the BBC, in November 2006, Mike Hulme warned against the dangers of using alarmist language from which emerges a strong fatalistic narrative with frequent referrals to helplessness, societal collapse, and catastrophe.

“Why we disagree about climate change” is presumably Mike Hulme’s most famous book, published in 2009. He does not describe climate change as being ‘a problem’ waiting for ‘a solution’. Instead he considers it as an environmental, cultural and political phenomenon which is re-shaping the way we think about ourselves, our societies and humanity’s place on Earth. He shows that climate change can act as a catalyst to revise our perception of our place in the world.

A few months after his famous book was published, Mike Hulme found himself in the midst of the “Climategate”. Because of his previous involvement with the Climate Research Unit, he was familiar with some aspects of the allegations subsequently made by critics about the corruption of science. Some of his own email correspondence was made public and he was also accused of certain dubious practices, or at least of being a proximate observer of such practices. But instead of taking a defensive stance, Mike Hulme asked: What does “Climate-

gate” teach us about the changing relationships between scientists and the public, about expectations for transparency and accountability in science and about the relationship between climate science and climate policy?

Mike Hulme is a great scientist deeply rooted in climate science, who has opened our field of research beyond understanding climate to understanding representations of climate change in history, culture and media, the relationship between climate and society, including climate engineering and adaptation, and how knowledge of climate change is constructed as well as the interactions between climate change knowledge and policy. His publication record is outstanding, but it is not the sheer number of high-quality and highly cited papers and books that is impressive, but also the wide spectrum of different journals. Mike Hulme is a humble person, a person you enjoy talking to, and he is a courageous person who tackles the inconvenient truth of how we do science and how we communicate science.