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At the Mercy of the Climate? Nico Stehr and Hans von Storch in an Interview



Climate is all-powerful, sometimes capricious, it affects our state of mind, our character and our lifestyle. This is the way many people see our climate. Nico Stehr and Hans von Storch are examining the effects this socially constructed perception of our climate is having on society.

Herr Professor von Storch, Herr Professor Stehr, how did it come about that a cultural scientist and a meteorologist decided to work together on the subject of "climate and society"?

Hans von Storch: We found a good subject that we were both interested in – the parallelism of conceptualities. In the field of climate research there are technical terms and concepts that have one or several different meanings in everyday life. This in turn links in with the parallelism between the scientific constructs of climate change and the socio-cultural constructs of climate change.

Nico Stehr: Climate is not just a physical issue, but also a social and cultural issue.

You have focused in particular on the social construct of climate.

Stehr: Yes, because it is a clear expression of people occupying themselves socially and culturally with the phenomenon of weather. People have been fascinated by the weather for centuries. It is therefore inevitable that people develop certain ideas about weather and climate, irrespective of the natural sciences.

Climate determinism

What might those certain ideas be?

Stehr: Until a few years ago climate was one of the main subjects up for discussion in the fields of philosophy, anthropology and geology. These fields of academia ascribed a huge amount of power to climate. It was maintained, for example, that the rise and fall of entire civilisations was dependent on climate and its changes. Climate apparently was also said to have a very important influence on our state of mind, our character and on people's everyday lives. It was only a few decades ago that ideas like these on the way climate determines our thinking were being heatedly discussed in the field of science and academia.



Von Storch: A further example is the question why certain peoples are more successful than others. For a very long time it was, and often still is, generally assumed that the Germans and the Swedes are so good at life, because they have to deal with a daunting climate, i.e. a natural habitat that inspires and challenges us and induces us to be constructive and efficient.

You say that climate determinism is not an outdated body of thought anymore, but that it is slowly but surely finding its way back into discourse – this time in academic guise.

Von Storch: When we speak of the dangers of climate change, it is often assumed that it is only climate change, and nothing else, that is responsible for certain social changes that are more or less unavoidable. According to this, climate change determines the future of civilisation and the human race.

Stehr: In the field of climate science, if one attempts to emphasise the significance and the effects of climate change, it is only natural to fall back, either directly or indirectly, on ideas that enjoy a certain affinity to climate determinism. For example, when one emphasises how important, how decisive, our climate is for economic development or for the future of our society.

The people are powerless



What effects does that have on the way people deal with climate change?

Von Storch: At all costs climate change must be avoided. In terms of climate determinism our evolution has contributed to us being able to live in harmony with our climate – a harmony that is absolutely necessary, a life without it would lead to disastrous consequences for us and our culture.

Stehr: The human race is viewed as a mass of powerless beings who find it very difficult to adapt to certain changes in their climate.

Could you name a few examples of the ways in which human beings have to adapt?

Stehr: Adapting in the North of Canada is very different from adapting in Bangladesh. Adapting is a regional phenomenon and requires a good knowledge of the way the weather and climate changes, for example, at the North Sea or on Lake Constance. How high will sea levels rise? Will it be drier or wetter, colder or warmer on Lake Constance? Only then can people start to deal with the question of how they are going to adapt best to these changes.

Why is climate policy alone not enough to help us adapt to climate change?

Von Storch: It is already possible to foresee that the concentration of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere will still continue to increase, even if we actually succeed in decreasing our CO₂ emissions. Climate change is already upon us and it is not going to go away. If climatic conditions change, we have to ask ourselves – what can we do to enable society and our ecological system to deal properly with this change? The vital cue here is - actively adapting to the changes, and, of course, reducing emissions.

“Climate change is a tricky problem”

Stehr: Ignoring possible ways to adapt is dangerous, as developing a strategy for adapting is probably the only way round the problem. This is what we should really be devoting more time to.

Could you give a few examples?

Von Storch: We are of the opinion that sea levels are going to rise due to the greenhouse effect. We should already be thinking now about ways to protect our coastlines. Another question is – What are we going to do, if it turns out to be true that in the next few decades in Hamburg, for example, there is going to be an increase in winter precipitation? What are we going to do with the surplus in rainwater? This might well be a huge amount of water. Climatic change in the tropics might lead to an increased spread of disease. How can we put a stop to this?

Stehr: The problem of climate change is a long-term issue. Up to now the realm of politics has not been particularly well prepared to deal with long-term problems. Politics thinks on a short-term basis and there are all kinds of reasons for that. Dealing with climate change is a tricky problem. I cannot emphasise that enough.

Nico Stehr holds the Karl Mannheim Chair for Cultural Sciences at Zeppelin University in Friedrichshafen; **Hans von Storch** is a professor at the Institute of Meteorology at the University of Hamburg and Head of the Institute for Climate Research in Geesthacht. He posts a blog called “Klimazwiebel”.

Recommended Reading: Nico Stehr, Hans von Storch, *Klima – Wetter – Mensch*. (Climate – Weather – People), Published by Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2009.

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