

WERNER KRAUß

‘Meat is stupid’: Covid-19 and the co-development of climate activism

‘Meat is stupid’ (*Fleisch ist doof*, fig.1) was my favourite protest sign at a Fridays for Future demonstration in April 2019, in Lower Saxony in the north of Germany. In retrospect, the slogan anticipated the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus among the workers in the regional slaughterhouses the following year. Covid-19 also interrupted my research about co-developing local climate activism, with a special focus on narratives of change as the missing link between science and society (Krauß and Bremer 2020). Anthropologists like developing stories and are well equipped to follow the process of how climate change turns from a global matter of fact into a locally meaningful matter of concern (Callison 2014). ‘Meat is stupid’ contains such a narrative of change, which is easily dismissed as a high school student joke, but it is much more than that.

At the end of the Fridays for Future demonstration, I met an activist of an environmental NGO who had attended a public climate workshop which I had previously held in a nearby coastal village. We spontaneously decided to organise another workshop, to transform the spirit of the demonstration into sustainable civic activity. In September 2019, the event, dubbed *Klimamarkt* (climate market), took place in an old farmhouse in Westerstede in the Ammerland district, with about 60 people attending. We asked the participants to imagine a climate-friendly future for the Ammerland. What does it take to get there, what is urgently needed, what exactly has to change? We roughly ordered the contributions into categories such as health, nutrition, land use, building, mobility, water, energy and construction. For each of these categories, working groups were organised that met in the following weeks. Our intention was to stage a follow-up workshop in spring 2020, where the results should be discussed with local politicians and administrators. But suddenly, the outbreak of Covid-19 impeded all public activities, and we had to postpone the workshop.

In Germany and elsewhere, new forms of civic climate activities are urgently needed. As a matter of fact, technologies of climate governance already shape the coastal landscape with its wind turbines, the new climate-proof dykes and biogas tanks, and climate increasingly pervades public administration and political rhetoric. But while there are hardly any climate sceptics in this coastal area, the hidden climate costs of our way of life are still poorly represented in politics. As I learned during my fieldwork, these repressed climate issues are increasingly addressed by concerned citizens at the local level, in everyday conversations and daily routines. This is one of the reasons why Fridays for Future is such a success story, and it was the starting point for our initiative to co-develop new forms of climate activism with coastal dwellers.



Figure 1 „Meat is stupid!“ photo by ©Werner Rudhart / BMBF.
[Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

At the workshops, participants expressed their frustration (Krauß 2020). Why are coastal communities not energy independent, even though they produce so much wind energy? Why in the European Union does large-scale industrial farming still preside over diversified production of high-quality food, making a predominantly agrarian coastal landscape even more vulnerable to the effects of climate change? And what about the urban sprawl, the use of plastic, the loss of biodiversity, the disappearance of bees? Why did the municipality sell public land to an investor who builds apartments for mass tourism, in the centre of a seaside resort that prides itself for its artistic atmosphere? Is it sustainable to construct a new *Autobahn* that will cross marshes and pastures? There is a long list of complaints, not all of them climate relevant in the strict physical sense of the term, but in the wider sense of climate understood as the relationship between people and their material conditions of life (Latour 2018: 51). Many participants critically addressed the neo-liberal ideology of the global market and argued for a post-growth economy. Their locally informed narratives slowly turned climate change from a matter of fact into a meaningful matter of political concern.

According to the visions of the participants, in the year 2030, the region will be energised by regional wind power, organic farms will spread and increasingly replace monocultures, public transport will improve, new urban architecture will end urban sprawl, people will buy regional products and support local businesses, and quality of life will improve in a climate friendly Ammerland. In the working groups, we tried to specify all these issues, to break them down onto a regional, local and personal level. It sounds like a Herculean task. There are many appeals to change individual lifestyles and consumption patterns, but how to link the individual and the global, how to make climate change politically relevant, and how to make it amenable to democratic processes?

Surprisingly, Covid-19 provided further insight into the global connections that constitute local climate change. The most dramatic outbreak of the disease in Germany happened at slaughterhouses in Lower Saxony, in neighbouring districts, among the cheap labour force from Eastern Europe who are hired on a contract basis and who live packed in overpriced rental flats. The slaughterhouses are owned by a billionaire, Mr Tönnies, who controls the prices on the German meat market, together with a couple of other meat-processing industries and four supermarket chains. In doing so, they also control production patterns in rural areas, dictating the prices for agrarian products and contributing to the mass extinction of small farms while increasing production. German surplus meat inflates the African markets; pig snouts, tails and feet are sold to China. Covid-19 made the global connections explicit: soy for animal feed is produced at the cost of rainforest; foreign local markets are undermined by German meat production; the migration of cheap labour enables price dumping and intensive animal production finally heats the climate. What remains is the fact that local climate activism and advocacy for a change of lifestyle, production and consumption patterns are political and relevant. 'Meat is stupid' struck me as a poetic reminder that we urgently need more place-based narratives of change to cope successfully with the challenges of a changing climate.

Acknowledgements

Funding Statement: Open Access funding enabled and organized by ProjektDEAL.
WOA Institution: UNIVERSITÄT BREMEN
Blended DEAL: ProjektDEAL

Werner Krauß 
Artec Sustainability Research Center
University of Bremen
Bremen D-28334
Germany
wkrauss@uni-bremen.de

References

Callison, C. 2014. *How climate change comes to matter. The communal life of facts*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Krauß, W. 2020. 'Narratives of change and the co-development of place-based climate services for action', *Climate Risk Management* 28 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crm.2020.100217>) Accessed January 2021.
- Krauß, W. and S. Bremer. 2020. 'The role of place-based narratives in climate risk governance', *Climate Risk Management* 28 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crm.2020.100221>) Accessed January 2021.
- Latour, B. 2018. *Das terrestrische Manifest*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.