

Climate Skepticism: Cultures and Subjectivities

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The unwillingness of the public in advanced industrial societies to take action to mitigate climate change is one of the major problems of our time. Political, psychological, and cultural factors all play a role in social inaction on climate change. Research into political gridlock (Oreskes/Conway) for instance has revealed the influence of skeptical neo-liberal think-tanks funded by industries with vested interests. Social scientists have analyzed skeptical beliefs and values. Research into the communicative and cultural dimensions of climate skepticism, denial and contrarianism includes surveys of skepticism in the media (Boykoff) and more general studies of the discourse of climate skepticism (Fröhlich; Powell; Washington/Cook). The ethnographer Kari Norgaard, who explains climate “denial” as a form of evasion through both conscious and unconscious organization of information about the environment in such a way that it remains outside the sphere of everyday reality (*Living in Denial*), assigns a key role to culture. “Thought prevention” and “selective interpretation” are facilitated by culturally specific toolkits and stocks of narratives. The cultural construction of climate skepticism has also been examined by others including Mike Hulme (*Why We Disagree about Climate Change*).

My RCC project is a one third contribution to a book-length study (co-authors are Greg Garrard of the University of British Columbia and George Handley of Brigham Young University) that will be the first substantial treatment of climate skepticism through the lens of a humanities subject. It will be my task to subject skeptical print and digital media texts in Germany to ecocritical analysis to provide a basis for comparison of the manifestations of climate skepticism, its sources, and political valences in Germany, Britain, and the USA.

The project as a whole seeks to comprehend both the coherence and the diversity of skeptical discourses, and to avoid environmentalist assumptions that climate skeptics are a homogenous group motivated by ideology or self-interest. It asks what concepts of nature and science skeptical texts deploy, contest, and defend in the print media, digital media, and popular culture, and what kinds of selves they project. It will provide close analyses of selected examples of skeptical writing, including popular science and fictional texts.

To date, ecocriticism, environmentally-orientated literary and cultural research, has tended to celebrate nature-endorsing texts, and there have been few critiques of outright opponents of environmentalism (Frederick Buell’s *From Apocalypse to Way of Life* is an exception). The project therefore breaks new ground in three principal respects: it will be a comparative study of cultures of nature, which is currently rare in ecocriticism; it will deepen and extend discussions of climate change and culture beyond pro-AGW literature; and it will address online as well as print sources. Its aim is to throw light on the identities and

discursive strategies of skeptics, help reductive stereotypes of contrarianism, and ultimately foster democratic debate.

My working hypothesis is that skepticism exists in three main forms in Germany: as a focus on the residual scientific uncertainties surrounding the evidence for global warming and the extent to which it results from human activities; as a reluctance to allow the state to intrude on personal freedom in matters of consumption and leisure; and as an emotional revulsion against the prophets of doom and the moralising which characterises much environmental activism. The initial focus of my work will be media discourse and the popular communication of climate science (e.g., Vahrenholt/Lüning; Ganteför), before moving on to popular culture (novels and films).