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Steam Engines Driving Meteors: Interpretations of Climate Change in Nineteenth-Century West European Newspapers

Discourses about the climate do not only exist in the present. In the nineteenth century, in the wake of global warming at the end of the Little Ice Age, people were already thinking about the changing climate. They tried to understand why climate change occurred and how it could be interpreted. Such early discussions of climate change took place in articles in regional European newspapers and weeklies, which appeared to report current climate shifts and explain them to readers.

My contribution looks into these equally fascinating and under-examined sources. I will present findings such as articles from the German lands of the 1790s, pondering whether a shift in the earth's position might be a reason for the perceived climate change or if medieval weather theories could provide answers. My material also includes an article from an Upper Austrian newspaper that, as early as 1841, suggests that the carbon output of steam engines was responsible for meteors, which were appearing more frequently at that time. Trying to explain the melting ice masses of the northern hemisphere, the author asks his readers if carbon could also be responsible. The newspaper editors published the article yet considered this idea so absurd that they explicitly distanced themselves from it. Another article from a London evening newspaper from 1870 reports the assumption that humans could be viewed as the cause of climatic change. It dismisses as speculative the idea that the clearing of forests had influenced rainfall and contributed to a drier climate in England. The article denies climate change in principle but nevertheless reports on this theory.

Articles like these provide insights into contested nineteenth-century interpretations of human agency when it comes to climate change. In my talk, I will first discuss why the authors published the articles to examine climate change discourse's early nature. Second, I will analyse the knowledge on which the articles were based or which they presented. It includes ancient theories and contemporary (early-scientific) observations derived from domestic sources or colonies overseas or both. Newspaper articles, therefore, offer insights into perceptions of international, even global connections when they discuss the impacts of climate change in Greenland for Austria or when they refer to Siberia and India to explain the Central European climate. It is debatable to what extent the articles raised early awareness of anthropogenic climate change or if they are part of what Frank Uekötter recently labelled 'environmental alarmism', or both. In sum, my talk is about cultural readings of climate change in early nineteenth-century globalism and the transnational history of knowledge.