

Extrem weather events and social resonance

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Problem

Since the formation of a very broad consensus amongst scientists in the 80ies on an imminent anthropogenic climate change and since a global public discussion on this topic started, the international sociology too deals with the problems of climate change. Doing so it seems that prominent British sociologists make only limited use of the state of the art of sociological analysis, thus findings very often do not point beyond the existing political-administrative frames. The helplessness of British sociologists is for example illustrated in „ten commandments“ (Urry 2010), which however can only be artefacts and not the results of sociological thinking.

Underneath this specific level one can observe a sociological discourse on several aspects of climate change, which is not grounded in theoretical and deductive or even moral argumentation. Referring to the political and public assumption of a relationship between climate change and the genesis of violent conflicts as well as population displacements as results, the findings of explorative studies on the topic show no evidence for this thesis yet (Gleditsch 2012, 7).

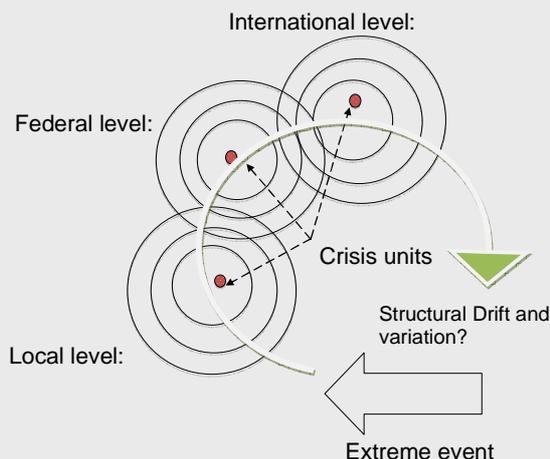
Another possible option for an useful sociological contribution to the discourse around the anthropogenic climate change concerns the question, how the functional systems of the modern western world deal with the topic of climate change. The disadvantage of such an analysis framed by systems theory, however, is the strong emphasis on the self-referential reproduction of the observed system. From this perspective negations and interruptions of the innerlogic of the system are out of focus and can hardly be detected (Weingart/Engels/Pansegrau 2002). The possibility of the overlap between an interaction- and a systemlogic and eventually the discovery of the possible effects of stakeholders, who act on front as well as on the back stages, would be - caused by the mentioned theoretical determination - permanently underexposed.

Research Questions

Our research project focuses on the phase shortly prior and right after a weather related extreme event, which can be interpreted as a catastrophe and results in a temporary interruption of the daily routines. From an interdisciplinary point of view we focus on the following questions: Despite the interruption of interdependence of complex societies - what can be done to bundle strenght, actors and their capabilities to handle the catastrophe and its outcomes? How is it possible to create social resonance and to focus attention on such an event, although society is internally differentiated by hierarchy, specific conflict constellations, contrary interests, and functional systems?

On a conceptional level the mentioned questions deal with the core question of sociology as a science: How is social order possible? This traditional topic will be extended by asking, how social order is possible in the light of an occurring extreme weather event. Beyond the usual protagonists in the sectors of public media, politics and science, the analytical focus will be on the actually interacting actors and on the social orders that may arise and stabilise against the background of an extreme weather event. Nevertheless the focus is not primarily on the social order itself but on the fragile practice of the genesis of order and social structure. In this context it is assumed that the rising of an order as a process will not so much be characterized by consensus amongst the participating actors but will rather be, empirically determined, shaped by contrary interests and their social processing. Under what circumstances will such divergences result in direct confrontations amongst the participants? When will the actors prefer an indirect form of social contradiction and in what ways consensus can be achieved? And finally: How and in what ways can the public audience exerts influence on the mentioned social forms of dealing with different opinions?

Komparative Trajekt-Analyse von Ereignis und Resonanz



Solution

The project idea picks up two main ideas for a sociological approach to the social phenomenon climate change. Firstly, the project is designed as an empirically based and explorative study. Putting the focus on empirical case studies avoids epistemologically and conceptionally one-sidedness and allows the researchers to stay open for surprises, which may be experienced in the course of a close observation of the phenomenon. Secondly, the study focuses on the dynamics of interactions without narrowing horizons and restricting the view a priori on only three main institutions or functional systems like science, politics and massmedia (Weingart/Engels/Pansegrau 2002). The questions of who declares an extreme weather situation as a catastrophe, which actors are involved and who interacts with whom when a weather related extreme event occurs and results in a temporary interruption of the daily routines can only be answered by reconstructing a specific empirical case first.

Research Design: Comparative trajectory analysis of extreme event and social resonance

Essentially, it is all about base patterns of resonance structures respectively structure formation and structural drift and variations in the framing of an extreme event interpreted as determined by climate change. As a matter of fact the developed research design deals with the special character of an extreme weather event chase by distilling its specific sociologic of the relationship between the event and social resonance. This aim will be realised by reconstructing the course of history (trajectory) of the social processing of an extreme event. In the beginning of the investigation the reconstruction will be led by the basic theoretical and epistemological questions how an extreme event becomes a discursive event. However, even more important are the following questions:

1. Why, in what ways and how far is an internally differentiated and hierarchical organized society able to react to a weather related extreme events?
2. Which impact on the social reaction to an extreme event can be observed, if more and more actors frame the weather event as a result of an anthropogenic climate change?
3. Why does society not invest more in protection and how is this justified?
4. Why and how do resolutions lose relevance?

To answer these questions there is no analytical use for focussing primarily on administrative interactions, coordinated by crisis units, that lay within the framework of protection mechanisms and civil protection. Such a restricted view would only depict a marginal slope of the complex process of resonance in society. Referring to the sociological classical writers and their works society is based on interaction, interdependency and communication. These basic elements of social life cannot be reduced to networked systems. We think that it is essential to investigate *which* actors communicate, cooperate and/or carry out conflicts in the context of transforming a physical into a social and discursive event. Which actors will be included and which ones will be excluded? How do networks emerge (and decline) and how and in what ways are these operations and processes determined by sociological and social concepts like a) space, b) time, c) power and inequality, d) gender, and e) life environments?

Data Collection

Biographically framed problem- and/or task-centered interviews

Preferred interview partners will be obtained amongst (locally) relevant protagonists who have played a special role in coping with and managing a weather related extreme event. Of particular interest are people who are in a position that allows them to speak as frankly as possible.

Local, national and international print media, radio and television reportings and electronic media

Content analysis, agenda analysis, allocations of meanings, process of resignification, strategies of steering the discourse, conflict and conflict prevention.

Documentary analysis of bibliographic publications, readers' letters, all sorts of process produced texts like internet blogs, evaluation reports, juridical files on legal disputes.

Analysis of aggregated statistical data from the political sphere, administration, insurance companies, economy, justice, police, and disaster and civil protection.