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"EVERYBODY TALKS ABOUT THE WEATHER"

Stephen Milder

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One summer day in 1966, the 23-year-old secretary Margot Müller was serving coffee at the McCann advertising agency's Frankfurt office. In the conference room, admen had gathered to discuss their ideas for a new Deutsche Bahn (German Railways) poster. Glancing at the wintry motifs they had designed, Müller said to no one in particular, "*Alle reden vom Wetter. Wir nicht.*" (Everybody talks about the weather. Not us.).¹

Müller's utterance excited her colleagues at McCann and catalyzed the creation of a celebrated advertising poster: On a black background, the ad paired Müller's slogan with the image of a locomotive plowing unencumbered through heavy snow. "Better take the train" was written in small letters at the bottom. This slogan became famous, turning the erstwhile young secretary into one of McCann's leading ad writers.

In fact, over the six decades since the Deutsche Bahn first deployed it, Müller's motto has hardly left the public discussion. According to one scholar, it is "perhaps the most frequently quoted [slogan] in the history of German advertising."² Müller's pithy comment was itself a quotation of sorts. It paraphrased an old witticism, attributed to the American journalist Charles Dudley Warner: "Everybody talks about the weather, but



The McCann Agency's 1966 Deutsche Bahn advertisement: "Everybody talks about the weather. Not us." © DB Museum Nuremberg. All rights reserved.

"Everybody Talks About the Weather"

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nobody does anything about it!”³ Both the nineteenth-century one-liner and the 1966 Deutsche Bahn advertisement trade on the idea that for middle-class suburbanites, at least, talking about the weather epitomizes idle chitchat. Hence, “doing something” is the exact opposite of talking about the weather, and Müller’s motto reminded Germans that while they were chatting about the snow, the railways’ well-trained personnel and powerful locomotives were getting travelers where they needed to go.⁴

The story of Müller’s slogan and its afterlives is not just a tale about old jokes and advertising breakthroughs. It is also an account of the changing political position of environmental problems in the era of anthropogenic climate change. In fact, following the career of Müller’s slogan reveals how increased awareness of climate change has brought environmental issues into the mainstream and redrawn the boundaries between meaningful political conversation and mindless chatter.

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When the Deutsche Bahn ad debuted, there was no doubt that talking about the weather was a shorthand for pointless small talk. In 1967, in fact, two young graphic artists used the likenesses of three “left-wing saints” to design a new poster that turned “talking about the weather” into a political epithet targeting opponents’ failure to take meaningful action. That episode in the slogan’s life began in Jürgen Holftreter’s Stuttgart studio. Seated at his desk, Holftreter was working on a collage that combined Müller’s slogan with profiles of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, when his friend Ulrich Bernhardt walked into the room. Looking over Holftreter’s shoulder, Bernhardt was stunned by what he saw. He quickly convinced Holftreter to let him have a go at the half-finished design, changed the background from black to red, and turned the collage into an ad used in the student government elections at the Stuttgart State Academy of Art and Design.⁵ Holftreter’s design was first produced in a run of just 50 silkscreen prints, but it was soon adopted by the Socialist German Students’ League (SDS) for its International Vietnam Conference in 1968, reprinted numerous times during the 1970s, and pinned to the walls of student apartments across the country. Holftreter and Bernhardt had created “the classic political poster in Germany.”⁶



Together with another student, Ulrich Bernhardt (left) presents a poster bearing a reprint of his design in January 1968. The poster features the three “left-wing saints”: (from left to right) Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin, and reads: “Everybody talks about the weather. Not us. SDS Socialist German Students’ League.” © picture alliance / dpa / Fritz Reiss. All rights reserved.

From the perspective of the radical left, Holftreter and Bernhardt’s iconic red poster was a reminder that mainstream politicians never got to the bottom of social problems by addressing the capitalist system itself. Instead, leftists argued, politicians just wasted their breath talking about “vacuities like the weather or the neighbor’s garden landscaping.”⁷ The journalist and Red Army Faction cofounder Ulrike Meinhof took this argument to its extreme in a fierce 1969 critique of recent discussions about the oppression of women. She argued that “appealing to fate and equal rights” but failing to “attack the class structures of capitalist society” that underpinned women’s exploitation amounted to no more than “talking about the weather.”⁸

In 1960s West Germany, many politicians derided environmental concerns as precisely the sort of vacuous topic that ought to be the subject of small talk, not serious politics. The response to Social Democrat Willy Brandt’s 1961 campaign pledge that “the sky over the Ruhr,” Germany’s most important—and most heavily polluted—industrial center, “must be blue again,” was telling.

Many politically engaged West Germans separated environmental problems, which they conceived of as meaningless talk about the weather, from economic concerns, the real stuff of politics.

Brandt used the image of clear, blue skies in a place whose name was synonymous with heavy industry to express how measures to mitigate air pollution would improve the “health of millions of people.”⁹ His political opponents, however, took him to task for emphasizing an irrelevant matter like the color of the sky rather than an important subject of politics, like industrial production. Minister of Economics Ludwig Erhard suggested that Brandt’s pledge to clean the air over the Ruhr was peripheral to serious politics by referring to it as a “throat lozenge.”¹⁰ The spokesman of Erhard’s Christian Democratic party went much further. By denouncing Brandt’s pledge as “a free ticket for a dangerous trip into the unknown, a sure recipe for state bankruptcy, and a document of total lack of responsibility,” he suggested that focusing on blue skies was tantamount to intentionally neglecting fundamental political matters.¹¹ On the radical fringe and in the halls of government, in other words, many politically engaged West Germans separated environmental problems, which they conceived of as meaningless talk about the weather, from economic concerns, the real stuff of politics.

Late in the 1980s, however, the emergence in popular political debates of the ozone hole and climate change offered an impetus to rethink not only the importance of environmental problems, but also what it meant to talk about the weather. Thinking along with another nineteenth-century one-liner, “climate is what we expect, weather is what we get”—a quote that is attributed to Charles Dudley Warner’s friend Mark Twain—helps to explain the changing meaning of talking about the weather and its significance. Indeed, as growing awareness of anthropogenic climate change made concerns about flooding and droughts, heat waves, and superstorms more widespread, experiences of unpredictable, extreme weather made the expectation of a stable climate appear naive. Changing weather patterns raised a question that got straight to the heart of the assumption behind Müller’s slogan—was talking about the weather really synonymous with small talk anymore, or had it become a means of getting at a seminal political issue?

Over time, environmentalists transformed the slogan’s connotation, making neglecting the weather a far more egregious offense than chatting about it.

Remarkably, environmentalists used Müller’s slogan itself in order to chip away at the idea that talking about the weather was just idle chitchat. Over time, they transformed the slogan’s connotation, making neglecting the weather a far more egregious offense than chatting about it. After all, in an era where the weather eluded expectations in ways that made it a matter of life and death, what subject could be more important?

The graphic designer Klaus Staeck jumpstarted environmentalists’ efforts to rethink what it meant to talk about the weather. Having grown up in Bitterfeld, the center of the East German chemical industry, Staeck had perceived pollution as a fundamental political problem since the age of 10, when he first got pneumonia from breathing his hometown’s toxic air. In 1956, at the age of 18, Staeck emigrated to West Germany, and, by 1990, he was already an experienced environmental campaigner and artistic provocateur. As part of a Greenpeace campaign advocating for a total ban on hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), Staeck designed a poster that paired images of German chemicals executives with the phrase “Everybody talks about the climate. We’re ruining it.” By replacing “weather” with “climate,” Staeck forced Germans to reflect on how serious talking about environmental problems could be. With the glib phrase “we’re ruining it,” he emphasized industrialists’ active role in environmental devastation.¹²



Klaus Staack's poster for Greenpeace's 1990 anti-HFCs campaign. "Everybody talks about the climate. We're ruining it." Unknown photographer. © Edition Staack / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024. All rights reserved.

At the same time as Greenpeace was pushing for a ban on HFCs, the West German Green Party latched onto climate change as an issue that could be used to show that environmental concerns were fundamental to all sorts of political problems, from transportation to energy to industrial production. The Greens made climate change the centerpiece of their campaign for the December 1990 parliamentary election—the first to take place in newly reunified Germany. Green candidates traversed the country in a chartered train, which they dubbed the "Ultimate Climate Express," and emblazoned their campaign posters with the phrase "Everybody talks about Germany. We're talking about the weather." Instead of German reunification, the poster continued, the Greens were focused on issues like "the ozone hole, smog, the greenhouse effect, storms, [and] acid rain."

Needless to say, amid the "rush to German reunification," the Greens' "climate campaign" fell flat. The West German Greens failed even to clear the "five percent hurdle" that was a prerequisite for representation in parliament and lost all 44 of their seats in one fell swoop.¹³ Though their campaign went down in history as an infamous failure, the Greens had nonetheless broached the idea that addressing environmental problems was a vital national interest. In recent years, that conception has become widespread, suggesting that in the longer run, the Greens' climate campaign contributed to a new understanding of environmental politics.

In fact, as discussions of climate change have garnered urgency, environmentalists have turned to Müller's slogan



The West German Greens' 1990 parliamentary election campaign poster. "Everybody talks about Germany. We're talking about the weather." © Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis der Heinrich-Böll Stiftung. All rights reserved.

time and again. It has proven so useful because it helps to articulate the growing consensus that climate change mitigation is a seminal political challenge, not a pet project of the well-to-do; in essence, then, the changing meaning of talking about the weather reveals the extent to which our political priorities themselves have changed in the era of anthropogenic climate change.

Today, it is failure to talk about the weather that marks a sign of neglect or serves as evidence that politicians are about to depart on a dangerous trip into the unknown. Thus, critical parodies following in the tradition of Staeck's 1990 attack on the chemical industry emphasize how despite the fact that "everybody talks about the climate," powerful politicians are "ruining it." A satirical poster created by the activist group Extinction Rebellion, for example, alleges that the conservative Christian Democrats have subsidized the coal and car industries and "actively blocked" the transition to green transit. An advertisement by the renewable-energy firm KACO contends that the liberal Free Democrats have done too little to support the solar energy industry, despite their probusiness orientation. Another satirical poster, this one created by an adbusting group and photographed by the Frankfurt activist group KoalaKollektiv, used the phrasing "Everybody talks about the future. We're making a climate crisis," as a reminder that Germany's leading energy company, RWE, "is one of the world's largest operators of fossil fuel-fired power plants."



Satirical poster by an adbusting group. "Everybody talks about the future. We're making the climate crisis." Discovered and photographed by the KoalaKollektiv who used it in their anti-greenwashing campaign. The poster is a parody of [this RWE ad](#). © KoalaKollektiv. All rights reserved.

Growing concern with climate change has also motivated advertisers to restore the powerful, problem-solving subtext of Margot Müller's old slogan by emphasizing what is to be done. Once again, the Deutsche Bahn led the way. A 2007 advertisement touted the environmental benefits of train travel with the slogan, "Everybody talks about CO₂ emissions. We're taking action."

Growing political attention to environmental problems has also changed our perceptions of who does meaningful politics.

In 2019, when Fridays for Future protests regularly mobilized tens of thousands of young Germans, the Tübingen artist Anne-Christine Klarmann created a poster that pushed even further, equating talking about the weather with meaningful political action. On a bright blue background, Klarmann's poster featured screen-printed portraits of Judith Ellens, Greta Thunberg, and Carola

Rakete. Above the three women's faces was the old slogan, "Everybody talks about the weather." But underneath the images was the phrase, "Us too." Rather than contrasting taking action with talking about the weather, Klarmann's poster made them one and the same. "Historically," she said with a nod to Holftreter and Bernhardt, "talking about the weather was just what neighbors always did—nothing more than small talk." And yet today, talking about the weather is itself a reference to taking action, a project of hard-working young activists, her poster shows. Not only Thunberg's school strike but also Ellens' food advocacy and Rakete's life-saving missions on the Mediterranean are closely linked with climate change. And what is more, the three women with whom Klarmann replaced Holftreter and Bernhardt's old, male "left-wing saints" reveal how growing political attention to environmental problems has also changed our perceptions of who does meaningful politics. These are three women, Klarmann says, who "are independent, they just do what they want; they need no party, they have no fear. They do not need to sit in the first row."¹⁴



(Left) Anna-Christian Klarmann's 2019 poster, featuring (from left to right) Judith Ellens, Greta Thunberg, and Carola Rakete. *Everybody talks about the weather. Us too*, 2019, screen print, 100 x 70 cm. © Anne-Christine Klarmann/ VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024. All rights reserved. (Right) Die Partei's poster from the 2024 elections to the European Parliament. "Everybody talks about the climate. We're making it!" © [Die PARTEI](#) / Roland Kronbauer / [Die PARTEI Landesverband Bayern](#). All rights reserved.

The changed meaning of "talking about the weather" reveals how environmental problems have moved from the margins to the center of political debates, bringing new people into politics in the process. It also offers evidence that the borders between politics and small talk have changed. In the climate age, where extreme weather has come to epitomize environmental destruction, the slogan has become so deeply associated with pressing environmental problems that posters bearing the phrase are to be found every election season. Most recently in the 2024 European Parliament election, "The Party" (a project of the satirist Martin Sonneborn known for deploying farcical slogans like "Sexy! Traffic jam!") put up posters with an image of a jumbo jet leaving a vapor trail across a

clear blue sky and the phrase “Everybody talks about the climate. We make it.” For a phrase that has its roots in a nineteenth-century witticism and is funny precisely because it states the obvious, this latest political poster suggests not only a story that has come full circle, but also a problem that is so essential to political debate that referencing it is restating the obvious. In fact, in this context, Charles Dudley Warner’s old one-liner, “Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody ever does anything about it,” has a radically different, urgent undertone.

Notes

¹ Ute Simon, email message to author, 9 June 2022.

² Jochen Kalka, *Handbuch Printwerbung: Planung, Kreation und Wirkung von Anzeigen* (München: Wirtschaftsbuch, 2008), 257.

³ The motto is sometimes also attributed to Mark Twain, but most experts agree that Twain’s friend Charles Dudley Warner actually coined the phrase. See “Everybody Talks About the Weather, but Nobody Does Anything About It,” Quote Investigator, 23 April 2010, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/04/23/everybody-talks-about-the-weather/>.

⁴ On the functionality of the ad, see Janja Polajnar, “Alle reden vom Wetter. Wir Nicht. Fahr lieber mit der Bundesbahn. Von Slogan-Karrieren in und außerhalb der Werbung,” in *Werbegeschichte(n). Markenkommunikation zwischen Tradition und Innovation*, ed. Sabine Heinemann (Springer VS, 2019), 253–80, p. 262.

⁵ Ulrich Weitz, “Plakativ,” *Kontext: Wochenzeitung*, 24 October 2012, <https://www.kontextwochenzeitung.de/kultur/82/plakativ-934.html>.

⁶ Ulrich Bernhardt, telephone interview with author, 9 March 2022.

⁷ Weitz, “Plakativ.”

⁸ Ulrike Meinhof, “Alle reden vom Wetter,” *konkret* 4 (1969): 5.

⁹ Willy Brandt, “Vertrauen in die Zukunft unseres Volkes,” *Vorwärts*, 3 May 1961, 19–23, p. 20.

¹⁰ Erhardt quoted in “Zu blauen Himmeln,” *Der Spiegel*, 8 August 1961, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/zu-blauen-himmeln-a-Oe088b54-0002-0001-0000-000043365482?sara_ref=re-xx-cp-sh.

¹¹ CDU spokesman quoted in Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, *Tschernobyl, 26. April 1986: Die ökologische Herausforderung* (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998), 199.

¹² Heinz Schutz, “Klaus Staack: Es brennt—Plakate zur Umwelt-Zerstörung und Klimakatastrophe,” *Kunstforum* 278 (2021): 218–26. See also Klaus Staack, “‘Ich musste mich früh für eine Haltung entscheiden.’ Der Plakatkünstler und Verleger Klaus Staack lebt und arbeitet bis heute in Heidelberg: Interview with Klaus Staack,” interview by Mirjam Mohr, Universität Heidelberg: Heidelberger Profile, May 2013, <https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/de/universitaet/heidelberger-profile/alumni-interviews/ich-musste-mich-frueh-fuer-eine-haltung-entscheiden>.

¹³ Notably, the East German Greens, who did not use this slogan in their campaign, did win five percent of the vote in the territory of former East Germany, and thus won eight seats in parliament.

¹⁴ Anne-Christine Klarmann, Zoom interview with author, 10 March 2022.



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