

A Discussion of Think Tanks in Climate Obstruction in Response to the “Analysis of the Moreno et al. (2022) Publication on EIKE Using Peter Gleick’s Toolbox”

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In January 2022, we published the paper “A Stronghold of Climate Change Denialism in Germany: Case Study of the Output and Press Representation of the Think Tank EIKE.” Europäisches Institut für Klima und Energie’s (EIKE’s) spokesperson has produced a rejoinder to our study, based on unfounded accusations through a misinterpretation of Gleick’s toolbox on “Deceitful Tactics and Abuse of the Scientific Process.” Here, we respond to those accusations by reviewing new evidence available on EIKE and provide further clarification of our conclusions based on the response received and the latest literature. We conclude that EIKE constitutes a clear example of an organization that masquerades as a think tank but whose work does not conform to the academic standards characteristic of such entities. Holding a key role in the German climate countermovement, its goal is not to promote scientific integrity, but rather to distort climate debates and obstruct climate action.

Keywords: climate obstruction, climate inaction, climate denial, climate change, Germany

In this paper, we address Lüdecke’s reply to our article published in the *International Journal of Communication* regarding the German think tank Europäisches Institut für Klima und Energie (EIKE). We thank the author, Horst-Joachim Lüdecke, spokesperson of EIKE, for the effort he has made to consider our study and express his disagreement with its conclusions. We welcome criticism and accept it with humility. However, we disagree with the assertions the author makes about our article in reference to Gleick’s toolbox.

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We believe that not only has the author misinterpreted Gleick's maxims but that EIKE does not even comply with these. In this text, we will attempt to highlight those aspects of Gleick's proposal that we believe to have been misinterpreted and take the opportunity to offer a follow-up discussion on the case of EIKE. Thus, we will first give our point of view on Lüdecke's criticisms of our paper, then review new studies that have come to light on the EIKE think tank since our research was published, and, finally, we will attempt to provide further clarification of our conclusions in relation to both Lüdecke's response to our article and the new evidence available on EIKE.

On the Abuse of the "Ad Hominem" Label

We wish to clarify as strongly as possible here that we at no time made an ad hominem attack on EIKE members. We have absolutely nothing against the individuals who make up EIKE. We regret that our article may have been understood in this way since this was never the intention. Below, we review each of the three elements of the supposed ad hominem attack presented by Gleick (2007) in his "Testimony to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation" for the Hearing on Climate Change Research and Scientific Integrity in order to demonstrate our belief that the reply to our article misrepresents Gleick's (2007) definitions with the aim of deflecting the criticism received.

First, with respect to the use of the "denialism" concept as an alleged form of ad hominem attack, we would like to clarify that our study was based on a line of research on climate change denialism that is well established in academia (e.g., Dunlap & McCright, 2015; Jacques, 2012; Jacques, Dunlap, & Freeman, 2008; Piltz, 2008). Although the approach to the concept of denialism has traditionally been linked more to the denial of scientific evidence, this conceptual range can include ideological opposition to climate action (Almiron, 2020). When we first began this case study years ago, our review of the literature in the field led us to adopt the framework of "denialism" because of its relevance to the area of study. Another of the more widespread concepts is that of "skepticism," which, in contrast to denialism, lends the climate action countermovement—or climate countermovement, that is, organizations that undermine climate action and are discursively aligned or even networked—an aura of (false) scientism. It is therefore not entirely appropriate to frame climate action contrarian organizations as "skeptics" (Dunlap, 2013). In fact, using this label would mask the true intentions when these are to attack the overwhelming scientific evidence for nonscientific reasons (Powell, 2011). When someone seeks to place themselves in a position of "skepticism," they are placing themselves on a plane of apparent objectivity, outside political and ideological interest, which is more relatable to "denialism" (Skoglund & Stripple, 2019). McCright (2016), for example, reserves the term "skepticism" for cases of individuals or groups who doubt the scientific arguments for climate change but are not immersed in the climate countermovement. Indeed, it is here that this author draws the line between skepticism and denialism, the latter being used to designate the organized climate countermovement that seeks to discredit the evidence and seriousness of climate change. Given that EIKE is part of this countermovement against climate action, it is appropriate to use this term. This is not, therefore, a personal attack but rather the adoption of a conceptual framework that already has a long academic tradition in this line of study. In the final section of the text, we will expand this discussion based on the current context and the new literature available.

Second, regarding the association with other organizations as a supposed form of ad hominem attack, we wish to clarify that showing publicly available information regarding these types of connections can in no way be construed as a personal attack. It is showing information, giving context. In our article, we merely collected the available data on EIKE's links to other entities. Our intention was to provide the best possible context with data that, again, were publicly available. Hence the reason that section is part of our literature review and context and not part of our empirical study. We therefore understand this argument against us as a distortion of what amounts to an ad hominem attack. In our study, we did not simply say that EIKE has a certain position on climate change because it is associated with certain organizations. We have analyzed its contents and its press coverage. If our intention had been to make an ad hominem attack, we would not have bothered to read such a large number of outputs. What we did was trace the context of EIKE and its related organizations with the best information we had available, a necessary requirement for any scientific article. In fact, the context of EIKE and its relations with other organizations in the emerging German climate countermovement is of such interest that it has prompted empirical studies, which we will review in the next section.

Third, the above also applies with regard to the motivation on sources of funding as an alleged ad hominem attack. We set out to collect the information available on the opaque funding of EIKE as context. We believe it is vital to understand why these messages are issued in order to have context regarding EIKE's funding and interests. In the critique of our article, the author mentions that we also receive funding. And of course, academic production requires funding. However, here the author compares two incomparable elements: EIKE's funding and transparency with ours. In our case, we are funded by two public calls for the development of scientific projects managed by the Spanish State: on the one hand, a call by the Spanish State Research Agency and the European Regional Development Fund, under Grant No. CSO2016-78421-R. In this case, concerning the project that supports the realization of the present case study, which was reviewed by independent, anonymous evaluators and assessed in a public competition of scientific merit. We were also funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, under Grant No. FPU18/04207. This relates to the doctoral research project of the first author of this article, who also passed a series of anonymous evaluations on his academic merits and his line of research. What is important, then, is the interest of the funding source. In our case, the only interest that drives our donors is scientific progress, since we are funded by public calls for proposals. Little is known about the funding of EIKE; it is opaque, and we tried to gather the few available clues to it in our literature review. In conclusion, then, the comments on funding are not a personal attack, and our funding sources and transparency are not comparable to EIKE's.

In addition to the above, it is worth noting EIKE's questionable stance in making these kinds of accusations, since they make many ad hominem attacks on proclimate action individuals in their own outputs. As discussed by Plehwe and Neujeffski (2020), EIKE has devoted efforts to attacking scientists working on climate change mitigation, such as Stefan Rahmstorf and Hans Joachim Schellnhuber at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK). They have also focused on attacking climate activists—Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future in particular (Plehwe & Neujeffski, 2020). From this we can deduce that EIKE does not really have concerns over scientific integrity or the use of ad hominem attacks since making them is part of their communication strategy. Thus, by accusing their critics of making ad hominem

attacks, they seek not to accept criticism or attempt to counter it. This kind of behavior is far from the ideal of scientific integrity that the author claims to defend in his response.

EIKE's Role in the Emergence of the German Climate Countermovement

Since the publication of our article in the *International Journal of Communication* (Moreno, Kinn, & Narberhaus, 2022), further research on the EIKE think tank has been published (Ruser, 2022a, 2022b). These new studies make empirical contributions to the role of EIKE in the emerging German climate countermovement. The new evidence presented both confirms our conclusions and provides new points for discussion.

One of the aforementioned papers is entitled "*En finir avec le consensus climatique: Le rôle des think tanks dans l'émergence tardive du réseau climatocéptique en Allemagne*" ("Breaking the Climate Consensus: The Role of Think Tanks in the Late Emergence of the Climate Skeptic Network in Germany") and authored by Ruser (2022a). This research shows that EIKE has played a broker role in the transfer of ideas and communication strategies between the German climate countermovement and U.S. neoliberal think tanks. The analysis employed makes use of a relational approach, aimed at weaving a network of collaborations that serves to make sense of the operations of the researched organizations. For this author, an organization increases its influence if it is networked with others with similar views. Thus, while in our article there was a contextual purpose for collecting data on the EIKE profile and its connections, Ruser (2022a) synthesizes this kind of link from a relational perspective. Ruser (2022a) reflects on how, despite being a rather small think tank and having a meager academic production, EIKE has taken on a central role in the climate countermovement in Germany. In this regard, the article indicates that interorganizational rather than intraorganizational aspects explain EIKE's emergence in this network. Ruser's (2022a) results thus highlight the central role assumed by EIKE in the German climate action contrarian network, in addition to those adopted by the Hayek Society, the Mont Pelerin Society, the CATO Institute, the Atlas Network, and the Heartland Institute. Although the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party has brought opposition to climate policies to the political chessboard, it has not tended to establish networks so much as build on those already woven by think tanks such as EIKE.

According to Ruser's (2022a) modularity analysis of the German climate action counternetwork, EIKE is integrated within three communities. The first is that of the "new political right" in Germany, including proximity to the AfD party and its political foundation, Desiderius Erasmus, the media outlet *Freie Welt* ("Free World") and the Netzwerk Vernunftkraft ("Reason Power Network"). According to Ruser (2022a), the online medium *Freie Welt* provides a platform for AfD politicians and supporters, including EIKE staff members. However, this was left out of our analysis of EIKE's press representation since it did not appear among those covered by the search platform we used. Thus, Ruser's (2022a) finding points to the need for future research on media and opposition to climate action to include some of these niche media outlets. The second community in which EIKE is integrated is that of U.S. think tanks opposed to climate action. Organizations such as Heartland, CATO, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, and the Atlas Network fall into this group. These organizations, Ruser (2022a) comments, have experience in orchestrating communication campaigns to sow doubt regarding the scientific evidence of climate change and thus prevent the adoption of climate policies. That EIKE is connected with them indicates that they both have access to and derive inspiration from their communications and public

relations tactics, as well as access to the large-scale global antiregulatory network of which they are a part. The third community is that of German free market stakeholders. These include the Naumann Political Foundation, affiliated with the Freie Demokratische Partei (Liberal Democratic Party), the Institut für Unternehmerische Freiheit Berlin (Institute for Free Enterprise Berlin) and the Friedrich von Hayek Society. Ultimately, an analysis of these communities indicates that EIKE plays a central role in the German climate action network and has the capacity to serve as a bridge between different groups, allowing it greater power to influence the public discourse.

In other similar research on the potential of the network against German climate action, Ruser (2022b) delves into EIKE networking. The results of this analysis reveal EIKE's central role in the German network, in which Heartland and *Freie Welt* also have a relevant position. According to the Ruser (2022b), the centrality of a few actors opens up a discussion on the accumulation of social capital. Ruser (2022b) follows a perspective that understands social capital as being based on the establishment of collaborative networks and the ability to mobilize potential resources through a network. In this case, the relationships of trust between groups opposed to climate action, likeminded media, and international organizations give EIKE and the German network a better position from which to exert political influence. In the case of the German climate countermovement, this political influence comes through links between organizations such as EIKE and related organizations and the AfD party. Ruser (2022a) indicates that in the landscape of German think tanks, EIKE stands out as the largest think tank to be disseminating ideas against climate action. Despite not having the resources of U.S. think tanks, its accumulation of social capital through interconnections with other climate action countergroups at the national and international levels makes it an interesting object of study (Ruser 2022b). In fact, these types of interconnections often go unnoticed (Ruser 2022b). This, we think, leads to an underestimation of their ability to distort public debates around issues as relevant as climate change.

Comparison of Lüdecke's (2023) Response and the Maxims of Gleick (2007)

The conclusions of our article—that EIKE is against climate action and employs a scientific rhetoric to support its stance—are confirmed by the response we have received. We believe it to be totally legitimate that in a democratic society, everyone is able to express whatever position they deem appropriate with respect to matters of public interest. As opposed to what Lüdecke (2023) seems to suggest in his reply, we do not question that. What we defend is the legitimate criticism of anyone's position, in the case of our study, using all the information available to us and the results of our analysis. What the rejoinder to our study demonstrates is, on the one hand, that the conclusions of our research do reflect reality. And, on the other hand, that EIKE is undertaking efforts to distort the debate on climate change—in this case, by making unfounded claims regarding the scientific integrity of our research. In doing so, Lüdecke (2023) is trying to distort the idea, widely demonstrated by this and many other studies in this same line of research, that some networked organizations with an interest in defending the status quo are attacking the scientific evidence on climate change and climate action. In fact, the criticism we have received is even contradictory: While defending the legitimacy of criticizing scientific evidence on climate change, the author challenges the legitimacy of our critically scrutinizing him and his organization for defending such a position. In a democratic society, the right to criticize is fundamental, and EIKE must accept this criticism.

What is also paradoxical is that in his criticism of our article, the author refers to a toolbox that calls into question the very stance of EIKE. One of the threats to scientific integrity that Lüdecke (2023) lists from Gleick's (2007) definitions is "arguments from ideology" (p. 3). The rejection of scientific evidence on ideological grounds is a threat to scientific integrity, since it is a tactic that overlooks the weight of scientific arguments in public debate. Gleick (2007) states that:

In the United States, ideological arguments that lead to the rejection of scientific information and conclusions, and contribute to public confusion and policy disarray, are still seen in disputes over evolution, climate change, sex education, and various health research efforts, such as stem cells. The inability to believe or accept something because of ideological or religious contradictions says nothing about the accuracy or truth of scientific findings. (p. 3)

Furthermore, according to Gleick's (2007) premises, the "Misuse of Uncertainty and Arguments from Consensus" (p. 4) also goes against academic integrity. In fact, Gleick (2007) placed the misunderstanding between the nature of science and the misuse of uncertainty on a political plane, saying that there is no absolute certainty in science—and on this point we agree with Lüdecke (2023): Science is not religion and is not about beliefs, but about evidence. As Gleick (2007) stated, although not absolute, evidence in science indicates the best knowledge we have about something. He also warned, however, that political strategists use the uncertainty so inherent in science to excuse taking actions, even when the available evidence endorses taking them. This is the case of the anthropogenic climate change we are experiencing. Gleick (2007) stated that exploiting the lack of absolutes in science indicates behavior that lacks integrity, as well as misinterpreting consensus. In his response to our article, Lüdecke (2023) exemplifies this behavior on numerous occasions, indicating that the consensus on climate change is "fuzzy" or "nonspecific," and justifies its undermining at the political level. Such a response demonstrates precisely the misunderstanding that Gleick (2007) warns against:

An argument is often made in the context of global climate change that very large numbers of climate scientists believe in climate change; therefore it must be a serious problem. This is backwards: climate change is a serious problem because of the mass of scientific evidence that underlies those beliefs, and it is that evidence that produces the consensus of opinion. The strength of the argument comes from the science itself, not the consensus. (p. 5)

It is for this reason that we cannot discuss the specific scientific aspects of climate change that appear in the response: doing so would give rise to a false debate that would put the extensive evidence that exists on anthropogenic climate change on the same level as the scant and dubious arguments against it. Our focus here is on communication, and we have therefore focused on analyzing both the messages issued by the think tank EIKE and its representation in the press. What we have seen here is yet another attempt to delegitimize criticism, with unfounded accusations of ad hominem attack, and, in an effort to divert the debate, seek to delay climate policies by fueling sterile discussions regarding the scientific community's already broad consensus on climate change.

Distorting Climate Debates by Misusing the “Think Tank” Label

In light of this response and the new studies on EIKE and its networking activities, we can make a more detailed discussion of the conclusions of our study and our conceptual approach. In our analysis, we mainly used the framework of denialism since EIKE, in its outputs, has grounded its discourse primarily in an apparently scientific plane, whether to attack climate action, scientific evidence on climate change, or the climate movement. In other words, EIKE has given its contents a halo of scientism, and that is why the framework of denialism was the most appropriate, according to the available literature. However, the new findings on EIKE’s networking activities, which expand in an empirical and detailed way what we only contextually pointed out in our literature review, bring a new perspective.

EIKE is not just a stronghold that maintains a tough discourse against scientific evidence on climate change in Germany. It is a key part of the emergent network of organizations against climate action in that country. Its integration into various communities of this type both nationally and internationally makes it more appropriate to understand EIKE as part of a structure of obstruction as described for the United States (Climate Social Science Network, 2021). Taking into account the parallels—the climate countermovement in the United States has far more resources, more economic and social capital, and more public support—it is possible to understand EIKE as an organization aimed at distorting public debate on climate action and obstructing the adoption of climate policies. Situating this case study in the area of climate obstructionism would also be in line with the latest conceptual advances in the field of study. The climate obstructionism line seeks to serve as an umbrella for describing the complexities of denialism, delayism, and inaction from an interdisciplinary point of view that integrates communication, sociology, history, psychology, and other areas (Ekberg, Forchtner, Hultman, & Jylhä, 2023). Thus, to understand think tanks like EIKE only through the prism of the more traditional “denialism” concept of this line of research would be simplistic, given that they do much more than reject scientific evidence and distort debates regarding climate science. Their ultimate goal is to influence political decision making by attempting to introduce ideas against climate action into the public debate. While the halo of scientism carries considerable weight in that argument in the case of EIKE, the obstructionism framework allows us to broaden the scope to include other dimensions such as networking and social capital formation.

Given the overwhelming scientific evidence providing proof of anthropogenic climate change and the need for action, there is an urgent need to identify and counter the public relations strategies of organizations seeking to boycott progress on climate policies. The social sciences have an important role to play in identifying discourses, networks, influences, interests, and strategies in this regard. In the case of EIKE, both our study and other research have shown the role played by this think tank in the emerging network against climate action in Germany. We believe that future research in this area should move beyond the denialist framework to adopt more holistic perspectives on climate obstruction. Mere denial of scientific evidence alone cannot be understood; it is necessary to unravel the context, networks, and interests of the actors issuing such messages to make sense of them.

An ethical reflection on the role that think tanks play in democracy is therefore urgently required. Although it must be acknowledged that many think tanks working on climate issues do rigorous academic work and make quality contributions to the public debate, others can be seen to have perverted the think tank label

to give certain discourses an aura of academic rigor that is not real. As Almiron and Xifra (2021) have discussed, think tanks such as EIKE do not fulfill the role that an organization of this type should have in a democracy: They generate opinion rather than expert knowledge; they do not oversee power imbalances that lead to inequality in society; they are not diverse; they are not oriented toward the common good; and they do not make relevant or rigorous academic contributions to public debate. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in February 2022, the Jena Tax Office revoked EIKE's nonprofit status (EIKE, 2022; Lobbypedia, 2022). The report that upheld this decision, prepared by Sönke Zaehle, director of the Max Planck Institute for Biogeochemistry in Jena, analyzed EIKE's activity in 2018. It concluded that EIKE's publications are problematic and technically deficient, that they do not support independent research and that they do not conform to the German Research Foundation's principles of good scientific practice. Furthermore, the Scientific Services of the German Bundestag also pointed out significant deficiencies after analyzing EIKE publications—some written by the author of the reply to our study (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019).

In conclusion, we have been able to verify, first, that EIKE's discourse is aligned with the ideas of climate action contrarian organizations in the United States. We know now that entities such as EIKE serve as a bridge between both sides of the Atlantic and accumulate relevant social capital. We also know that EIKE's work lacks academic rigor and that its objective is not remotely the promotion of scientific integrity but rather the obstruction of climate action for purposes unrelated to science and closer to ideological interests. It is therefore necessary to alert the academic community that the work of think tanks such as EIKE—as found in its discourse, verified in the response received to our study, and discussed in the literature—infringes on scientific integrity and perverts the public debate on such a compelling issue as climate change.

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