

Rethinking: *Wind, Wende, Wandel*

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The elements fire, water, earth and air were already conceptualized as the four primary and all-encompassing substances in ancient times, for example in classical Greek thought, Buddhism, and in Middle Eastern and Medieval medical philosophy.¹ Occasionally, instead of the ensemble fire, water, earth, and air they have been translated into modern vernacular as fire, water, earth and *wind*. The word wind, meaning movement of the air, has the same spelling in German as in English but is pronounced [vɪnt]. *Wind*, air flow, is phonetically and in nautical practice related to *Wende*. The word *Wende* in German does not only mean motion, but an extreme motion; a reversal, a turning point of large proportions. The term is now associated both academically and popularly with the year 1989. In November of that year and as the result of a peaceful revolution, the Berlin Wall came down, which subsequently led to the unification of Germany and, in the larger geopolitical context, came to signify the end of the Cold War.

However, in recent times the term *Wende* has become the designator of another kind of sweeping historical change, the systematic commitment to replacing increasing amounts of fossil-fuel energy with renewable energy sources.²

The resulting compound word reads *Energiewende* (energy transition). As a policy it was proposed by Angela Merkel's government in 2010 and originally referred to the pursuit of an energy portfolio consisting of a mix of wind, biomass, solar, and

nuclear sources. When very soon after this declaration the catastrophe in Fukushima happened, the German political leadership vowed that the transition to the use of clean energies would no longer include nuclear power.

While we might wonder why Germany has made this commitment to cleaner sources of energy that are relatively expensive to harvest, we must remember that the country has 80 million inhabitants, twice as many as California, but is actually smaller than California. Preserving resources such as clean air and potable water is therefore of particular urgency and relevance. Moreover, maybe a long-standing awareness of observable ecological crises such as the existence of acid rain in the forests, threats to the ecosystem of the unique intertidal habitats, and other localized pollution has made it relatively easy for Germans to also believe in the reality of *Klimawandel*, climate change, and here I have arrived at my third term in the phonetic triad *Wind*, *Wende*, and *Wandel*. Whereas, as I've noted, *Wind* means a movement or motion and *Wende* means more pervasively a turning point, *Wandel* — etymologically related to *Wende* — may refer to constant change which can include a sense of volatility, unpredictability, and unreliability. The magazine *Global Magazin für nachhaltige Zukunft* [Global Magazine for a sustainable future] reports that around 93% of the German population believe that climate change is happening, 5% are skeptical, and only 2% outright deny its occurrence.³

Here in the US and with the season of presidential elections upon us, we sometimes speak of Washington insiders and outsiders, establishment and

antiestablishment candidates and the like. However, many movements, many winds of change, as it were, start out outside of the establishment and eventually become part of it. When the Green Party in Germany was founded in 1980 it was to a large extent a youth and protest movement, and nobody could have predicted that only three years later the party would have representatives in the German federal parliament, and that in the late 1990s it would even become one of two coalition parties elected to run the federal government, a position which the Green Party held for eight years.

It has to be noted that Germany's strong belief in the reality of climate change and the country's general commitment to a transition to renewable energies has not prevented Germans from being among the world's most frequent flyers and long distance travelers⁴ and their economy from being highly dependent on strong expert figures,⁵ so the question of externalization of its carbon footprint will still need to be addressed for many years to come. This is one of those dilemmas, which the philosopher Max Weber recognized as a cognitive dissonance and existential paradox: the irreconcilability between an ethics of conviction and responsible societal practice. Nevertheless, Germany has come a long way in attempting to protect nature, to legislate and incentivize such protections, and also, as the current exhibition "Rethinking" shows, in trying to learn *from* nature.

The present exhibition "Rethinking: Learning From Nature" is on display at the Seeley G. Mudd Library (640 N. College Street) at Pomona College until March 3,

2016. It is open Mondays through Fridays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and has limited additional opening hours on Saturdays and by appointment. The exhibition consists of four rooms. Each room or pavilion is dedicated to one of the four elements water, fire, earth, and wind. In each pavilion a large wall with beautiful images and bilingual captions highlights the positive, emotional and mythological connotations and life-sustaining qualities a given element has. When visitors then turn to the reverse side of the large display, they are confronted with the negative aspects of that element: its own damaging force, but also its endangerment by human-caused destructive developments. Smaller, reversible display walls bring stories and examples of how efforts are faring at present to protect that element.

A third component in each room, the triangular, rotatable display areas, present cutting-edge experiments and new inventions within the realm of that element. These are the exhibit's components that engage with the idea of "rethinking," the title and topic of the exhibition. Each pavilion also features interactive activities and video screens showing short films. The exhibition was primarily designed for middle and high school students with an interest in STEM fields, the environment, bionics, and/or German language. Due to its attractive design and thoughtful curating, the exhibition is also worth seeing for anyone interested in science writing, science pedagogy, exhibition design, and the presentation of environmental themes.

Instructors and visitors and their families can find supplemental materials and apps in English and German that are informative, thought provoking, and entertaining at this website: <https://www.goethe.de/ins/us/en/sta/ney/lhr/umd.html>

Sponsored by the Goethe Institut, the exhibit is traveling internationally, with stops in Moscow, Washington DC, New York, Toronto, Bogota, and currently Claremont. In Claremont it is hosted by Pomona College and is free and open to the public.

¹ For a concise overview, see Philip Ball. *The Elements: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. Print. See also Kelley L. Ross
<http://www.friesian.com/elements.htm>

² As a matter of fact, the term “Energiewende” was coined in the early 1980s already, but it only gained wider currency around the year 2010. See also
<http://www.economist.com/node/21559667>

³ <http://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/mensch/klimawandel-skeptiker-sind-in-deutschland-eine-minderheit-a-906481.html>

⁴ <http://www.bloomberg.com/visual-data/best-and-worst/top-spenders-on-international-tourism-countries>

⁵ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2078rank.html>