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Research note (encyclopedia entry style) and literature list on

Flight shame

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Bibliographical note: This research note is part of a discussion on flight shame with Klavs Birkholm, Adjunct Associate Professor & founder of the think-tank teknoetik.org.

Also known as “shame of flying”. Translation from Swedish “flygskam”, can be traced back to 2018 when climate activist and founder of Fridays for Future, Greta Thunberg, demonstratively took the train. Used to denote the feeling of guilt associated with air travel, an activity of high climate impact. Based on the assumption of individual climate responsibility (as opposed to climate apathy), the recognition of the acuteness of the unfolding climate crisis (as opposed to anthropogenic climate change denial), as well as an awareness of the need for behavioral change (as opposed to a belief in technological / market “fixes”). As such, the term is truly interdisciplinary, enmeshing question of belief systems and morality of the humanities with climatology and economics.

The lexicon entry on flight shame falls in two halves: Firstly, it looks into the life of shame in climate change debate and the revival of the notion of sin through the backdoor: How and when did (pseudo)-religious arguments enter narratives on climate change mitigation? Secondly, it explores what there is to be ashamed about by looking into the “external costs of aviation”: Air travel is one of the most potent individual choices to emit greenhouse gasses, not only because the energy intensity of getting a plane off the ground and make it stay there, but also because the “emissions per passenger kilometer” must be corrected for their high altitude, causing a two to four times greater “climate warming potential”. *Flight shame* is further fueled by the time of release (that is, now, at the tipping point of climatic change). Compared to other climate conscious individual choices (like vegetarian diet, biking instead of driving, recycling etc.), and because other choices (renewable energy-based electricity, heating/cooling and transport systems) are often beyond individual agency, “not flying today” in fact turns out to be one of the few choices individuals control in relation to mitigating climate change. However, this behavioral change has until today not been achieved through economic measures of regulation. Flight shame can thus be perceived as a cultural correction for a market failure, truly internalizing the external costs of aviation. Safe travels!

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