

Interdisciplinary encounters and empirical insights: My key takeaways from the Summer School

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In this short blog, I will briefly present my key take-aways from the Post-Carbon Futures Summer School that took place in Halle (Saale) between 09/19-09/25. These insights are, firstly, the interdisciplinary exchange, secondly, the theoretical discussions that take place in Anthropology, and thirdly, the empirical insights that I take with me for my Ph.D. project. I will present all three in the following:

As I write my Ph.D. about the hydrogen economy in Germany, I was particularly excited to gain some empirical insights into the formation of the hydrogen economy in the region, particularly in Halle (Gas Power Plant of the Stadtwerke) and Leuna (Chemical Park Leuna) The field trip to the gas power plant of the Stadtwerke Halle provided interesting insights into ongoing decision-making processes at the local level, as the company develops its decarbonization plans according to national decarbonization goals (and time horizons). As one option, the company discusses the decarbonization of its existing power plant by replacing the use of fossil gas with (green) hydrogen. Already today, its gas turbines are hydrogen ready. However, the company also discusses alternative pathways to carbon neutrality. In view of the mounting uncertainties regarding future developments such as the availability and costs of green hydrogen, the company strives to develop a “decision-making tree” which should allow the company to react quickly to regulatory, technological, and other developments that affect the economics of its decarbonization plan. The decision-making tree is based on a scenario analysis that the company currently conducts to assess its decarbonization opportunities. In this sense, the local agency in regard to energy transition seems limited. All the company promises to do is react as quickly as possible to developments that are largely beyond the control of the company itself.

Moreover, the discussion of the decarbonization of the Leuna Chemical Park at the Summer School was closely aligned with my work. Linde, one of the largest hydrogen-producing corporations in Germany is based in Leuna.

However, the company currently produces hydrogen based on fossil fuels and sells it mainly as a chemical feedstock for further production processes. In the future, this so-called grey-hydrogen needs to be replaced with green hydrogen, produced from renewable energy. The current hydrogen boom emphasizes the importance that (green) hydrogen will play in the global energy transition. On the one hand, the increasing importance of (green) hydrogen for the energy sector poses great opportunities for Linde to develop new business opportunities. On the other hand, other powerful actors (particularly energy suppliers) now enter the hydrogen business and represent new competitors for Linde that could potentially disrupt its existing business areas. As such, Linde seems well-positioned to become an important player in the future hydrogen economy, even though its success will depend on the company's ability to push the decarbonization agenda proactively.

Besides Linde, the local oil industry at the Leuna Chemical Park is heavily invested in the use of green hydrogen as a chemical feedstock for the production of synthetic fuels. Insofar, the chemical park is an interesting site to consider questions of hydrogen production and use in different economic sectors, as well as the decarbonization of the chemical industry and its infrastructural assets. Since Felix Ringel will conduct a research project on the chemical park in the future, I think that the Summer School provided excellent opportunities for networking and thinking about possible collaborations in the future.

As I have a background in economic geography and consider myself a political economist, the discussions with the participating anthropologists offered inspiring insights into alternative ways of doing research. From my perspective, the anthropological epistemology focuses on the micro-level of everyday practices and meaning. In this regard, the research goals and methods (participatory observation) of the anthropologists present at the Summer School differed from my own, more macro-oriented research goals and methods (expert interviews). Nevertheless, similarities with geography exist as well, as anthropological research, for example, highlights the importance of certain places for communities. Therefore, the conference offered me important means to reflect on my disciplinary views and assumptions.

I could best link two theoretical discussions that take place in anthropology to my work: First, work on the anthropology of time. As I currently write a paper about the governance of the hydrogen economy in Germany which touches on temporal issues, the concept of temporal agency was particularly insightful for my ongoing work (Ringel 2016). Second, I had not considered the possible importance of macro-spatial categories and long durée developments for my work, such as the fall of state communism and the emergence of post-socialist spaces which the conference focused on. How (if so?) do these categories affect the emerging hydrogen economy? This is one research question that I take with me from the conference.

Last but not least, I want to deeply thank the organizers for assembling this outstanding summer school. In difficult times like these, organizing an offline event requires a lot of care. The event showed me that it is indeed possible to organize events again and it proofed to me that the quality of the academic exchange and networking in a shared space is incomparable to online events.

I hope to stay in contact and wish all of the attendees all the best for their future research endeavors.

References

Ringel, Felix. 2016. Can Time Be Tricked? A Theoretical Introduction. *Can Time Be Tricked? A Theoretical Introduction The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 34 (1), p. 22-31.

About the Author

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