

The 2021 Summer School in Halle: A PhD student's reflective account

Matthias Kloft

As the train crept its way towards the Halle train station, I looked out my window and took stock of the scenery. Prominent across the landscape was a large smoking chimney that belonged to a coal powerplant. It was some kilometres away from the train tracks. The thick smoke coming out of the stacks had that optical illusion where it did not seem to be moving at all. It looked almost as if it was frozen in time. It seemed somehow appropriate that the Summer School on Post Carbon Futures was about to be held in this city.

In other areas of Germany, the relatively recent construction of wind turbines and solar panels has made visible what a post-carbon future might look like and the politics that comes with it. The smoking chimneys in Halle might evoke a sense of the past — one that should be left behind. But these somewhat archaic constructions also raise questions about the development — and potentially uneven development — of post-carbon futures. Will that future ever arrive?

Clearly, if the world wants to reach the agreed cap of 1,5°C of global warming, we need to transition toward more sustainable energy production. However, energy transition policies must take into account the ways through which different modalities of energy extraction and power production - with coal, for example – are intertwined into people's daily lives. In other words, there is a sociality to coal production in the way labour conjoins with ideals of class, gender and even, kin. Coal can also frame how people think of the past and even the future. In many respects, the politics of energy transitions are underlined by questions and, quite often, heated debates and contested narratives pertaining to the ideals of the past and imaginaries of the future. The Summer school offered an opportunity to engage with and learn about these different debates and narratives through various interesting field trips and discussions with local actors and international scholars.

In her lecture about energy dilemmas, the anthropologist, Professor Mette High, spoke on a tangent about how capitalist logic tends to value knowledge that is mobile, able to move from one context to another. Her analysis prompted me to think back to the chimney I saw from the train and what happens to production when a certain kind of knowledge is no longer valued. It can become stuck and even appear out of time or a thing of the past. This notion of temporality also resonated with the interdisciplinary discussion we had with Ralf Wehrspohn, a physicist and member of the “Kohlekommission”ⁱ, who insisted that the technologies needed for Germany’s energy transition (Energiewende) were already sitting in the drawers of scientists and engineers. The current problem was one of governing the social and cultural elements of society in a way that would create consent and excitement about one or the other technical application. From the perspective of those scientists and engineers, a coherent vision and plan for a sustainable energy transition plan would require anthropologists and other social sciences to find from local communities their needs and visions of the future. It was interesting to me that scientists and engineers assumed that a coherent plan could emerge from a collection of a heterogeneous panoply of lived experiences.

In many ways, the interdisciplinary component of the summer school encouraged me to think further about my own research interests in digitalization and engineering knowledge amongst Germany’s *mittelstand*. I wondered about possible ways to collaborate and perhaps even co-research with engineers. At the same time, the strong anthropological focus of the summer school encouraged me to think critically about energy transitions and the dilemmas such restructurings posed. I started to reflect further on the politics involved in social transformation and making visible and explicit certain kinds of knowledge, such as digitalized engineering.

What does it mean to speak of transformation, especially transition? The anthropologist Chris Hann once pointed out that anthropologists should be careful when approaching the concept of “transition” as it potentially does not consider in full the multiplicity of lived realities of the people who endure transitions within its designated spaces (Hann 2007).

In fact, there is a huge body of literature showing the different ways in which people survive these processes of transformations without transforming too much of their values and the situated knowledge they possess (Caldwell 2004, Dunn 2004).

The school's theme was "Post-Carbon Futures". Yet, we, as visitors to Halle and as scholars (and aspiring scholars) of energy transitions, were firmly situated in the present. We even, perhaps, paid closer attention to the past than to the future. The first of three thematic segments of the Summer school entitled "Energopolitics and urban industrial entanglements" offered participants the opportunity to visit Halle Neustadt, a prototypical socialist urban landscape that was connected to the former chemical industry. An industry that fell victim to post-socialist transitions of the past. Looking at the local coal industry of the present in the context of energy transitions, one could ask whether history repeats itself or whether the past hasn't fully transitioned yet. But then again, perhaps imaginaries of the future are not supposed to be fulfilled. Our pasts will always be spectres shaping the way we think about the future.

Ideas and imaginaries of the future were aplenty throughout the summer school. One of which was put in focus by a field trip to the "Energiepark Dieselstraße", a powerplant of the city of Halle which provides district heating and electricity to the city's grid. The plant is in the process of transformation to run on renewable energy sources. Crucial to this transformation is not only material changes to the plant like the addition of a gigantic hot water storage tank, a smart grid, and other digital technologies but also new kinds of knowledge and expertise. Even though none of these skills and technologies are particularly typical to the city of Halle itself, the combination of all of them follows a historical trajectory that is very much specific to the place.

The summer school offered an opportunity to think about knowledge and how it transforms in the context of the structural change that is often described in the German context as energy-transition or "Energiewende". I was prompted to think about the temporal and spatial dimensions of knowledge and how it is valued accordingly under capitalist imperatives. It also brought to the fore the importance of the social sciences in the public debates about energy transitions, as there is clearly a need to contextualize technological applications like smart grids and energy storage tanks and make visible the spatial particularities that lead to their success or failure.

On a final note, after two years of a global pandemic with physical distancing and isolation mandates, many of the school's participants had their first chance of good old-fashioned analogue face to face socializing!

References

Caldwell, M.L. (2004). Domesticating the French Fry: McDonald's and Consumerism in Moscow. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 4(1), 5–26.

Dunn, E.C. (2004). *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press.

Hann, Chris. (2007). After Communism. Reflections on East European Anthropology and the Transition. *Social Anthropology*. 2. 229 - 249.

About the Author

Matthias Kloft holds a Master's Degree in Science and Technology Studies from the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt. In his M.A. Thesis, he explored the role of speculation within various forms of expert knowledge inside Lebanon's emerging hydrocarbon industry. He is currently in the process of designing a PhD research project that explores processes of digitalization within Germany's Industrial landscape.

¹ Kommission für Wachstum, Strukturwandel und Beschäftigung - Commission for Growth, Structural Change and Employment