

What do we talk about when we talk about post-carbon futures? Reflections on the *Post-Carbon Futures Cities, Industries and Energies in Central Europe* Summer School in Halle

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“One way or another, they [*tourists*] bring value, not only in the financial sense but also intellectually, becoming objects of contemplation. In addition, the figures and gazes of tourists shape and change the landscape familiar to the locals, emphasizing the aspects that the locals have failed to notice and appreciate. In this way, deserted places become destinations, and vice versa,” I recall this thought by Vytautas Michelkevičius’ in the Nida Art Colony Log “On Critical Tourism” (2013: 4) when standing at the bottom of *Tagebau Profen*, an opencast lignite mine on a cloudy afternoon on Friday, September 24, 2021. Spending one’s weekend catching the last breath of a mine is not a usual tourist attraction, but equipped with theoretical knowledge, we – anthropologists, human geographers, and the alike – often still find ourselves unarmed when entering the field for the first time, so I believe it is fair to call ourselves critical tourists, looking not for pleasure, but... What are we actually (re)searching for?

Being guided around by the director of the mine, the awe of observing industrial landscapes and heavy machinery turns to anxiety when they express their skepticism over man-made climate change. Our guide is not in denial, but pragmatic, carefully illustrating his point by positioning students around on an imaginary time scale, showing us how fossil fuels were planted in earth long before the tantrums of the climate began, and how now, after the third ice age, warming is inevitable. Why, then, not make the best out of it the way we always did?

You cannot go around telling people they are evil, although Tobias Holzlehner does make a point when comparing the director as an archetype to the Frankenstein’s monster from Bruno Latour’s “Love Your Monsters” perspective, that is, an abandoned invention that we as society have failed to take care of (Latour 2012).

Even though obviously skeptical glances are exchanged in the group, the fact that the discussion continues until the very last moment when students have to be explicitly called back to the bus is a sign of mutual interest – between the monster, towards its' creator's children, and the children, for whom the *now* was once designed for as *future*. What do *we*, choosing to face the problem talk about when we talk about post-carbon futures? Reclaiming, rewilding, recultivating have been recurring concepts in (academic) theory and (postindustrial) practice for decades. Additionally, turning from material aspects of land use to the embracing its history and memories, Hilary Orange has proposed the lens of reanimation as an approach that takes into account three additional, sociocultural aspects of how we deal with industrial spaces. These are the dynamics of forgetting and remembering, the continual transformation of heritage through everyday experience, and the transformative potential of scholarship and community engagement (Orange 2015: 15). Not only do these aspects raise the question of whom do we talk to when we talk about post-*anything* futures, but also self-reflective contemplations on what kind of impact – if any – do we as researchers have on our subject(s)?

Moreover, what if the expectations of an *informed* researcher do not match the local experience-based worldview and the socioeconomic reality which relies heavily on the *status quo*? Energy production is both an international matter and – often conflictingly – linked to ideas of national sovereignty, as we learn from the director of the mine, but at the end of the day it is the local community that has to face the byproducts and leftovers of the industry – the pollution, wastelands, and abandonment. Although there are examples of resistance, my own fieldwork, and that of other participants of the summer school has proved otherwise: extractivism is seen as necessary evil to support the (local) economy, be it either through creating jobs or receiving compensation for land use and pollution. A toxic resilience, at the price of health and environment.

Just like there is no one-size-fits-all solution, there are no simple answers to what the future will, or should be like either. Over the days when we were preparing for our field trips, there was a lot of talk over the messiness of fieldwork when collecting qualitative data in post-industrial societies – or rather, societies in transition.

Scavenger ethnography, a pair of words that was uttered during an Environmental Storytelling and Narrative course held by the Environmental Humanities Research Group of Norwegian University of Science and Technology in late spring 2021, starts making increasingly more sense in contexts like these. Scavengers are animals that eat the prey that has been killed by someone else, and we, too, are as if chewing on someone's leftovers when trying to make sense of lost places, often "working with people in the ruins of their violent past" (Holzlehner, September 24, 2021), when striving for a more practical, future-oriented way of engaging instead of nostalgia.

The (re)search continues.

References

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