

Ringel, Felix: *Back to the Postindustrial Future. An Ethnography of Germany's Fastest Shrinking City*. New York: Berghahn Books 2018. ISBN: 978-1-78533-798-7; XIII, 219 S.

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How do the citizens of Germany's fastest shrinking city deal with the „prospect of no future“? What kinds of relating between pasts, presents and futures do people generate? And how can anthropology engage with these futures? Felix Ringel presents a compelling „Ethnography of Germany's Fastest-Shrinking City“ which contributes and consolidates the future as an integral part of anthropological analyses. He shows how Hoyerswerda's present is practically constituted by mobilizing the future in complex and unexpected ways. Hoyerswerda, a small Eastern German city, was developed as a major settlement for the Lusatian brown coal industry and a socialist model city in the 1960s and 1970s leading to massive population growth. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the German reunification, the population quickly declined and huge parts of the former „new town“ were demolished.

Ringel conducted sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2008 and 2009 in Hoyerswerda amongst different groups of concerned and engaged citizens. Drawing on participant observation he mainly focuses on arenas of „publicly expressing, disseminating and negotiating the (near) future.“ (p. 18) Moreover, Ringel develops more intervening modes of conducting fieldwork like „publishing weekly in the local newspaper, conducting an anthropological research camp for local youths and initiating a community art project.“ (p. 27) Unfortunately, we do not learn in detail how the actual fieldwork unfolded and what insights his interventions generated.

In chapter one Ringel establishes the narrative of shrinkage as dominating the (self-) representations of Hoyerswerda. He points to three different local modes of contextualizing Hoyerswerda's demography – „healthy shrinking“, „economic expulsion“ and the „chances of shrinkage“ (p. 39) – and draws at-

tention to the „politics of context“ (pp. 42ff.) by relating to postmodernist, Marxist, and post-socialist accounts of urban development. Ringel convincingly shows that neither the narrative of shrinkage nor mainstream academic framings thoroughly capture the diverse negotiations of hopes and fears taking place amongst the citizens of Hoyerswerda.

The second chapter continues to set the scene. Ringel introduces the notion of „temporal complexity“ (p. 65) to shed light on how a broad range of temporal references is mobilized in negotiations of and visions for the future in two youth education projects. By describing the arguments that occur around different understandings of the relations between the Nazi and GDR pasts and the present and future of Hoyerswerda, the author accounts for the situatedness of temporal heterogeneity, that is its continuous social, political and epistemological embeddedness.

In chapter three Ringel turns more explicitly to the politics of the future by following and questioning „the evacuation of the local (near and far) future“ (p. 91). With Jane Guyer, he takes the reader to a city development exhibition, conversations with the Mayor, and discussions amongst former architects, alternative cultural elites, planners and deconstruction experts to grasp the tension between an „enforced presentism“ and „fantasy futurism.“¹ The competing temporal regimes tangible in and through distinct temporal references generate the „condition for a successful reappropriation of the near future.“ (p. 115)

Chapter four focuses more specifically on the role of affects (particularly hope and fear) in Hoyerswerda's economy of knowledge. Contrary to the previous chapters, Ringel goes beyond „explicit forms of temporal reasoning“ (p. 118) in order to capture how affects are mobilized and imposed as technologies of power as „enforced futurism or prescribed hope“ (p. 124). Ringel emphasizes their performative power and practical function in „recolonizing the previously evacuated near future“ (p. 143).

Chapter five contrasts „the logic of per-

¹ Jane I. Guyer, *Prophecy and the near Future. Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time*, in: *American Ethnologist* 34/3 (2007), pp. 409–421.

manence“ (p. 172) with notions of emergence, becoming, possibility and assemblage through different empirical examples – the attempt to rescue a building through different cultural institutions and maintaining anarchist youth culture. Ringel urges us to analytically exceed particular moments of emergence and engage with (their) maintenance and endurance as stabilizing efforts that make „impossible alternatives survive, against all odds, and sustain the future in a context characterized by postindustrial shrinkage and decline.“ (p. 172)

Throughout the book, the author introduces, combines and discusses a broad range of theoretical strands. In particular, he relates anthropologies of time and knowledge. Each of the chapters works towards one specific analytical vantage point that make up the „morphology of the local future“ (p. 176), drawing on and tying together different fieldwork settings and empirical data. This structure makes the monograph a good read in different (all convincing) ways: either read single chapters for the sake of the arguments or enjoy the gradual plunge into the arenas of Hoyerswerda’s future-presents.

Ringel’s „presentist methodology“ proves particularly generative in highlighting the role the future plays in the present without losing sight of „all the temporal relations and experiences.“ (p. 9) He succeeds in establishing a symmetrical analysis of the practices in which such relations are established and temporal agency is produced. Ringel undoubtedly makes an important contribution to the anthropology of the future, which as Bryant and Knight² recently argued „asks about the fragile and tentative ways in which the present is projected into the future, and the future drawn toward the present and the past.“ (p. 193) They develop a set of heuristic distinctions of what they call orientations – „indeterminate and open-ended teleologies of everyday life.“ *Back to the Postindustrial Future* grounds future orientations in Hoyerswerda convincingly – in methodological and empirical terms.

Ringel’s book animated my curiosity concerning the question of what we as anthropologists could or might want to say about the future in the end. Marcus has pointed

to anthropologists’ „anxiety of belatedness once coevalness is embraced“³ and Appadurai⁴ called anthropology to „bring the future back in“ with the explicit aim of „build[ing] the capacity to aspire in those who have the most to lose from its underdevelopment“ (p. 84). Thus, what is the role of anthropology regarding the futures of the worlds we study? Ringel’s study demonstrates that the future „plays a [...] decisive role“ far beyond „studies of the ecological limits of our own planet.“⁵ Literally studying the „groundwork for the future in the present“⁶ might enable us to more closely collaborate with those who produce dominant knowledge within the fields we study in order to point to the arenas of future-making that deserve further attention. As Ringel reflects upon in his conclusion: „perhaps the continuous training sessions and the many social relations cultivated in them already practically created the city that they had wished for?“ (p. 184) Let’s take this book and engage this question more explicitly: where and how to place our ethnographic insights in order to practically establish an anthropology not only of but for futures.

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² Rebecca Bryant / Daniel M. Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future*, Cambridge 2019.

³ George E. Marcus, Afterword. *Ethnography between the Virtue of Patience and the Anxiety of Belatedness Once Coevalness Is Embraced*, in: Steffen Dalsgaard / Morten Nielsen (eds.), *Time and the Field*, New York 2016, pp. 143–155.

⁴ Arjun Appadurai, *The Capacity to Aspire. Culture and the Terms of Recognition*, in: Vijayendra Rao / Michael Walton (eds.), *Culture and Public Action*. Stanford 2004, pp. 59–84.

⁵ Bryant / Knight (2019), p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 193.