The time of post-socialism: On the future of an anthropological concept

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Abstract
When accounting for changes in the post-socialist era, anthropologists were forced to carefully distinguish between what had remained the same, what had actually changed and what was emerging anew and on its own terms. As a sub-discipline, the anthropology of post-socialism has thereby contributed prominently to theories of time, change and temporal agency. It has also shown that the post-socialist present is, if at all, as determined by its socialist past as it is by its insecure futures. Based on a few ethnographic examples from a former socialist model city in East Germany, and my own experiences as both a post-socialist anthropologist and an anthropologist of post-socialism, I scrutinize the temporal logic of the sub-discipline's defining concept. I do so by testing its applicability to three objects of anthropological inquiry, and by pondering upon its implications for a more sustained study of the future. The temporal multiplicity that this concept affords, I claim, is crucial for the discipline overall, but demands further scrutiny. Rather than abandoning it, as I and others have previously argued, it is time to rewrite the time of post-socialism with regards to the future.

This article begins with a simple question: What is the time of post-socialism? This question can be understood in different ways. One way to rephrase it would be to ask: *When* is post-socialism? If it was a historical period, we could explore when the time of post-socialism began and, respectively, when it may stop, if it has not done so already.

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This literal interpretation is not what I have in mind. As any analytical construct, post-socialism's worth goes beyond its representational value. As a representation, it arguably only ever rightfully referred to a temporally distinct period in the few years or even months of institutional transformation of former state-socialist societies into capitalist ones. Although its usefulness, accuracy and analytical remit have often been questioned in anthropology and other disciplines (for example, Chelcea and Druță, 2016; Gilbert, 2006; Gille, 2010; Müller, 2019), it still remains productive, in sometimes unforeseen ways. I therefore want to reformulate the questions about the time of post-socialism from an analytical perspective: What temporal reach does the concept of post-socialism have, and what kind of temporal phenomena does it help to describe?

These questions are central to the field of inquiry that calls itself post-socialist studies. Unfortunately, there are no definite answers to these questions. Each analyst – in their own time – has to determine whether or not the concept still makes sense, and which temporal operations it supports. It is for this reason that I will not provide a clear definition of the time of post-socialism here. Rather, I want to explore some of the temporal meanings and (il)logics inherent in this concept. I do so in order to reinvigorate its use more than thirty years after the era of socialism came to an end. However, I can only tentatively explore its current potentiality, with the help of a few ethnographic vignettes. These empirical examples stem from my long-term fieldwork in a former socialist model city, as well as from my own post-socialist upbringing. I want to revisit them in order to explore the future of this particular analytical concept.

The inspiration for this exploration stems from the recent demise of the concept. As some scholars (most recently, Müller, 2019), including myself (Ringel, 2013, 2018), have argued: as an analytical concept post-socialism has run out of steam. In this article, however, I want to reverse my previous position and explore whether there is still a future for this concept in the social sciences. The answer to this question is not straightforward, either. Rather than advocating for an abandonment of the term, I want to engage here in something that Martin Müller (2019: 534), another abandoner, might call an 'alternative project': a reappropriation of the time of post-socialism. I offer a presentist re-reading of the term's temporal capacity. As I claim later, the use of the concept 'post-socialism' during the last three decades was productive and stimulating not despite, but because of its manifold temporal meanings. Its temporal prefix alone problematizes issues of time and invites a variety of careful temporal considerations. While we might not be able to answer questions such as 'What influence does the socialist past have on the post-socialist present and future?' once and for all, the concept allows us to pose them in the first place. My argument for a fresh approach falls into three parts.

In the first section, on time and the post-socialist city, I discuss problems with the term in relation to my fieldsite, a former socialist model city in East Germany. Although Müller (2019: 535, fn1) uses the title of a movie about East Germany – *Goodbye, Lenin!* – for his critique of post-socialism, he explicitly excludes this particular region from the post-socialist world. In contrast, I argue that the East German context provides a particularly powerful argument for the political and analytic relevance of the concept. Indeed, one can see the treatment of the former socialist past in Germany as a showcase for what happens when a more productive take on the 'post-socialist condition' (Fraser, 1997) is prevented.

Thirty years after reunification, references to East Germany and its socialist past are still framed in a derogatory way by mostly West German media and commentators. Without the help of the concept, or its local equivalents such as *nach der Wende* ('after the changes of 1989/90'), one can hardly account for the specificity of local reformulations of capitalism that have happened since the end of socialism, including their negative effects. The analysis of other post-socialist countries might similarly benefit from a more forceful form of strategic essentialism. But this is only one way in which post-socialism could continue to provoke temporally more complex analyses – and politics.

In the second section, I provide a theoretical argument. I claim that as long as we follow the invitation to explicate our informants' as much as our own understandings of time, change and permanence, the term will remain productive. This should incite more elaborate accounts of temporal complexity, and promote a concern for the temporal metaphysics inherent in our discipline's theories, analytics and methods. As earlier calls for accounting for the multiplicity of temporal relations in the post-socialist era prove,[1] post-socialism might be a uniquely productive term for these purposes.

In order to scrutinize its use, I deploy it in relation to three common analytical objects in the third section. Following recent work from the anthropology of time (Bryant, 2014; Ringel, 2016; Ringel and Morosanu 2016; Ssorin-Chaikov, 2017), I argue that the different temporal characteristics we infer from buildings, ideas and social relations allow us to reconsider and specify what we actually mean when we refer to something (or someone) as being post-socialist. I also return to the political character of the concept and its future potential. As Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2017) has recently argued, we should not simply indulge in the discovery of temporal multiplicity. The irritation everything presumed to be socialist provokes in the present underlines that there is more at stake: continuous ideological conflicts and temporal politics (Gille, 2010), which are negotiated in the present and with an eye on the future.

For these reasons, I propose in the conclusion that we defer the term's abandonment for now, and embrace the fact that there are still many rem(a)inders from/of the socialist past around (see Martinez, 2018). While architectural, material and ideological remainders might be easily distinguished from, as well as incorporated into, the genealogy of western capitalism (see Zarecor, 2018), the time of post-socialism can productively withstand such easy inclusion. Instead, it can – through its own remnants – continue to be slightly awkward in a few more presents yet to come, acting as a reminder that things can always be fundamentally otherwise. However, this potential will have to be sought and renewed time and again.

My presentist approach to the time of post-socialism provides a theoretical perspective to explore this potential. It follows Barbara Adam's claim that any 'reality that transcends the present must itself be exhibited in it' (Adam, 1990: 38). Counterintuitively, this asynchronous approach allows us to reconsider permanence as a notion that produces continuity between a post-socialist present and its specific pasts – socialist and post-socialist – as well as its futures. This is a temporal operation both analysts and informants, embedded in their respective politics, can deploy. I start my argument in the next section by introducing my fieldsite Hoyerswerda's difficult existence as an – arguably – post-socialist city.

Time and the post-socialist city

A former socialist model city like East Germany's Hoyerswerda should be a prime place to study a post-socialist city. Over most of the forty years of its existence, the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) socialist state invested heavily in this city, deploying material, ideological and spatial forms and logics that differ from those of capitalist modernity, such as the famous *Wohnkomplex* or living complex – a distinct urban form that, as Christina Schwenkel (2014, 2020) underlined, can be found throughout the former socialist world.[2] The city's undoubtedly 'once-socialist' built environment should provide ample ethnographic material to study what has remained from a bygone era. However, as colleagues studying former Yugoslavia pointed out (Gilbert, 2006; Gilbert et al., 2008), anthropologists of post-socialism necessarily face problems of periodization. In Hoyerswerda, too, the recent past has added further temporal factors to the equation. To rephrase Sonia Hirt's (2013) apt question: What has happened to the post-socialist city?

In Hoyerswerda, one such determining event, the first xenophobic pogrom in reunified Germany, whose conflicting analyses I explore in this section, happened in 1991, during the early transition period from socialism to capitalism. Almost thirty years later it still both challenges and reinforces an easy definition of the city's temporal character as post-socialist. More recently, in a new present with its own politics, it has been reinvigorated to help explain electoral successes of right-wing populist parties in Hoyerswerda and East Germany. However, as I show below, the pogrom's inclusion in a narrative of post-socialism – as an outcome or legacy of socialism – entails its own metaphysical commitments. Whether in 1991 or in 2019, time itself is a factor when judging post-socialism's conceptual worth: indeed, what makes a city (or any other phenomenon) 'post-socialist' and how does that feature endure? What some commentators in Germany seem to suggest is something like a 'historical essence'. But how would such essence endure or change over time itself? Questions about continuity and change, in turn, are not questions that the anthropology of post-socialism alone has to answer. They have great relevance to the discipline overall. The example of Hoyerswerda shows how swiftly the presumed temporal essence of a city once built for a communist future can become a complex and confusing matter.

Before German reunification, Hoyerswerda was a vanguard socialist model city. Or rather, it was planned and built as such. Commissioned in the 1950s as the GDR's '2nd Socialist Model City', it was to house the miners and energy workers of the nearby lignite power plant. However, less than a year after German reunification, in September 1991, it was in this once proud and prosperous city that the first xenophobic attacks of the newly reunified Germany took place.

Exact accounts of what happened in Hoyerswerda vary, but the reports that circulated in national and international media (such as in *Der Spiegel*: Matussek, 1991, or in *The New York Times*: Kinzer, 1991) powerfully capture some of the atrocities that were committed over the period of a few days. They describe a neo-nationalist reality that directly contradicted state socialism's claims to internationalism and solidarity: crowds of local residents harassing everybody they considered not to be German, chasing them through the streets of Hoyerswerda and bellowing 'Foreigners out!' and 'Germany for

Germans!'; applauding onlookers who, even if themselves not partaking in the chase, supported the harassment; frightened and angry former contract workers (*Vertragsarbeiter*) from other socialist countries such as Vietnam and Mozambique, and asylum seekers, who had more recently arrived in the city, staring numbly through the broken windows of their temporary shelters in one of Hoyerswerda's industrially pre-fabricated apartment houses (*Plattenbauten*); and, finally, helpless police forces and local authorities, who after a few days of public uproar and affray decided to remove the victims of this pogrom rather than arrest the brawling perpetrators.

Although these images are usually mixed up – as my informants often noted – with other examples of right-wing violence of the same time in both East and West Germany[3] (for example, in Rostock-Lichtenhagen, Mölln and Solingen), they have come to symbolize predominantly the doom and downfall not just of Hoyerswerda, but of the former socialist East Germany. As my informants eagerly noted, these narratives of post-socialist failure are recirculated on all anniversaries, characterizing past and current right-wing violence as an East German – and thereby post-socialist – problem. Contrary to such narratives about xenophobia as a socialist legacy, I along with many of my interlocutors would argue that, by 1991, Hoyerswerda had already transmogrified into an entirely new city. Even before these dramatic events, it had ceased to be 'post-socialist', as its many new problems – unemployment, outmigration, etc. – had broken the links to, and continuities with, its socialist past and constituted a new present in its own right. Hoyerswerda arguably had become a capitalist city, whose existence in time after the September events could as convincingly be described as post-1991 (rather than post-1989/90).

As sociologist Detlef Pollack (2005) has shown, those scholars and journalists in Germany who explained the 1991 pogroms as a legacy of an authoritarian form of socialism, often inferred that the GDR had never really overcome its non-democratic legacies of the Nazi era. The same logic applies when the post-socialist framework invokes similar personal, cultural or ideological continuities in order to explain current neo-Nazi activities in the city, the latest electoral success of the right-wing AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) party or even the city's general decline. Some of my informants do not concur with the latter presumptions of decades-long continuity. They believe that Hoyerswerda's dramatic post-reunification decline resulted not from its socialist legacies, but from its bad reputation, forged in those September days. For them, the events of 1991 are a local historic fissure of similar importance to the changes of 1989. These events mark the conclusion of East Germany's swift institutional, economic and political transition to a neo-nationalist form of capitalism, and brought an end to its short-lived period of post-socialism while launching a new era in Hoyerswerda's history: one of accelerated post-industrial decline.

In the polyphony of interpretations of the causes and effects of the 1991 events I, to my own surprise, remained silent in my academic work about the city. My own accounts about Hoyerswerda could have utilized both the concept of 'post-socialism' and that of 'post-1991'. However, I chose to abstain from both (Ringel, 2016, 2018). The reasons for that are personal, political and theoretical. For me, the theoretical reasons to abstain from using such temporally charged terms apply to any attempt at *historical* periodization. My

foremost worry is that they exclude perspectives on and from the future. To put my informants' ideas about the past and the future on equal analytical and metaphysical footing, I deploy a presentist approach, which presumes that in any given moment only the present exists while the past and the future are unreal (Ringel, 2016). These other temporal dimensions – that is, the past and the future transcending a specific present – equally need to be represented in this present, as postulated in the aforementioned quote by Barbara Adam, both by the analysts and their interlocutors. The September days of 1991 did not have much analytical purchase in understanding the city's crisis-ridden presents that I encountered during my fieldwork in 2008 and 2009. A causal relation starting from a precise 'dreadful socialist then' and ending at an 'unpromising post-socialist now' would also fall short.

It would do so because one could even add further temporal markers: in 1994, Hoyerswerda elected Germany's first post-reunification Lord Mayor of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS – Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus), the successor of the GDR-leading Socialist Unity Party (SED – Sozialistische Einheitspartei); since 1999 more than a third of its cityscape has been demolished; by 2009, the average age of the city's population had more than doubled in less than fifty years, making it one of Germany's demographically oldest cities; and, in the same year, Hoyerswerda was officially declared to be the nation's fastest-shrinking city. Even if the demise of socialism or the 1991 pogrom could be blamed for kick-starting this process of decline, my informants would agree that the wholesale deindustrialization of the GDR's economy and its subsequent effects on Hoyerswerda and other industrial settlements would have happened anyway. More recently, they are also equally adamant that the decline could have been prevented with a different form of reunification. However, rather than confronting one historical narrative with another, I am here interested in the metaphysics that are at the core of any such claim on the influence of the past, particularly the two temporal logics from above, which are key for the concept of post-socialism.

As previously indicated, the influence of the socialist past on the 1991 events have been interpreted in two different ways. The predominantly West German media commentators commonly deploy a deterministic perspective (Pollack, 2005). Their inherent conceptualization of time, history and causation has allowed them to claim that the atrocities happened *because of* socialism. They perceive the GDR as an authoritarian dictatorship, whose formerly oppressed subjects lacked democratic convictions or any appreciation for diversity, freedom and tolerance. For them, the xenophobic events were causally determined by a hidden nationalist culture or mentality. In contrast, and with a more presentist framework in mind, many Hoyerswerdians, without wanting to excuse the 1991 events, would emphasize the present and future factors of the time: East Germany's sudden rise of unemployment in the wake of reunification; general insecurity amidst wholesale societal change; and the West German neo-Nazis' targeting of East German communities for recruitment.

These two ideal-typical metaphysical positions on the influence of the past often match opposing political views. They also neatly map onto different metaphysical commitments in our discipline. The more deterministic one uses concepts such as 'culture' and 'mentality' to claim the past's influence on the present (for example, Brandstädter, 2007;

Buyandelgeriyn, 2008). In the form of a distinct East German culture or mentality, the socialist past is seen to have effects in the present. The second would argue with a presentist perspective that it was not the past per se, but present reasons that led to the 1991 atrocities. Arguably, post-socialism's prefix invites the former determinist perspective because it explains the (post-socialist) present with a perspective from the (socialist) past. However, because of its ambiguity, which I explore in the next section, the term allows for multiple temporal meanings, which can help to overcome any overly determinist analysis. Post-socialist studies have often used the term this way, but as often failed to explicate these metaphysical commitments. The following section therefore unpacks them and explores post-socialism's inherent temporal logics before assessing its future, and that of the sub-discipline, in the final section.

The time of post-socialism

In writing about Hoyerswerda, I have been overly critical of the term 'post-socialism', partly for personal and political reasons. Whereas I regularly enjoy referring to my own East Germanness, I – like many other East Germans – feel uncomfortable when the category 'East German' is used by others to describe me, particularly in a German setting. Perhaps my anti-ontological, anti-essentialist or anti-culturalist theoretical convictions fuel my personal sensitivities. Nonetheless, I also dislike it when my own post-socialist-ness is denied. After noticing more recently that the term 'post-socialism' had lost its earlier relevance (with fewer and fewer publications and conference panels organized under its banner), I have begun to feel nostalgic about the term. Like others (for example, Murawski, 2018; Gallinat, this issue), I came to believe that there is still some potential in it, both in political and analytic terms. Politically, the era/area the term describes, could still entail conditions of possibility for societal innovation and progressive change, due to its unique history and despite recent political developments (see Hann and Scheiring, 2021). This long-disappointed hope was prominent among scholars of post-socialism who thought that the experiences of a different political economy might support a critique and more social reformulation of capitalism. It was also inspired by the impressive agency demonstrated by many people in post-socialist countries, including my parents and grandparents, through surviving and managing a variety of fundamental changes (Bridger and Pine, 1998; Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Gal and Kligman, 2000). Second, the term still offered a tool for comparison between and beyond former socialist countries (see Boyer and Yurchak, 2010). But how are we to conceptualize post-socialism so that it can allow for (spatio-temporal) comparison and (continuous) hope for better, fairer futures?

Some of its potential lingers in the term's major characteristic: its logical ambiguity. One could argue that there is really only one temporal operation it affords: it refers to something that once was socialist, but is not socialist any more (whether that is conceptualized as a break or as continuity). Studies of post-socialism, in that sense, simply investigate the aftermath of an ideology – the afterlife of an idea and political economy after their demise. But the problems with even such a straightforward understanding of the term are multiple. I focus on two: the attribution of socialism and the qualification of 'post-'.

First, what is (or rather was) 'socialist'? And on what level is something socialist, ontologically speaking? In a piece on the continuous success of socialist urbanism, Michał Murawski (2018: 913) recounts how people on both sides of the Iron Curtain disagreed on whether the Soviet version of socialism itself was truly socialist – 'hence the origin of the ironic notion of 'actually-existing' socialism' (see also Thelen, 2011; Verdery, 1996). Murawski also mentions Lazar Kaganovich's 1934 tautology that 'any city in a socialist country is socialist by definition' (Murawski, 2018: 929). By that definition, everything 'post-socialist' is also only ever capitalist in essence – as this was the political economy that succeeded socialism – but arguably not all capitalist cities are post-socialist. Such sweeping declarations are hardly helpful. We should rather ask other kinds of questions, for example, can something still be socialist in a non-socialist context, and how do people and things lose their socialist character? As we can see, notions of both context and essence, as well as continuity and change, seem to be defining whether something is or is not seen to be post-socialist. Indeed, is socialism something that has to be 'unmade' (Humphrey, 2002) because it lingers, haunts the present, or simply 'remains' (Bach, 2017) in a form of 'still-socialism' (Murawski, 2018)?

Second, similarly, the prefix's 'after' is also not straightforward. Although the reference to the socialist past in most uses of the term remains unquestioned, it also entails a future perspective – as was noted in early critiques of transitology (for example, Berdahl et al., 2000; Verdery, 1996). If the new state has not been named or described as other than 'not being socialist any more', there is an implicit apprehension or promise of this transition to something that will not be 'post'-socialist, but something in its own right (which is neither 'post' nor 'pre' anything). One could complicate and multiply the use of prefixes further. For some analysts, for example, it would be more succinct to refer to what people think of as 'post-socialism' as 'post-late-socialism' as socialism itself underwent several changes (e.g. Yurchak, 2006).

In response to the multiple challenges of the term, anthropologists have put forward several conceptual strategies. These strategies, too, follow metaphysical conceptions. Some colleagues have argued for a *spatial* extension of the meaning and applicability of 'post-socialism' beyond the former Second World (Buyandelgeriyn, 2008; Chari and Verdery, 2009; Gille, 2010; Hann, 2002; Hörschelmann and Stennings, 2008). Rogers (2010) even argued for a multiplication of post-socialism to different 'post-socialisms'. Others, including myself, have extended the meaning of the term *temporally*, by embedding the time of state socialism in the epoch of industrial modernity and that of post-socialism in the broader post-industrial era.[4]

My East German informants from Hoyerswerda, in contrast, do not use the term at all. However, their temporal markers also have their own metaphysical and political implications. The most common temporal markers are *vor* and *nach der Wende* (pre- and post-*Wende*, before and after the historical 'turn' of 1989 and the Fall of the Berlin Wall). They do not imply that the time after the *Wende* of 1989/90 is predetermined by the pre-*Wende* period of socialism. Rather, although monumental, the *Wende* is only a point in time, an event, which divides the flow of history into a 'before' and 'after'. At the same time, the cultural attribution of East German (*Ostdeutsch*) works like the term 'post-socialism'. On the surface, '*ostdeutsch*' describes presumed cultural differences between

East and West Germans after 1989 (see Borneman, 1992; Boyer, 2001; Glaeser, 2000) while it also presumes a certain cultural continuity and homogeneity in both groups. However, this difference is derived from the presumption that Germans can be continuously divided with reference to their different pasts – with one difference: West Germans are not defined by their (capitalist) Cold War past while East Germans are defined by their (socialist) past. Only the East German past is rendered problematic, and presumed to have enduring negative effects. One effect of, or response to, this continuous interpellation: even many of my informants in Hoyerswerda, who were born after the GDR, in the 1990s, perceive themselves as being East German (an *Ossi*), even though they have no first-hand experience of socialism. They thereby replicate a West German determinism.

This determinism postulates a logic of ideological and cultural continuity, with the help of ideas of socialization and intergenerational indoctrination. According to that logic, parents and grandparents imprint their children and grandchildren with a certain East German essence and quality. Such an operation seems to happen on the level of culture or mentality, and then endures there, irrespective of people's agency. A more presentist approach would rather point to a series of moments of subjectivation – instances when people are made to be East German by a joke, a question, a comment or any other act of interpellation such as the fact that East Germans earn lower wages and have lower pensions than their West German co-patriots. On the level of identity, these invocations of East Germanness (or post-socialist-ness) entail their own temporal logics, which might differ from the political uses of the socialist past (see Gallinat, 2016; Kaneff, 2004; Kurtović, 2019). In a recent article, such ideological invocations of the socialist past were felicitously referred to as forms of 'zombie socialism' (Chelcea and Druță, 2016), where the socialist past is made to reappear in its already deadbeat form. Given such a variety of temporal considerations, on which analytical level then does post-socialism (despite its presumed break from or continuity with the socialist past) make sense? And how can anthropologists account for that? Put differently, can we find a theoretical framework, in which 'post-socialism' can account for both change *and* continuity (cf. Müller, 2019)?

Whose time, where and when?

Let me propose a simple operation: in order to specify in which instances the term 'post-socialism' makes sense, I dissect my field of inquiry into single analytical objects and scrutinize how we conceptualize their specific endurance in time. I have previously (Ringel, 2016) done this with regard to buildings and the idea of 'culture' (cf. Brandstädter, 2007), but here I want to push this idea further. Again, as a presentist, I am doubtful about the influence the past can have on the present. I have laid out my take on presentism elsewhere (Ringel, 2016, 2018). Suffice to say that in this metaphysical framework, I do not look at the influence the past potentially has on the present, but at my informants' references to, or invocations of, the past in the present. I analyse their conscious references to the socialist past with regard to what they tell me about the present – the politics and claims at play, the current problems and conflicts, contemporary meanings and social relations, and so on. Since their presents are very much concerned

with the future, I could not have written an ethnography about Hoyerswerda without discussing my informants' constant and ubiquitous concerns about the future, captured in the omnipresent use of the term 'shrinkage' (Ringel, 2018).

As a presentist, I explain my informants' references to the past not with a view from the past (for example, by testing them for their accuracy or truth-value, or by extrapolating their own 'historicity'; cf. Hirsch and Stewart, 2005), but with a view from their present (and future). Concerns with the present and future are at the heart of these references to the past, so they should take centre-stage in anthropological analyses. With such a presentist approach, the attribution of something being 'post-socialist' is an emic matter. My informants have to presume and elicit that there is a link to the socialist past in a given situation – which is usually an unverifiable endeavour. I therefore refrain from presuming any actual direct relations between socialist past and post-socialist present. In addition, any reference to the past can quickly be deciphered as a political act.

As anthropologists of East Germany (e.g. Berdahl, 2009; Boyer, 2006) have shown, even post-socialist practices of nostalgia (or *Ostalgie*) – usually played out in the domain of consumption – are essentially political. They are less about the actual past invoked by these practices and more about conflicts in the present and a say on the future. Indeed, most of their East German interlocutors were certain that they did not want the GDR back, but still used memories of GDR times to critique the present. If I were to account for these acts by presuming an implicit endurance and effect of the socialist past in the present (for example by claiming that the socialist past prevents East Germans from fitting into the capitalist present), I would have to develop and utilize a rather complex theoretical and analytical apparatus, and methodology, to prove that this is true.

While presentism is productive and convincing, it also has its disadvantages. One relates to the etic use of 'post-socialism' in our analyses. I probe this integration of the historical context with regard to a variety of different ethnographic objects. I do not want to look for essences in these material objects, social relations and ideas. Rather, I see their historical features as potentials for use in human deliberation in the present. These socialist remainders have become post-socialist reminders. Their capacity to provoke a historical comparison in the present is a capacity that both our informants and we, as analysts, can activate (see Bryant, 2014). Any such analysis, however, forces us to explicate the temporal implications of the concepts we use in order to describe these ethnographic objects. Does socialism endure in content or form, in culture, sociality or materiality, in objects, subjects, affects or other forms of knowing the world? To paraphrase Jonathan Bach's spot-on 2017 book title *What Remains*: when we speak of socialism, what, indeed, does remain – and how? Let me give a few examples of when the city's socialist past was referenced and made to have an effect in the present. This follows the first (emic) strategy to allow for the influence of the socialist past through my informants' invocations of it.

Socialism's actual material legacy is obviously most prominent in Hoyerswerda's New City (*Neustadt*), whose erection began in the mid-1950s as the planned extension of the historical Old City (*Altstadt*). Most inhabitants of the city are well-versed in *Neustadt*'s architectural history. Older citizens, most of whom will have moved to Hoyerswerda in the 1960s and 1970s, have seen the socialist *Neustadt* grow throughout their life until the

Wende. Altogether ten districts were erected east of the Old City, which, in contrast to the New City's modernist architecture, showcases a medieval castle, several churches and a picturesque market square.

Hoyerswerdians know the different types of flats and apartment houses that were built in the different districts by their sonorous names, such as WBS70 or P2. They also know that the apartments of WK 1 were older than the ones of the city's youngest district WK 10, which was demolished 'area-wide' (*flächendeckend*) just a few years ago. But where exactly do they see traces of socialism in *Neustadt*? Which aspects of it do my informants really regard as still being related to the socialist past? The New City's layout remained mostly unchanged despite widespread deconstruction, but its modernist features are currently not rendered problematic. They seem to fit the needs of the capitalist present as much as they did those of socialism.

Similarly, in many living complexes the apartments' interior and exterior have been modernized. Most facades are covered in thick insulation and eye-watering pastel colours. However, in these cases, their socialist past is also not rendered problematic. Only the houses which have not yet been renovated, constitute temporal problems. They still seem to belong to the socialist past (and thereby not to the present) while their signs of decay and neglect speak even more of their loss of the future. Only failure to belong to the capitalist present and future here defines being post-socialist (which, in turn, is indicative of an implicit presentist approach to their existence in time by my interlocutors). Out of the many temporal factors at play, this irritation with their belonging to the present seems to explain my informants' reference to the socialist past best. As my informants were very selective about the problematization of the socialist past, it seems they, too, were not approaching socialism's legacy as an essence.

For example, many of the visitors of a 2009 art project in WK 10 commented not just on the fascinating pieces of art. To my surprise, they also commonly remarked on the poor quality of the concrete used in the apartment block, which before its demolition had housed the artists and their artworks. In the concrete's qualities, its porosity and comparative frailty, they would not see socialism per se, but late socialism's economic problems and shortages. But why does WK 10's concrete suddenly speak of its past and thereby become 'post-socialist'? Although the concrete of flats in other WKs were originally produced during socialism, too, I have never heard anyone problematize their material and temporal qualities, particularly not those of recently renovated flats. Although materially similar, the non-renovated WK 10 concrete is actively excluded from the present and rendered into an object of concern, whose existence in time is problematic. Metaphysically, then, objects are only seen to entail a post-socialist essence when they do not easily fit in or, perhaps, even pose a threat to, the capitalist present. They have not yet earned a rightful place in the new present, with its own unproblematic expectations of the future. Rather they are seen to linger without purpose. In turn, something loses this quality of being post-socialist when it belongs to the present in its own right – and ceases to remind people any more of its links to the socialist past. But when and how does the concrete lose this quality? Already when it is not referenced? Or when the concrete loses its old form or gains a new function? Most of the concrete rubble from Hoyerswerda's demolished apartment houses was reused for different building projects elsewhere, mostly

for the construction of roads. Was it still post-socialist when it was reinserted into the capitalist market in that way then?

On the level of social relations, we find another often repeated reference to the socialist past. Some of the more experienced activists of Hoyerswerda's surprisingly diverse sociocultural milieu claim that this milieu is a direct legacy of the many clubs and associations that were founded during socialism, such as the NATZ, the city's Naturwissenschaftlich-technische Kinder-und Jugendzentrum, once founded to prepare the miners' children to become engineers and scientists. Most clubs are still run by the same personnel, who use similar kinds of formats and ideas to those used before 1989. Most of the clubs have not even changed their names. While members remain very proud of their clubs' work during socialism, they can also be very critical of the GDR and its version of state socialism. However, a continuity in personnel and forms of practices is far from being a proof for these clubs' post-socialist features. During my fieldwork, most activists were very much concerned about the everyday running of their clubs and their future survival. Given these existential problems that shaped most of their post-reunification work, I hesitate to reduce their clubs' existence to a direct legacy of socialism. Rather, the continuous work and investment that my informants have put into the running and survival of the clubs makes them as much social forms of the time after socialism. These people and forms could not have endured without constant investment and up-keep. They have become a part of the present in their own right because they were preserved against all odds. If I were to ascribe to them a temporal essence, I would struggle to define it as socialist. Any of these clubs could have ceased to exist years ago – as many others have. Their endurance always depended on their members' continuous commitment. Whether that, in turn, was forged during socialism, is another question. Clubs and associations are also very common throughout Germany. Although undoubtedly grounded in the present, West German clubs, too, face similar problems, particularly a shortage of new younger members (*Nachwuchsmangel*), but might claim their historic continuity more easily.

A last invocation of the socialist past concerns ideas about urban development. These ideas are even less material than the socialities of Hoyerswerda's clubs and associations or the concrete of its new district's apartment houses. For instance, the citizen group for 'Urban Redevelopment and Citizens' Participation' (Stadtumbau und Bürgerbeteiligung) consisted of former architects and civil engineers who had built Hoyerswerda. In their many interventions in Hoyerswerda's more recent urban planning debates, in numerous newspaper articles, exhibitions and public events, they consciously used logics and ideas about the city and its future from the socialist period to inform their critique of the city administration's post-reunification planning strategies. By making such ideas relevant for the present, these local experts would not define their ideas as socialist in kind. Rather, they used them to build up a continuity between socialism's modernism and a current version of modernism. The ideas from the socialist past only mattered because of their value for potential current futures. These ideas' redeployment in the present, then, does not uncover in them a historical essence. Rather, the quality that counted most for their reiteration was their applicability to the future. The experts were not fussed about their historical character. They wanted to give them relevance in the present in their own right.

Others used a similar strategy. Inspired by ideas and experiences from the construction of *Neustadt*, some critics argued for a binding building code for the New City, different restoration designs or vanguard urban experiments. A project called one such experimental idea aWaKe – using the supposedly socialist form of the WK to think about one district's potential post-capitalist future. Again, even these conscious references to ideas arguably originating under socialism do not conform to a determinist framework. Once we start unpacking their temporal qualities, we discover a more complex picture, which, however, is directed not to the past, but to the future.

For any of these objects of inquiry – concrete, social clubs, urban planning ideas – it is difficult to determine their existence in time. My informants, still – temporarily at least – imbued them with a link to the past, but that, for want of a better phrase, was actually not the point. They created and activated a historical capacity, in order to intervene in the present, thereby adding to a variety of other temporal characteristics and operations. I claim that even the way my informants linked these phenomena to the past and the future was not per se 'post-socialist', that is, predetermined in any specific way by their own socialist past (cf. Hirsch and Stewart, 2005; Pels, 2015). Socialism's invocation as a contrasting backdrop to the present might add to a phenomenon's temporal complexity and equip my informants to consider or problematize this complexity more easily. But this kind of work happens in the present, and with regard to the future. The context of post-socialism, as I tried to show, does not capture these claims on the future well (see Pelkmans, 2003; also Pedersen, 2012). This is the final step on which the future of the concept depends. It undoubtedly helps to spark considerations of time, of what endured and what had changed. But it will also have to allow for more specific considerations of the future.

Conclusion: The future of post-socialism

The term 'post-socialism' is an invitation to think about time and human agency, and to reconsider our understanding of permanence and change. In this way, it invites metaphysical considerations. Presuming a link to the socialist past, either envisioned as a break with or a continuation of it, encourages us to be more specific about our informants' metaphysics as well as the temporal frameworks that we have in mind when thinking through what stayed the same and what did actually change after the downfall of state socialism and its incorporation into the global capitalist political economy.

There are several problems with such an undertaking, metaphysical and methodological ones. Methodologically, there is a question of how anthropologists can access the past with their presentist methods of fieldwork and participant observation. As I laid out above, we usually follow two strategies: first, in the presentist mode, we include our informants' emic invocations of the past – whether they are proven to be accurate or not – in our analysis; and, second, in what we could call the historicist mode, we construct our own (etic) version of history and thereby are in danger of verging on determinism when we apply this account of history to our study of the present. Both strategies have their own advantages and disadvantages. However, even if we could access the actual socialist past by some form of time-travel in order to establish whether our informants' and our own

representations of the past are 'true', what would that mean for our analysis? Would any arguments about permanence and change suddenly become more or less meaningful – given that at least thirty years have passed since the *Wende*?

The danger of post-socialism's continuous problematization of the socialist past is that it allows our informants and us to take the past, which is contrasted to the present, seriously – indeed, *too* seriously, thereby neglecting the demands of the present and future that occupy our informants' lives and thoughts, because we presume the past to linger in the form of essences hidden away in our objects (or subjects) of analysis. The potential of post-socialism is that it reminds us constantly that times were different once, and could be different again in the future, and it urges us to unpack the temporal qualities of any given situation or empirical phenomenon. I started this article with the 1991 atrocities in my fieldsite that added another temporal marker to the city's history. Because of the city's prominent socialist past, these post-socialist events were easily embedded in a determinist narrative that builds up a continuity between a presumably failed socialist past and post-socialist failure. In contrast, most West German cities' Cold War pasts are not rendered problematic. However, sparked by the contrastive comparative foil of socialism, temporal references abound in places like Hoyerswerda's Neustadt.

For example, hardly anybody would think of a contrast between the capitalist present and the feudal past when looking at the Old City's castle and medieval church. These artefacts of a different past are not a problem. They are already integrated in the history of capitalism (as authentic sites with touristic value, for example) and therefore less problematic. The same does not work for socialism, for which the work of distancing, in positive and negative terms, continues to be an option. The term 'post-socialism' can variably problematize both continuity and change, and thereby help to shape ideas about the (perhaps non-capitalist?) future. As my examples show: some of my informants find the presumed continuity of socialist characteristics threatening; others welcome them. Some might consider the many changes the city has gone through over the last decades as exhausting and frightening, others might endorse them.

Anthropology is well equipped to scrutinize these different temporal logics, relations and considerations - and even to creatively problematize the time of post-socialism for its own purposes. But we still have to abstain from inscribing permanence and change too easily into any given social situation. We should not take either of them uncritically for granted. Post-socialism as a concept and analytic helps to keep up this scrutiny. But it has its own limits. The widespread conceptual critique of the term has, indeed, identified a few of them. For its future use, however, we should keep this momentum going. The historical marker between socialism and post-socialism might lose its relevance in the near future, and other events and markers will appear. Still, the term's inherent potential for, among others, ideological alterity might help to keep the past, present and future problematic in productive ways. The continued problematization of the past is giving us not insights into the reality of the past, but into the concerns of our interlocutors in the present and with regard to their future.

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Notes

1. For example, Hann (2002), Pelkmans (2003), Ssorin-Chaikov (2006), Boyer (2006), Rogers (2010), Pedersen (2012), Ringel (2013), Haukanes and Trnka (2013), Kesküla (2016).
2. However, Schwenkel (2020: 108) points out that scholars like Sonia Hirt (2013) and Kimberly Zarecor (2018) have questioned what has made 'a socialist city *socialist*' in the first place.
3. I use the terms East and West German(y), rather than eastern and western German(y), to refer to a distinction between the new and old *Bundesländer* or federal states after reunification in 1990.
4. For example, Ssorin-Chaikov (2006, 2017), Buyandelgeriyn (2008), Gallinat (2016), Collier (2011), Rogers (2010), Ringel (2018).

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