Future Making in Times of Urban Sustainability

Maintenance and Endurance as Progressive Alternatives in the Post-Industrial Era

Felix Ringel

Abstract

Different times evoke different relations to the future. At first sight, most recent additions look discouragingly conservative: sustaining, maintaining, enduring describe practices that look like they are aimed at preventing change rather than provoking it. However, once we change our own expectations of what making the future entails, we can see them as what they are—radically progressive alternatives for future-making in the post-industrial era. But what kind of futures do these practices help us and our informants to envision? And are these futures necessarily "otherwise"—and otherwise with regards to what: the state of the present or the doomed, dystopian expectations of worse futures? Based on material from Germany's poorest city, a prototype post-industrial city, I explore my informants' seemingly meager and disappointing attempts at maintaining urban sustainability. Hit by a series of post-industrial crises since the mid-1970s, the citizens and officials of this North German harbor city have tried over the last decade to build up a fully sustainable economy, and to become a Climate City. This transformation towards urban sustainability has been stagnant over the last five years. Recently finished economic, ecological and social infrastructures already turn out to be less sustainable than expected, requiring yet further investments, maintenance and care. Has this future-city-making failed? And how can anthropologists assess this maintained effort of urban revitalization? As I claim in this paper, the answers to

these questions problematize our own expectations, and expand our current analytic toolkit by fully contextualizing our informants' imaginations of the future.

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As anthropologists, we often cannot but share our informants' fears, hopes, worries and expectations. During fieldwork, therefore, we do not just cultivate a sense of their "historicity" (Hirsch and Stewart 2005), i.e. the ways in which our informants relate to the past. We also cultivate a sense of, or "sensibility" for (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007), the ways in which they imagine the future. However, expectations of the future are volatile, and anthropologists are most aware of their volatility on their return to the field, when the contrasts to previous expectations come to the fore. On a return visit to my current fieldsite, the North German harbor city of Bremerhaven, in February 2017, most expectations from my previous visit nearly a year earlier remained unfulfilled. In the context of the enduring failure of these expectations, how is the future made and imagined in this postindustrial city?

One example of failed expectations concerns the renovation of the center of Bremerhaven-Wulsdorf, the city's southern district where I was usually staying during fieldwork. The city council had opted for its renovation in 2014 and, if I remember correctly, this renovation was originally envisioned to be completed by 2016. I had seen the glossy images in the local newspaper, depicting the transformation of the district's central crossing into a round-about and the development of the adjacent area into a central square with new-built houses, infrastructures and shopping facilities. In 2015, I had noticed that some of the shops and restaurants next to the crossing had already been emptied and readied for demolition. One of those was my favorite Chinese take-away, which had to close

in preparation for the new development. But by 2017, these houses still stood empty, slowly dilapidating. There was no sign of the start of building work yet. My friend and landlady Carla's comments throughout that year varied from "They'll never start!" to "They promised to finally get it done at the end of this year." By "they" she meant the city administration in charge of the district center's revitalization. At some point, we both did not know what to expect anymore. Despite the initial signs of progress, the hoped-for change just never seemed to occur.

Even worse, the whole city had experienced a blow to its prospects during the same period—and I was shocked when I first heard about it on my return. The initially much welcomed Malaysian investors, who had bought one of Bremerhaven's biggest remaining shipyards, had suddenly left the city not even a year after their locally celebrated purchase. To the dismay of many of my informants, the company claimed that it had shifted the production of several river cruisers (within a year, no less) to shipyards in East Germany "for economic reasons." Many Bremerhaveners were amazed that the investors did so despite large investments in the renovation of the old shipyard's headquarters and despite opening a brand-new design laboratory in it. Even these clear signs of long-term investment did not prevent the company's short-term retreat.

However, during that same visit I also encountered some unexpectedly good news: Some of the city's most dilapidated scrap houses (*Schrotthäuser*) in its poorest district, the *Goetheviertel*, were unexpectedly renovated despite the fact that many of the district's inhabitants had repeatedly underlined that this was impossible. Since the physical state of the houses had led to their closure by

German building law, being deemed legally unfit to house people, many Bremerhaveners had presumed that a renovation was either technically impossible or economically unviable. But one daring private investor, well-versed in such renovation projects, had taken on the challenge and revived three of these *Schrotthäuser* against all expectations. Similarly, the long-dreaded closure of the local science center *Phänomenta* in the southern fishery harbor was also suddenly averted and my friends running the center reported that it would, apparently, be given a new building soon and, thus, avoid closure. I even attended a workshop with city officials during that visit, in which we developed architectural ideas for the future building and conceptual visions for the center's new thematic orientation.[1]

Against the backdrop of these unexpected set-backs and developments, I fell prey to such surprises on most of my return trips to Bremerhaven: previously uncertain plans had actually been realized against my own expectations; and many plans whose fulfillments were previously certain and immanent still had not materialized against all probability. In the meantime, my informants had already forgotten, changed or adjusted many of their previous expectations but still maintained their aspirations for a better future. The contrasts to my last visits showed how volatile expectations are not just in a context of drastic change, but generally. Still, despite this volatility, the informants I am concerned with in this paper, activists and professionals in charge of making the city sustainable, continued to maintain the proto-sustainable economic, ecologic and social forms they had introduced several years earlier—against all odds. I claim that these practices of maintenance and continuity depict a radically progressive form of

future-making, typical for the postindustrial era. They aspire to a form of change often neglected in the social sciences.

However, any analysis of future-making practices depends on the clarification of the analysts' expectations. These expectations are crucial when assessing the potential "progress" (not) made in a particular ethnographic context, even more so in a context where aspirations favor sustainability. As I indicated with the help of the introductory vignettes, the volatile nature of expectations, i.e. the volatility of the "knowledges"—the many ways of knowing the world (Thrift 2008)—that relate to the future, makes it hard to turn them into stable objects of analysis and construct a specific "futurity." These expectations have their own conflictive and ever-changing historical, political and social contexts. As I show below with regards to the maintenance of urban sustainability in Bremerhaven in local businesses and institutions, this should not prevent anthropologists from including these manifold and different relations to the future, including seemingly conservative ones, in their analyses. This, in turn, depends on further metaphysical, political and methodological commitments.

When assessing the efficacy and promise of future-making practices, there is one specific problem that both our informants and we face in equal measures: Metaphysically, the future does not exist (yet). Consequently, no one has a privileged perspective on, or knowledge about, the future. Metaphysically speaking, anyone's guess is as good as any other. I would concur that some options seem more or less likely, or as the editors of this volume have it, they are more or less probable, and some are straightforwardly possible or impossible—or at least seem so at first sight. Nonetheless, as the ethnographic material from my fieldsite

suggests, one can never be too sure. We therefore need a metaphysics, and a methodology, that can account for this volatility and problematize the analysts' expectations.

As a presentist (Ringel 2016a, 2018a), I presume that only the present exists while the actual future remains inaccessible by any methodology I can muster. As Barbara Adam has it: "every reality that transcends the present must itself be exhibited in it" (1990: 38). This means that we can study the future only through the ways in which it is imagined in any given present. We have to attend to any form of knowing that is imagined to relate to, or to represent, the future regardless of whether these expectations, predictions, forecasts, fears or worries ever actually become true and are actualized in a future present. It is not only representations of *actual* futures that make up the future's existence in the present. The kind of knowledge I have considered during my long-term fieldwork in Bremerhaven since 2014 is simply characterized by its quality of being "of the future." Furthermore, that also means that the future (in the present) is also not just made in high-fly futurist arenas of professional planners, creative entrepreneurs, path-breaking inventors and digital or technological pioneers. The future is part of most if not all social practices, and an anthropology of the future should be as detailed and encompassing (comp. Bryant and Knight 2019).

This presentist take on the future allows us to take all kinds of futures into consideration, embedded in their respective presents. If only the present exists, then any future can only be measured or assessed against the concrete and contested expectations involved in its imagination. And anthropologists, because of their presentist methodology, can help scrutinize such expectations, their own and

others (e.g., Abram and Weszkalnys 2013; Appadurai 2013; Bear 2017; Boyer 2001, 2006; Ringel 2018b). We have our own "temporal agency" (Ringel and Moroşanu 2016) and we can even study the future together with our informants (comp. Ssorin-Chaikov 2013; Ringel 2013), because, neither the anthropologist nor her informants have privileged access to the future. Their expectations take place on eye-level.

One methodological tool I used for scrutinizing my informants' expectations was to contrast them (and my own expectations) during my many return visits to the city. During the overall fourteen months of fieldwork, I was not trying to uncover an underlying futurity, but to take relations to the future for what they are for both anthropologists and their informants: objects of their own agency, continuously changing and constantly negotiated in their own specific socio-political context. A single fieldwork period might not have allowed for this long-term observation of changes in expectations. These expectations, in turn, are not dissimilar to other ethnographic objects. My fieldwork in Bremerhaven therefore looked similar to fieldwork I have done elsewhere. I had simply focused on issues of the future and sustainability, both in the many semi-structured and recurrent interviews with local experts and residents, and during participant observation in specific professional, activist or private social groups. Rather than asking my informants about their past, I would continuously inquire about their ideas of, and relationships to, the future—in the full awareness that these ideas and relationships are bound to change in time. To access such modes of knowing the (future) world, no other methods were necessary. However, when collecting this kind of empirical data, including the aspirations to the future that seem conservative at first sight,

analysts should determine its metaphysical qualities as well as its specific temporary context. Similar to representations of the past, these representations of the future should not be judged based on their potential truth value. Rather, they are significant for what they tell us about the present.

As I argue in this chapter, a presentist approach, therefore, allows us to throw light onto future practices that do not look innovative, experimental or radical at first sight. In their own context of postindustrial crisis, with its own dominant "problemization" (Rabinow 2003: 56) of the future, practices of maintenance and repair, forms of endurance, and continued strives for sustainability might look conservative because they do not aspire to something new. However, they already adhere to a framework that works beyond the notion of growth and its conceptualization of change and the future, particularly once, as any anthropological method should, we contextualise these expectations of sustainability properly. Having studied them over the course of five years, I can attest to their radically progressive character in their own context of decline. In this chapter, I focus on these often unnoticed relations to the future and their work on possible, probable and impossible urban futures.

With these conceptual confessions in mind, my remaining argument about urban sustainability and the future practices it engenders in Bremerhaven falls into three parts: First, I introduce my fieldsite and its specific context of socioeconomic stagnation and decline. I introduce the topic of urban sustainability and explore some recent discussions in the anthropology of the future. I then discuss two ethnographic examples concerning the maintenance of local forms of economic and ecological sustainability. They show how my informants in Bremerhaven had to

learn that sustainability, once introduced as the guiding trope, itself has to be sustained beyond its initial promise for change. Both examples of ecological sustainability also elicit another logical implications of sustainability, namely that it already adds considerations of the future's future to practices of future-making. In conclusion, I argue that aspects of imagining the future in the conceptual realm of sustainability are already part and parcel of our work as anthropologists: we can facilitate and foster broader temporal and spatial contextualizations of the wished-for changes (supported by ethnographic comparison) and contribute mundane and specific details of how these different (or similar?) futures could look like (via empirical, if somewhat imaginary, specificity).

The Time of Urban Sustainability

Bremerhaven is a prototypical post-industrial city. With its huge harbor infrastructure and as the US American army's post-World War II port of embarkation in Germany, it was thriving economically in the first half of the Cold War period. However, in the wake of the postindustrial era in the 1970s, most of the city's shipyards as well as the German national fishing fleet closed down. After reunification in 1990, the US troops left, too. Almost five decades ago, Germany's main North Sea harbor had stumbled into a period of economic decline, high unemployment, increasing poverty and extensive outmigration. Although the downward spiral has been halted in the last decade, in 2014, Bremerhaven was still named Germany's poorest city, and it continues to struggle to secure a better future.

However, in response to this ongoing structural crisis, the city was fortunate enough to develop and implement a strategy of urban regeneration with the help of extensive national funding. In 2004, it was given a substantial lump-sum payment from the Federal level and it opted for two of the most common strategies of urban regeneration in the postindustrial era: reindustrialization and economic restructuring. Whereas reindustrialization is still based on the idea of growth and copies previous modes of urban development, the second strategy of restructuring attempts is used to find and establish an alternative economic foundation for the city. It promises to make the city economically sustainable and mitigate the effects of any further crisis by creating a robust and resilient local economy, for instance, through economic diversification. Its advocates aspire to stabilize the local economy by shifting the terms on which it operates towards a different economic logic. This logic would give economic practices and planning not the vision of growth, but of stability: the city should aspire to conserve and strengthen its industries rather than to expand them. The aim for the actors involved in this process was to make the city's economy viable and enduring for all futures yet to come.

I came to the city in 2014 when at least some aspects of these two economic sustainability strategies had already been implemented for more than five years; the change, arguably, had already happened. What I studied, in contrast, was the aftermath of this change: not the creation, but the equally difficult maintenance of the social, economic and ecological urban forms that had materialized under the trope of sustainability. One could argue that this process of transformation was still going on, but during my fieldwork, public austerity measures, among other factors, had shifted the attention of many activists, entrepreneurs and public officials to

preserve and maintain the changes that had already been introduced rather than to seek new ones.

I therefore explored how the maintenance work of urban sustainability—the work aimed at maintaining the new present—was itself maintained. In a context of potential further decline, I claim, this maintenance work of local businesses and institutions expresses a form of progressive future-making currently neglected in anthropology and other social sciences because it does not cater to notions of radical change or new alternatives (comp. Ringel 2014). These latter two notions seem to capture the expectations of an anthropology of the future best—as part of our (justified) critique of the present we study the future in the hope for changes that could help overcome current shortcomings and crises. But how could an ethnographic context like Bremerhaven change the remit of an anthropology of the future?

The anthropology of the future was hailed in the discipline not least since Munn's 1992 important essay on "The Cultural Anthropology of Time." However, it has only gathered momentum over the last decade or so. Whereas initially, particular topics that relate to the future, such as hope (e.g., Miyazaki 2004, 2006) or planning (e.g., Abram and Weszkalnys 2013; Weszkalnys 2010), attracted academic interest, lately many scholars have dealt with the topic head-on (e.g., Guyer 2007; Appadurai 2013; Pels 2015; Ringel 2016b, 2018; Bear 2017; Yarrow 2017; Salazar et al. 2017; Bryant and Knight 2019). Still, some tropes have only been dealt with in passing such as expectations (e.g., Ferguson 1999; Strathern 2005) or endurance (e.g., Povinelli 2011). Other scholars have expanded the

modes in which we can think about the future beyond the present towards science-fiction and outer space imaginaries (e.g., Battaglia 2005; Valentine 2012).

Most of these analyses of the future conceptualize and approach the future as something potentially different from the present. The discipline's first comprehensive volume on *The Anthropology of Sustainability* (Brightman and Lewis 2017), for example, also follows this tradition while critically engaging with the hopes that others invest in the trope of sustainability. The editors Marc Brightman and Jerome Lewis argue that there is a "need to focus our approach to the future in terms of sustainability—on how to ensure a future liveable earth" (ibid., 3). However, such an approach to the future, they underline, should not be "in terms of maintaining what went before (as resilience thinking implies) but as a process that prepares us for an unpredictable future." Their critique of the fashionable trope of resilience is spot-on: to only mitigate worse futures does not allow us to prevent them. The seemingly impossible task of stopping global warming can only be tackled with an aspiration for the unpredictable. While I very much agree with their vehement argumentation for immanent (and often hardly imaginable) change, I still think that sustainability also helps to envision a future that is not dependent on further change, but on the maintenance of the present in the future. In Bremerhaven, this situation is already emerging on a local level. Both economic and demographic decline have been halted, but my informants do not conceptualize this as radical change in comparison to previous expectations of decline. For some of them, only growth would register as change and a possible way out of decline. Others in turn, aspire to sustainability with a different temporal register in mind.

For conceptualizing such a different understanding of sustainable futures, I take inspiration from another recent development in studies of the future in anthropology. Following work in human geography by scholars such as Graham and Thrift (2007; for the topic of urban sustainability comp. also Castán Broto and Bulkeley 2013), anthropologists, too, have belatedly taken on the topics of maintenance and repair (for example, Graeber 2012, Jackson 2015; comp. also Jansen 2013 on gridding). Particularly the recently very productive study of infrastructure (for example, Mains 2012; Larkin 2013; von Schnitzler 2013, Appel 2015) has combined these issues with reference to the future, scrutinizing its promises (Anand et al. 2018) and other relations to the future (for example, Howe et al. 2016; Ringel 2018c).

The trope of sustainability can be linked to these efforts to stabilize, maintain and endure the changes affecting contemporary communities worldwide. To do so, however, we would have to explicate our expectations for what this link would contribute to the study of future-making. This entails a reconceptualization of the notion of crisis, in this case the structural crisis of postindustrialism. Bryant and Knight (2019) have most recently attempted to rescue the notion of teleology (or as they describe it following Schatzki: "teleoaffective") to also give some force and agency to people's attempts of having an effect on (and in) the future. Sustainability, too, affords a telos. They reminded us, furthermore, that we should not lose sight of the more mundane practices of future-making, rather than to expect the future to emerge elsewhere and elsewhen in privileged sites of future-making. Such practices easily include practices of maintenance and endurance, if

that is the "telos" of people's efforts and expectations. But what if these "teloi" and expectations change too often and dramatically like in Bremerhaven?

In such a context of structural change, defined by times of accelerated decline as well as the enduring absence of progress, the idea of sustainability can foster more radical takes on the future, which go against the odds by reproducing the present in the future rather than changing it. For that, however, we have to see the crisis that affects Bremerhaven as something that incites relations to, and problematizations of, the future rather than prevents them. As Bryant and Knight (2019: 43) ask poignantly: "What of those instances ... when the parameters of life have changed so distinctly that the future is no longer imaginable? When anything or nothing could happen?" In response, I would argue that even in what they describe as the "vernacular timespace of a 'Time of Crisis'" (ibid.)—i.e. "when anticipation is not possible—when the future cannot be imagined, planned for, forestalled, or resolved" (ibid.)—people still invest in the future, for instance, by maintaining what they see in front of them. This is one way of imagining the future, but also of having an effect on it and exercising one's temporal agency.

The following two ethnographic examples of the impact of expectations of urban sustainability depict a specific take on the future. In Bremerhaven, urban sustainability continues to be the most promising idea for tackling decline. However, local problems with its supposed lack of success offer some conceptual incitement, too. I address the kinds of hopes for the future that seem to allow unpredictable, unorthodox responses to crises by fostering, somewhat counter-intuitively, the maintenance of social forms against anticipated change. Researching the production of more of the same would in this particular context also mean to

look at "emerging and uncertain worlds" (Salazar et al. 2017). However, what would sustainability actually look like once it is achieved?

Sustaining Economic Sustainability

The practices of sustainability I am concerned with seem rather mundane: the people doing work at local museums, in the Climate City Office or at social clubs attending migrants, refugees and the urban poor. To my own surprise, my informants are former natural scientists, retired teachers, or retrained career changers, who I met in various local organizations and activist groups during intermittent fieldwork starting in 2014. Although entangled with and dependent on local politics and resources, their work does not seem to entail radical political claims on the surface: they are not calling for a political revolution, set up barricades or conspire for a coup d'état. However, in some sense, they aspire to a radically different future: the sustainment of recently introduced industries and the continuation of the Climate City project. Their future survival, my informants gather, needs contemporary regulation, management and investment in order *not* to change with regard to the present. Indeed, their work is simply geared to produce, establish or maintain what there already is. This work entails a form of care for the present that imagines, and thereby produces, the future as much as a future-practice that aspires to a future different from the present. In a context where the reproduction of the future is under threat, envisioning more of the same is a radically different achievement and prospect in its own terms. My informants' common aims and strategies are best captured by the term sustainability, despite the different forms of sustainability they aspire to (economic, ecological and social).

Although some of the problems the actors deal with affect them and their city existentially, they are often tackled in fairly unagitated and nonchalant ways. How can our analytics account for such attempts at stabilizing the present?

There are, certainly, a few problems with the concept of "sustainability." While the term is often nothing more than an empty signifier, it continues to incite new practices, hopes, and ideas of the future. At least in Bremerhaven, it dominates local urban regeneration strategies and meanwhile creates new forms of personhood and sociality, for instance, in the domain of ecological sustainability: apart from the stereotypical green activists, I encountered Youth Climate Councilors, various energy consultants and green transformation specialists, several environmental advisers, climate scouts, climate detectives, climate friends, and climate godparents—to only name a few. As agents of a better future, their agentive force is revolutionary, even though their projects are small-scale and practical, often tiresome and disappointingly long-term (comp. Hackney et al. 2016, Kazubowski-Houston 2017). They seem to follow a different idea of politics and change. For example, the managers of the city's most prestigious hotel have introduced a variety of sustainability projects in their hotel, which involve both the guests and the staff: they offer green room service, charging points for electric cars and a variety of local products; they try to minimize their food wastes, follow a social sustainability strategy for the whole team and installed two bee colonies on their roof. While still looking for new projects to implement, their main focus is on sustaining the many little efforts they had already started. They also do not see their role as radical in political terms, which traditionally would involve some lobbying and party politics or forceful propagation. As one of the hotel manager

underlined: "We are in it for ourselves and for the long run. We see that our efforts do really work, every day, but this success demands endurance." Despite disappointing my own "needs for the political" (Dzenovska and De Genova 2018), they still collectively sustain the change they have introduced in form of their own future-making activities.

The radical nature of their ongoing practices also stems from the future of the future they envision. For instance, sustainability seems to suggest that once the urban infrastructure and all circulations of goods, finances, and resources will have been "made sustainable," my informants predict, the city's existence will be secured and any further decline prevented. As my friend Carla remarked on the sudden closure of the Malaysian-owned shipyards: "I thought now was the moment, when the city's development would finally pick-up again!" As others, she thought that the strategies of economic sustainability would take Bremerhaven out of these cycles of growth and decline. Many believed that with the new diversified economy, the city will remain continuously economically viable and thereby attractive and worth living in. If such future was realized, their logic goes, it would sidestep any further crises yet to come.

However, if we take this logic further, actually existing sustainability would also sidestep notions of change: once the state of sustainability is reached, historical development would necessarily stop. The new industries would continuously flourish and they would not need to grow anymore. The city would be a Climate City with zero carbon emissions and endless energy resources. To some extent, the end of all crises will coincide with the *End of History* as we know it. As preceding ideologies, sustainability entails a promise of stability in the future, which

is triggered by wishes for stability in the present. My informants' experiences with the aftermath of their city's turn to sustainability, however, underlines the opposite: the city's desired economic sustainability has proven not to be sustainable in and of itself; as any other social reality, it, too, needs to be continuously maintained. Sustainability's problem with its own sustainability is, that it, too, needs to be sustained. As any realized future changes, it needs continuous human scrutiny, investment and care.

The same goes for the city's efforts of reindustrialization. For a long time, Germany promoted itself as the forerunner of the global green revolution, and since the transition to a post-carbon economy once seemed inevitable, Bremerhaven's economic sustainability strategies jumped on the safest bet by seeking to adopt renewable energy in the form of off-shore wind farm industry. For more than a decade, Bremerhaven aspired to establish itself as the national center of this nascent industry. With the help of the substantial federal payment, it linked plans for a straightforward reindustrialization to the security promised by the undeniable necessity for renewable energy. The hope was that with the implementation of this economic strategy, and because of its ecological twist, the wind farm industry will continuously thrive and thereby secure economic growth and stability.

At first, the strategy seemed to be successful. Several thousand jobs were created in multiple new factories, for which a whole new infrastructure was constructed on the city's large areas of brownfields in the southern harbor. Many inhabitants saw the beginning of a new era materialized in the gigantic tripods, rotor blades and engine cases stored onshore before being transported to one of the newly emerging North Sea offshore wind farms in the German Bay. The city's

Economic Development Agency BIS (*Bremerhavener Gesellschaft für Investitionsförderung und Stadtentwicklung*) was proud of the success of its strategies. It had managed to attract new investors and provided them with industrial real estate and access to public funding. Its offices still showcase maps of Bremerhaven's industrial areas and shiny brochures about the potential the city has for future investors.

Against all hopes and realistic expectations, however, change in national discourse and policy dramatically affected the German offshore industry. Investment for infrastructures needed to support the transition to renewable energy, the nation's *Energiewende*, slowed down as concerns about the costs for energy consumers suddenly took center stage over the need to tackle climate change. Since the federal government had put a halt to the German energy transition, Bremerhaven's re-industrialization stopped. Most wind farm companies fired people and introduced long periods of reduced working hours for those employed. The company building the enormous tripods, for example, whose opening was celebrated by a visit of Germany's president only a few years ago, went bankrupt and closed down. During my fieldwork, the Economic Development Agency and its investors were generally insecure about the future of the whole industry. They could not have foreseen that the inevitability of the energy transition itself suddenly became questioned.

In response, the Agency more forcefully pursued economic diversification, the second strategy, targeting the city's potentials for creative industries and the so-called green economy. Although the promise of sustainability had failed them in the case of reindustrialization, they were still continuing their work, not by radically

throwing their previous visions and instruments over board, but by adjusting them carefully. This takes some perseverance: the green economy project in the southern harbor was announced more than five years ago and continuously reported on in the local newspaper. But as of summer 2019, the project has not materialized yet. As we can see, the economic diversification strategy also had its difficulties.

Economic diversification, too, promised to prevent any crisis in the future: if the offshore industry fails, for instance, another branch would still thrive and guarantee the city's wellbeing and ultimately its survival. The diverse economic pillars, however, were nonetheless to be sustainable on their own terms. Tourism was seen as such a sector, so the city used part of the federal funding to become a prime tourist destination. It capitalized on its location at the North Sea, but, given the usually dire weather, a set of new museums was to secure this branch's successful future. By the time of my fieldwork, these museums were all up and running, but with varying success.

Since 2004, a whole new city center had emerged on the post-industrial wastelands of the oldest parts of the harbor. Already in the 1970s, the National Maritime Museum (*Deutsches Schifffahrtsmuseum*) had opened in this area. By 2009, the same area housed two further museums, the German Emigration Centre (*Auswandererhaus*) and the Climate Centre (*Klimahaus*), next to a Dubai-esque hotel and convention center, and a shopping mall with the maritime, though in a North German context somewhat misleading name of *Mediterraneo*. The whole marina was refurbished, and more and more high-end apartment houses are being built alongside it. More than five years after the opening of the Climate Museum in

2009, one would think that the new infrastructure should run successfully—if it was not for yet another crisis.

Tourism appeared to be more fragile than expected; tourists are, in fact, not as renewable a resource as predicted. Their choice of destination and ability to travel depend on all kinds of factors, as the city's tourist managers explained to me, including the weather, individual economic well-being, and a tourist destination's reputation. A bad summer in one year can boost the visitor numbers of local museums and other in-door attractions. However, a good summer can as well diminish them. For reasons still unclear these tourism professional, visitor numbers of Bremerhaven's museums had overall declined over the last years. The three major museums felt the decline most strongly. By 2014, all of them were concerned about their futures. For example, at least 200000 visitors per year are needed to make the two new privately owned museums profitable. The advertisement costs for assuring this are considerable. On top of that, according to my interlocutors, the "novelty-effect" of a newly opened museum quickly wears off. Apparently, at least every eight years, a museum should introduce a variety of new attractions to maintain its attractiveness. Whereas in its first year, a record 700000 people came to visit the Climate Centre, by 2014 the numbers had fallen dramatically. Even temporary new attractions, such as a too lurid show on dinosaurs in 2013, could not prevent this decline.

The two other large museums face similar problems. They, too, have already introduced several strategies to secure their survival. The Emigration Centre added an extension building for immigration, tried out new event-based formats to attract more visitors and intensified its cooperation with local activist groups on the issue

of the so-called refugee crisis. The National Maritime Museum, too, tried out new formats and further collaborated with local actors, among which, as in the cases of the other museums, particularly schools were much sought-after since new generations of pupils promised ever new generations of visitors. They also planned and are currently completing a huge extension. The necessity for such strategies shows that tourism has actually not produced the constant, sustained cycle of income. In contrast, the recent struggles shook Bremerhaven's inhabitants yet again in their hopes for a secure future. Against initial claims and expectations, the city needs to continuously invest in *remaining* a touristic hotspot, and an economically sustainable city more generally. The new touristic infrastructure has to be maintained, not just created. Given these actually sobering developments, has my informants' agency failed or, rather, has it been failed by the notion of sustainability? Thus far, the sustainability strategy remains unquestioned.

Sustaining Ecological Sustainability

A last example shall help to answer this question. This time it concerns the Climate City Office (*Klimastadtbüro*). In 2009, the local government had agreed to transform Bremerhaven into a Climate City (*Klimastadt*), which entailed serious and binding commitments to the reduction of CO_2 both in official institutions and the city as a whole. Newly opened in 2014 in the city's central shopping alley, the office was to ensure the implication of strategies towards this aim by developing projects and plans together with a diverse set of local actors.

Till, the head of the office and a former marine biologist, had a clear idea of what he was doing. For him, it was not just about the quick fixes and radical

solutions, he said. His undertaking was a long-term process, whose single steps had to go into the right direction. He believed that change did not happen from one day to the next. With this logic, Till created new forms of social practice, for instance, the first worldwide Youth Climate Council (*Jugendklimarat*). However, he resisted attempts by national TV stations to report about it. He said the Council has to work first and be able to sustain itself in the future. The way he approaches his task is not just by changing the present, but he also holds the present responsible for its endurance in the future. In a context of decline, this is not to be mistaken for stagnation; rather, it is a progressive intervention beyond ideas of growth and decline, aspiring to a future that can itself endure in the future. However, what would actually determine the moment, when this Council, or the city, will have become sustainable? As with the city's overall aspiration to become sustainable, I wonder whether citizens' imaginations were ever specific enough to determine when the introduced changes had become sustainable.

Interestingly, Till was also quite hesitant to determine this future in more detail. He used rather abstract biological terms to conceptualize his work. When he spoke about the future of the Climate City project, he deployed terms like "dynamic equilibria" (*Fließgleichgewichte*), organic development (*natürliche Entwicklung*) and systemic factors (*systeminherente Faktoren*). The social forms he produced will have to stand the test of time within the given social ecosystem and its specific resources, but these biology-inspired conceptual tools do not seem to clarify how sustainability should or will look like. The only thing that counts for Till in the moment is that these forms can endure, not that they are radically new. It will be no surprise that in the meantime the Climate City Office, despite its important

work, was threatened with closure and demise. Till had always suspected that, but after local elections in 2015, and with a new political coalition in power, the office had only barely escaped closure. In the end, it remained open, but was moved out of the city center into a much less-frequented area. Against all hardship and discouragement, the people working in the office continue with their work and still try to uphold the Climate City project.

Conclusion: Sustainability/Maintenance/Endurance as Future Making

As we can see, the endurance of local forms of sustainability depends on constantly renewed efforts for, and investments in, their futures. Sustainability's temporal logic is crucial for Bremerhaven's continued urban regeneration efforts. In times of massive and drastic change, practices that try to maintain the state of the present in the future can be understood as radically progressive, indeed, political acts. Given the most common progressive take on agency, as criticized in Saba Mahmood's works (2004), we would usually account for such practices as expressions of a conservative, fearful attitude to change because they aspire to the status quo. As the ethnographic examples from above underline, in Bremerhaven this is not the case: although they want to conserve certain aspects of the status quo, they do so against the backdrop of expectations of decline. However, they are right in metaphysic terms: if they would not invest in these forms, they would seize to exist and sustainability would have failed their future-making.

Thinking through the future-making involved in practices of maintenance therefore also advances conceptualizations of change and expectations. In the instance of defining change as being different with regards to the present,

anthropologists cling to a framework of progress. In popular and academic discourse, change is often conceptualized as being for the better; to make a difference is all about changing the state of the present, which is perceived to be lacking and bad. Despite my belief that the present is often extremely lacking deficient and troublesome, such thinking conceptualizes change on the presumption that the present is enduring by itself and constantly in need of change. Particularly in a context of actual, probable and realistic decline, however, the endurance of the present is itself the outcome of continuous practice. To reproduce the present then constitutes a betterment of sorts.

The metaphysical question about change, namely whether something is per se durative or has to be made durative, however, can only be answered in relation to the ways in which we attempt to do an anthropology of the future. My main analytical strategy in this paper was presentist: to take my informants' claims about the future fully into consideration, and to see their attempts at maintaining social forms as progressive in relation to their own expectations. Carla sustained her hope in the city's future; the hotel managers persevered with their sustainability strategies; and Till managed his Climate City Office against all odds. To them, the temporal logic they employed did not seem conservative, but progressive. Their maintenance work counter-intuitively proved revolutionary—but only if I take their often-volatile expectation of further decline seriously. This shows why, through the analytical lens of the future, it is often more important to explain endurance (as change) rather than change as progress towards progressive alternatives.

For many communities suffering from post-industrial and other crises, sustainability is seen as a remedy against current economic, social and ecological problems since it promises change towards a different future as well as the future maintenance of that future. In Bremerhaven, the hopes connected to this strategy were severely shaken by recent negative developments through which sustainability itself turned out not to be sustainable. Rather, it needed constant reinvestment and the use of a variety of resources. Despite sustainability's own shortcomings, it allowed thought and practice in the present that capitalized on maintenance and endurance rather than change. It thereby enabled new relationships to the future, which we should include in our analyses. As the inhabitants of Bremerhaven found out, beyond the dreams and fantasies of a better future, sustainability deserves— and depends on—constant practice and investment in people's daily professional and personal lives. Once we take our informants' expectations of the future more seriously, and study them in their detail and complexity, we will be able to account for the radical political character of attempts at maintaining sustainability, not just in Bremerhaven.

We should therefore be careful when prescribing our own ideas of what constitutes a better future. We should hesitate to only see progress in difference, and search for cure-all remedies in the emergence of altogether different and new futures. If we want to explore the future worlds of our informants with them, we should be aware of their, as much as our own, expectations, which are at the core of their manifold future-making practices. Anthropology's presentist methodology allows for that, but it should be accompanied with its according metaphysics, too. My theoretical, metaphysical and political hesitation, however, should not silence

anthropologists' ideas for, and imaginations of, the future. In fact, since knowledge about the future is volatile and constantly readjusted, it invites our collaborations and interventions. Our informants' future-making practices are not just to be represented in all their complexity, but they invite collaborative imaginations of change that can be all at once—possible, impossible, probable—depending on the expectations we approach them with. As I proposed in this paper, with a presentist methodology we can sidestep our own metaphysics of progress and approach our informants' practices of future-making in their own ever-changing contexts of expectations.

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[1] Needless to say, by the time of writing this chapter in the spring of 2019, nothing had transpired yet, but at least—and that is in some sense even more surprising—the *Phänomenta* was still open to the public despite these dire forecasts.