Abstract. Since the breakdown of the socialist system, Europe has been seized by a tremendous acceleration of social and cultural change that has questioned basic certainties of modern societies such as unlimited growth, lasting increase of social security, stable nation-states and systems of equality, just to mention some. This dramatic change is in general often perceived as decline or loss. In this article I present three narrative schemas, which grasp the experience of decline – crisis, shrinking and disappearance. These narratives are not only stories; they are always connected to action and therefore develop their own directive force. I have collected the material in Germany over years. My research has revealed these three main narrative schemas, which are part of modernity at large but developing their special persuasiveness under particular circumstances. That is why I will show their rhetorical use where they are applied, adjusted to special situations and purposes, and the wide-ranging vocabulary that is connected to them. At the same time, however, I aim to make clear that the usage of these narratives is not limited to these examples, but it can be related to more general sociological interpretations of contemporary processes.

Key words: decline, crisis, shrinking, disappearance, Germany, rhetoric, narratives

1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been published, discussed and argumented about transition\(^1\) or transformation\(^2\) as explanatory concepts for the fundamental change in Europe

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\(^2\) In Germany there is a whole branch of research called Research of Transformation. One of its most informative publications is the Journal “Berliner Debatte Initial”. For selected critical publications furthermore see Michael Thomas, Transformation – Hypertransformation – Transformation? Drehen An. Inst. de Ist. „G. Barițiu“ din Cluj-Napoca, Series Humanistica, tom. VII, 2009, p. 7–22
triggered by the breakdown of the socialist states in 1989. Nevertheless these terms have left one unsatisfied not only because they imply an end of the process and a promised return to an already known normality somewhere in the far future. They also fail to cover the multifaceted shape and the complexity of social and cultural change.\textsuperscript{3} Furthermore, transition or transformation is geographically bounded. It has been situated mainly in the post-socialist states of Eastern Europe, and only sporadically been related back to the rest of Europe\textsuperscript{4}.

All studies about post-socialism have to deal with a widespread \textit{experience of decline}. On the other hand, only a few works about declining parts of Western Europe\textsuperscript{5} have been explicitly related to the anthropology of post-socialism. In the parallel universe of Western sociology, however, there is likewise an ongoing discussion addressing severe decline in western parts of Europe using provocative terms. It has been noted that there is, for instance, a decay of democracy\textsuperscript{6}, increasing disintegration, new poverty, new violence and the production of “human waste”.

In this article I suggest an approach that in some respect merges the arguments and rich results from the anthropology of post-socialism and post-socialist studies with western sociologist’s interpretations. This approach shall open a view that does justice to the people involved, and allows, at the same time, for observations on a large scale, for abstraction and more general statements.

The reflections presented here are more a general result of my research during the last decade than of one particular study. The examples all come from Germany. Compared to what is happening elsewhere in eastern and southeastern Europe or Russia, Germany does not seem an appropriate place to examine decline.

\textsuperscript{3} Also in the economics, the rooted idea of path-dependency turns out to be theoretically insufficient, because it only partly explains widely diverging developments in regions of approximately similar resources.


However, for many reasons it is. Firstly, because of its geographical, political and historical situation Germany can be understood as the interface between eastern and western discourses. Therefore it provides an excellent field to demonstrate how these discourses collide or how they are negotiated. Secondly, Germany is a pioneer in terms of the fundamental demographic decline that Europe will face during the next decades with still unknown consequences. Thirdly, de-economization and de-population of the regions that belonged to the former GDR entail a brain drain from East to West. This endangers the social reproduction of many middle-sized former industrial towns in the East. Some of them have lost more than a third of their inhabitants over the last decades. Fourthly, the different extent to which the consequences of the change are experienced in the eastern and western parts of Germany produces tensions, which have to be smoothed in everyday-life perceptions. And finally, the growing inequality between eastern and western regions of Germany calls for political intervention. This essentially is performed in two different ways: a) subsidies are still spent to keep the declining areas in eastern Germany connected; b) federal government and regional authorities treat themselves to experts paid to think about the extent and political consequences of the decline. This leads to a strong awareness of the problem in local politics and a very special situation in eastern Germany compared either to other western or eastern European neighbors.

The approach I suggest here is a rhetorical one. People think in narratives. These narratives are not only stories; they are always connected to action and therefore develop their own directive force. I will present narrative schemas,

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9 In Wittenberge, a middle-sized former industrial town in the Southwest of East Germany for instance the population went down from 27956 in 1990 to 19767 in 2005 (statistical figures from *Landesamt für Datenverarbeitung und Statistik Brandenburg* provided by the mayor of Wittenberge).

About the tendencies more general: “Between 1990 and 2004 the population of East Germany (incl. Berlin) decreased 7.5%. In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Saxony the decline was 11%, in Thuringia about 10% and in Saxony-Anhalt even about 14%” ([Demographic Report of the Federal States Berlin, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia](http://www.mdj.brandenburg.de/media/ibm1.a.4478.de/ergebnisbericht.pdf), accessed in 13.09.08).


which grasp the experience of decline. By doing so I understand them as shared cultural models, which “frame experience, supplying interpretations of that experience and inferences about it, and goals for action”. They help to define ambiguous, liminal situations and make “accounts of (...) behavior that are comprehensible, plausible, justifiable, and socially acceptable to [people] themselves and to other audiences”. This requires “a certain amount of smoothing, patching, and creative amendment to these ends”\(^\text{12}\) – a rhetorical use where they are applied, adjusted to special situations and purposes and sometimes even changed almost until they are beyond recognition.

Rhetoric in that context is understood as public utterances addressing a special issue to reach a particular goal (i.e. someone to persuade her/him/them to make a change, to move something). Talk and speech are always acts with powerful social consequences. People accomplish social ends by talking to others and telling stories publicly\(^\text{13}\). Being rhetorically successful (meaning convincing/persuading) public utterances have an impact on the direction of further actions. Therefore, it also can be seen as a way of formulating ideas while anticipating future.

All the examples I draw on have been published. The material on Germany I have collected over years has revealed three main narrative schemas, which are part of modernity at large, but which are developing their special persuasiveness under particular circumstances. That is why I will show the wide-ranging vocabulary that is connected to them very concretely. At the same time, however, by the argument in general and illustrated by the quotations at the beginning of each section, I aim to make clear that the usage of these narratives is not limited to these examples, but, rather, can be related to more general sociological interpretations of contemporary processes.

2. HUMAN WASTE IN EUROPE?

“\textit{The production of human ‘waste’, or more correctly wasted humans (...), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity. It is an inescapable side-effect of order-building (...)} \textit{and of economic progress.”}^\text{14}\n
Zygmunt Bauman argues that modern societies produce “human waste”. At the beginning of western modernization and during colonial times, so he writes, this “human waste” has been shipped abroad to newly colonized areas\(^\text{15}\). In contrast


\(^{13}\) “Publicly” is here used based on the notion of public as a social entity of strangers, \textit{Ibidem}, p. 6–7; see Michael Warner, \textit{Publics and Counterpublics}, New York, Zone Books, 2002.


\(^{15}\) \textit{Ibidem}. 
to those times, contemporary states have to deal with the “problem” within their societies without such empire-driven possibilities. This results in a large number of people who are living in, as he put it, a global borderland. Bauman’s term “human waste” embraces people who are not only unable to make their living, but also a cost for state bureaucracy. From an economic point of view they are neither producers nor promising consumers. They are excluded from all respectable work and hence lose their self-respect. Bauman sees “human waste” embodied first and foremost by immigrants, refugees, camp inhabitants with no hope of going back or to somewhere else, innocent victims of wars and populations of urban ghettos. I believe that this clear analysis allows for a new understanding of worldwide processes, and it makes us aware of the inequality and inhuman dimensions of modernity and globalization in general.

Nevertheless I think this view has to be broadened and differentiated. Bauman for instance only briefly mentions people living in neglected areas in the middle of Europe, and he seems to underestimate the extent to which the described processes reach into the middle of prospering cities. German sociologists meanwhile have created a new social category: “Überflüssige” (dispensables). This term is created to explain what Bauman still calls only a possibility – exclusion that is lurking everywhere and endangering everyone. “Dispensables” then are not only the immigrants in French banlieus, inhabitants of the remote areas and deserting former industrial cities of Siberia, former miners in the Jiu Valley in Romania or the population of Odemira in Portugal. Anyone can become dispensable. A former long-time soldier not finding a way back into civil life, a skilled worker of one of the giant plants moved east- or southwards for cheaper workforces; even a middleclass teacher with cancer or older people without family – anyone.

The breakdown of the Iron Curtain went along with a neoliberal modification of national states in Europe and I would argue that this has caused an increasing production of dispensables not only in remote and sparsely populated areas but also in urban centers. This dramatic change is in general perceived as decline and loss. Bauman might argue that the societies of the (still) useful people undertake efforts to make the dispensable invisible. I would reply that they increasingly fail to

17 F. Dubet and D. Lapeyronnie, op. cit.
20 Dorle Dracklé, op. cit.
21 Sabine Hark, op. cit.
22 Zygmunt Bauman, op. cit., p. 42.
make them invisible. For all these arguments I prefer the category of “dispensable,” understanding it as an extension to Bauman’s concept of “human waste”.

Furthermore Bauman’s analysis needs further differentiation. How do people involved define their situation themselves? It is very unlikely that they understand themselves as “human waste”. And how do they make the situation bearable, how can they live or survive? These are questions anthropologists can answer. One considerable contribution to answer those questions comes from Jack Friedman and his research in the Romanian Jiu-Valley. By the concept of “statementality” he tries to find a way of understanding the emergence of both excluding processes and their production in acts of self-exclusion and social defeat and how “new configurations of global powers limit the human condition by establishing a mentality of self-defeat”23. My following argumentation can complete this admittedly pessimistic version with a more optimistic one. My cases show perceptions of decline by people who are feeling responsible for future perspectives and who are acting politically and publicly in the above-described sense.

3. CRISIS

“This crisis is really, really bad. How do I know? (...) when newspapers ask, ‘is this the end of capitalism?’ it’s time to head for the hills. (...) Everywhere, the loss of confidence was palpable. An Independent reporter tried to live on a pound a day, the Times invited readers to imagine life without possessions, and the London Evening Standard suggested, to keep ourselves entertained, we should go to free lectures at the London School of Economics – which, 50 years ago, would have been a perfect preparation for post-capitalist thinking.’” (Peter Wilby)24

Crisis probably is the most widespread way of describing a perceived challenge to normality. Every morning, reading the newspaper, whether in Germany or the U.K., I find myself confronted with statements of “crisis”, be it the educational system, the family as a social unit or the cinema as an institution. Global warming is described as a crisis of mankind and meanwhile, at least in U.K. papers, people discuss the end of capitalism brought about by the financial crisis. Sometimes we learn of people suffering from personal crisis as a result of these social or global developments. As I will show by the following example of the crisis of German unification, first of all, crisis is a strong rhetorical device.

Since the official unification of Germany, commentators have been talking about the crisis of the unification. In 1995, for instance, the western German historian Jürgen Kocka remarked: “We currently are undergoing a crisis of

23 Jack R. Friedman, op. cit.
unification”. In saying “we” he referred only to the eastern part of Germany and people living there. “They” were undergoing the crisis. That becomes clear when he concedes:

“Who in that situation would seriously feel able to question such a workable and widely accepted societal system as that of the federal republic? And who would do that to create alternative and generally enforceable future prospects? For that the situation is too critical (for the society of the former GDR) and not critical enough (for the rest of Germany).”

Here is the starting point of a long lasting story in which East Germany, with all its facets, has been invented as the other Germany. From that time on, it has been used for the public negotiation of future prospects of the entire Germany and for talking about things which Michael Herzfeld would have called “the dirty laundry of the nation state”. In 1995, Jürgen Kocka foresaw the change and crisis in the Eastern part being representative of all those who believed that unification would mean the assimilation of the former GDR citizens. Implying a secure and unambiguous future prospect for all of Germany, this crisis would not endanger a stable system like the Federal Republic. He used the term crisis to describe a transitional time until the “cultural unification” would have been realized.

A decade later the connection of the term crisis and the unification was still alive, although in a different social and political climate and with an altered notion of crisis and new actors using the term. The actors had even increased in numbers, as it had become clear that the change/transformation/transition, with its resulting uncertainties as described by Bauman, would affect, and indeed had already affected, the majority of Germans. Notwithstanding, a short glance into German newspapers reveals a whole range of negative topics connected mainly to East Germany: from unemployment and poverty, to criminality, right wing electoral success, violence and hostility against foreigners. The crisis still seems to be limited to East Germany and leaves the western part untouched.

In 2006, one of the October issues of a weekly Germany-wide newspaper was titled “The discovery of underclass”. It was explained to the audience what “underclass” could mean in the united Germany. Informed by a study supported by the social democratic party, the main constituents of the so called underclass were people who had abandoned themselves; people who live in new poverty, in self-

27 Jürgen Kocka, op. cit., p. 50.
destroying families where children were abused or even murdered. While the study has divided the Germans in general into nine different social groups (competitive individuals, established achievers, critical intellectuals, engaged citizen, satisfied social climber, insecure middleclass employees, self-satisfied traditionalists, authority-oriented unqualified, excluded “precariat”), the last category was mainly to be found in eastern Germany: in western Germany 4% of the population belong to the last group (“precariat”) – compared to 25% in eastern Germany. They were the losers of the “Wende” and most of them are men. They were people who experience the world of employed labor as a closed society and mistrust politics. Foreigners are perceived as enemies, and many members of the “precariat” chose to elect either the left or right extremist parties. That way of highlighting the eastern German situation as a worst-case scenario, and its refusal to adjust to the western economic system in Germany, is a permanent dramatization and rhetorical use of the “crisis” of unification by which the status of the German society is defined. If the western German system is as stable as Kocka had stated some years ago, then, rhetorically, there is a very clear path outlined to the reader’s logical conclusion: if the East Germans would adjust, the crisis could be overcome. Thus eastern and western Germans were addressed in a different way: while the former are called on for a massive change, the latter can further build upon their stable society.

Jens Bisky, a journalist who grew up in the GDR, first worked for a daily newspaper mostly read by inhabitants of the eastern part of Berlin. Today, he is writing for a Germany-wide daily newspaper with a high reputation, and he has recently written a book entitled: The German Question. Why unity endangers our country (“Die deutsche Frage. Warum die Einheit unser Land gefährdet”). In this book he uses the “crisis” of unification for other purposes. He aims at attracting attention, not only to his personal voice, but also to an alternative “eastern German” perspective in a Germany-wide discourse. Bisky’s argumentation can be summarized as follows. The developments in eastern Germany had shown that normality was in question throughout German society. That normality had hitherto gone unnoticed, as the entire society rested upon it: the notion of normal working conditions, of eternal growth and growing wealth. In that scenario East Germany functions as a persuasive rhetorical figure that represents the crisis. It proved very suitable for a dramatized presentation of all these problems. Bisky takes up the perception of a crisis of unification to make it the starting point for his two-fold counter argumentation. For the eastern Germans the message is that there is need for a change of direction in the development. He provides them with a way to understand the extensive change they are experiencing and he demands the reinterpretation of their situation by grasping it through other words and ideas. They should be enabled to see this situation as something new and they are called on to part slowly from familiar ideas – for instance, the idea of the cultural unity of

Germany and the idea of eternal growth. But he also addresses western Germans in order to turn their attention to a new view of the contemporary state of the society. In both ways, the concept of crisis is used for demanding a change towards an anticipated future.

The concept of crisis often is connected to feelings of powerlessness against a surrounding, growing complexity and diverging experiences and expectations. It is thus related to the experience of contingency and can be applied to transitional situations of decision-making and a felt need of reducing the burdens of deciding. It can be used as an expression of feelings like shock or (mortal) fear and panic and, therefore, can enforce actions of rescue or produce political pressure. “Who diagnoses a crisis usually is ready to expect or bear [or to apply] extraordinary measures.”30 But “crisis” also implies the possibility of a way out that keeps both the uncertainties and the related anxieties bearable. As I have shown elsewhere31 the narrative schema includes, for instance, the figure of a savior, i.e. it makes people wait for “the big investor” who probably brings back full-employment to everyone.

The possibility of overcoming has extended the vernacular notion of crisis. Economists in particular have made it more sophisticated. Knut Borchardt shows different ways in which economists like Sombart, Schumpeter or Kondratieff tried to explain economic crises in a wider context of trajectories. Relevant for my purpose here are two things: 1) in the discussions about crises and conjunctures, a concept was elaborated that conceptualizes a cyclic process of longue durée, that made the overcome predictable; while 2) economists have dissociated themselves from these ideas because they failed to explain economic processes precisely enough. Nevertheless the economic connotations of the term crisis have diffused into a popular everyday concept that serves to define unclear situations. And in times, when economic explanatory systems enjoy great popularity and persuasiveness in all parts of society, this context also strengthens the rhetorical force of a concept like crisis.

4. SHRINKING

“During the last 50 years most of the shrinking cities have been in Western European Industrial Countries: first and foremost in the USA (59), United Kingdom (27), Germany (26) and Italy (23). Since 1990 shrinking cities are also increasingly to be found in countries of the former Eastern Bloc like Russia (13), Ukraine (22), Kazakhstan (13). Furthermore, between 1950 and 2000 there were shrinking cities above average in South Africa (17) and Japan (12).”32

“Everybody was told clearly that not another penny would be put into the buildings that were scheduled for demolition. In the best cases, a block would become empty within half a year. Those who were stubborn and wouldn’t leave would soon live alone or with one or two neighbors in an otherwise empty building. Nobody lasts long with that.”

Shrinking processes have been observed everywhere in Western societies, primarily in connection with demographic change, i.e. the decreasing number of births and the increase in the percentage of elderly people. In Germany, the term “shrinking” has flourished in the context of a government program responding to the processes of de-industrialization and de-economization in the Eastern part, bringing about an exodus of young people and the vacancy of countless apartments. The program aimed at “taking apartments off the market”, as the official phrase was, meant the demolition of buildings. The reshaping of towns and cities, or at least of parts of them, was supposed to make them attractive again (spacious, green) to their inhabitants.

The remarkable career of the term shrinking in Germany began at the turn of the century. At that time it named the unthinkable – something diametrically opposed to what Germans have been used to and have believed in. I remember finding it myself very frightening to listen to someone who, for the first time, suggested giving up entire cities. Meanwhile, the process in Europe has been proceeding very quickly: the idea of deserted cities is something people in Russia, for instance, have had to become used to. In Germany the term “shrinking” has developed into a political tool used by local politicians, especially in East Germany. Students of sociology at the Humboldt-University in Berlin even come across the term as a canonical concept presented in power-point manner and neatly summed up in bullet points like this:

1. “Shrinking” is negative growth of: economic action, population, settlement area, tax revenue (with different, but interacting reasons)
   ⇒ turning back of classical (industrial) coordinates of urban development
2. Reasons:
   • change of economic structure: development of the third sector, globalization, increase of spatial inequality

33 Executive Director of the WVL Housing Company, in Wolfgang Kil, The Marvel of Leinefelde, Sandstein Verlag, 2007, p. 17.
34 Christine Hannemann, op. cit.
35 Even if the term “shrinking” might have been particularly influential in Germany, the processes of shrinking can be found elsewhere as well. In 2002 the German Federal Cultural Foundation initiated and supported a huge project that turned its eyes towards other shrinking cities in Russia, USA and elsewhere (see *** Schrumpfende Städte, …, Band 1; Ibidem, Band 2, Handlungskonzepte, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005).
36 I took this from a presentation of an urban sociologist teaching at Humboldt-University of Berlin, which he gave before doctoral students of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung in June 2007.
• demographic change: decreasing birth rate, selective migration, changed population pyramid

3. Explanatory models of urban sociologists:
• life cycle of urban development (urbanization – suburbanization – desurbanization – reurbanization)
• delayed process of adjustment: first and foremost cities with one-sided economic structure insufficient small economic differentiation and with homogene elites
• shrinking as new type of urban development, polarization within the up to now model of growth

4. Effects and needs for political agency
• thinning out of employment base
• decline in levels of qualification
• precare financial situation in the municipalities
• losses in usage and function
• increase of empty flats – structural emptiness
• unproductiveness of social and technical infrastructure
⇒ increasing gap between necessities and resources for state action on municipal level

5. Urban policy and economic development
• principle hope and stimulation of the economy
• principle departure and social capital approaches
• principle change of ideas: shrinking as chance

6. Development programmes
• Urban rebuilding East (national)
• The social city (national)
• EFRE/URBAN (EU)37

The systematic form of this knowledge apparently is addressed to and has met the interests of local politicians, as it has very quickly been adopted and used. What is missing here, however, are the cultural dimensions of the process. They were outlined mainly thanks to Wolfgang Kil – a journalist and architecture critic. With his creative and inventive vocabulary he has tried to redefine the negative connotations of the term. He could be regarded as representing the above-mentioned category “Principle change of ideas: Shrinking as chance”. In his book *The luxury of emptiness* ("Luxus der Leere")38 he concentrates on questions of the cultural praxis accompanying shrinking processes. At first glance, his vocabulary does not seem very different from the one Bauman uses: “inner shadow zones of

37 There are some critical interventions from other sociologists, stating that shrinking is not contrary to growth. That should be mentioned, although this argument has not found its way into this schematic knowledge yet.

the system\textsuperscript{39}, “valley of tears”\textsuperscript{40}, “regions of functional irrelevance”, “symptoms of decline”\textsuperscript{41}, a “whole range of expendability”\textsuperscript{42} and finally “return to wildness”\textsuperscript{43}. A second look, however, shows Kils demands for giving up spaces without any substitution (“give them back to nature”), doing work of mourning, creating leaving rituals, withdrawing in dignity and decency, deceleration, the development of post-living-landscapes and the acceptance of a delayed future (“retardierendes Zukunftsland”). Another term he brings into discussion again is wildness as something that must be thought about in a new way. For the German context, Kil wants to encourage more grey zones and more creative management of “crisis”, and he demands appropriate leaving rituals for the sake of the people involved.

To most politicians these demands would seem a nightmare. Nonetheless, the term shrinking has pushed its way into the public, at least in East Germany. It was frightening at the end of the 1990s, but now it is a common term to describe the situation in most of the cities and middle-sized towns there. This has been possible for various reasons: a) the first one is the already mentioned systematic (canonical) form of the knowledge about “shrinking” provided by academics to politicians; b) secondly, the concept of shrinking could rhetorically take up a notion of “Gesundschrumpfen” (shrinking to a financially sound position) that already had been used before in an economic context, although this notion had a somewhat bad reputation because it had served to legitimize extensive job cuts; c) thirdly, the narrative schema of shrinking allows one to avoid the question of what stands at the end of this process. Anyone, educated in school mathematics, knows that shrinking can be continued indefinitely – there is always something smaller. This characteristic twist of “shrinking” might have contributed to its development into a convincing concept.

5. DISAPPEARANCE

“Europe changes. Places and landscapes are left. They decay or completely disappear. Between the Atlantic and the Caspian Sea between Adriatic and Barents Sea one meets ruins of the modern civilization: industrial fallow land, caving in railway stations, barracks and sanatoriums, dead railway lines or indecipherable epitaphs. In Middle and Eastern Europe in particular are the scars still visible of an era characterized by war, expulsion and a megalomaniac control of the nature.”\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{39} Ibidem, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibidem, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibidem, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibidem, p. 61.
Disappearance is a faithful accompaniment to the acceleration of modern development. Like “crisis” and “shrinking”, this narrative schema is an answer to one of the most intriguing questions of modernity: how to deal with taking leave from familiar and beloved things. Disappearance can be used rhetorically to persuade an audience to invest money, time or whatever resource necessary. In the end, it is thanks to this rhetoric that the academic and non-academic field of so-called ethno sciences and folklore studies – “Volkskunde”, ethnology and anthropology came into existence, as it is based in the longing for collecting what seems in danger of disappearing. The notion of rescue is one of their key disciplinary issues. In German there is a proverb stating that things declared as dead have a longer life. But the rescue is just one of several rhetorical dimensions of “disappearance”. Referring again to some examples from Germany, I will show in more detail how this narrative schema works.

People in Germany speak of the disappearance of the GDR. In 1998, the (eastern) German historian Stefan Wolle wrote:

“At first the fear disappeared and the depressing eventlessness of the dictatorship. Then the wall came down. All the symbols and uniforms of the GDR disappeared, the endless police checks and the blue 100-Mark-bills with Karl Marx’s bearded face. (...) Now, gradually, also the places are disappearing which are marked by all that. Almost daily obituaries have to be published. (...) This is a book of saying good-bye. And in the minute of leaving everything is allowed: tenderness and hatred, sentimentality and bitterness, nostalgia and optimism, mourning and anger.”

A new situation is made comprehensible here – the time following the GDR. In that process the GDR is transformed into something irretrievable - a distant object of history. In the aesthetic of Wolle’s book this distance is emphasized by black-and-white pictures of the GDR. At the same time a discursive space is opened which allows for discussion about something that had been self-evident before. The historical object now can and must be evaluated, justified or analyzed. The newly opened discursive space turns into a place where negotiations can begin about the appropriate ways of saying good-bye and of remembering.

A vernacular way of seeing these negotiations can be found in the magazine “Superillu”, the only magazine in the German print media market made for East Germans and their concerns. While other papers and magazines set the tone for East Germany by grey images showing people out of work, high-rise buildings and bald heads, Superillu shows smiling, successful, hard-working characters, and delivers on those interests of East Germans which are recognized nowhere else. For Superillu the GDR must not disappear because it is the material of what it itself is made – at least the memories and remainders of it. In one issue last year, one former popular GDR TV-actor writes:

“Sometimes I wonder how long the GDR will still exist in the memory of people? After a couple of decades nobody will be left, who has experienced life in the GDR. Contemporary witnesses are leaving (...) but will the GDR be forgotten then? Certainly not. There it will be historians and authors drawing their knowledge from second hand. (...) Napoleon has been supposed to say: ‘The objective image of history is the sum of lies which society has agreed upon after 30 years’.”

The editorial board strategically published this statement to launch a discussion of readers and contemporary celebrities with a GDR-history. The people, in a Habermasian sense a lethargic and consuming mass in front of which a refeudalized media public is talking, shall be reawakened as an active public that critically brings in its opinions and concerns. People who had lived in the GDR are asked to evaluate their lives and to position themselves in the present. One of the most popular arguments mirrored in the replying readers’ letters, is: not everything was bad in the GDR, although we do not want to have the GDR back. This is a reasonable answer from people who spent most of their lifetime in the GDR to the unreasonable demand of finding an unambiguous position in an ambivalent situation. It allows for recognition of the former life in the GDR and a declaration of belief in the new system at the same time.

In this example the narrative schema of disappearance is used to transform the present into past and to fit it into accepted perceptions of history. In this process, truisms are challenged and changed, and re-negotiations are pending on what shall be forgotten and what remembered and who has to decide about those things. Who will report about life in the GDR when no witness is left? And, on the other hand, who wants to be the sad figure of the last – the one who turns the lights off?

My last example emphasizes still another dimension of the schema of disappearance: In 2006, a book entitled Last & Lost. Atlas of the disappearing Europe was financially supported and published by the German Federal Cultural Foundation. The editor’s goal, as stated in the preface, was to create a book, “that can be used like an atlas, in a geographical or lexical sense: a compendium of places, areas and spaces, which can be determined as the last ones of their kind, calibrated and recorded by writers and artists.” Secrecy and the deliberating dimension of disappearance lie next to the pain inflicted by loss. “Does the magic charm lie in the fact that they [the places] are the last ones of their kind?” the authors ask. They observe processes of a new quality and express a diffuse feeling that the vocabulary they have at their disposal is not adequate any more. Again, one can see the search for an appropriate narration. Where the language seems to resist, the authors rely on pictures, but alas rhetorical ones. Considering possible visualizations of disappearance, none seems apt to grasp the loss of function, the

46 “SUPERillu”, 12/2008, p. 16.
47 I cannot discuss here the full implications of this idea of the readership entangled with the market economy on the print media market, but I am certainly aware of it.
becoming dispensable parts of society. Places do not disappear in the strict sense of the word, they become lost, are devastated, or “betrayed”. Their potential lies fallow, their power and energy is lost – so the tentative language of the book. The cartography of such places, however, interrelates them and opens up a contrast to the apparent “normality” of growth surrounding them. Here the familiar distinction between centre and periphery is strongly challenged, because these places are strewn all across Europe.

The editors of that publication act in a political context that is engaged in a search for new thoughts and developments beyond infinite growth. As Wolfgang Kil tries to do for the concept of shrinking, the authors are looking for new modes of expressing disappearance. New and distinct in their approach is the fact that they are not interested in a mere documentation of loss – which has been the most common way to deal with disappearance so far. They want to trace the fabulous, the fairy-tale dimension inherent in the concept of disappearance.

6. CONCLUSION

In this article I followed an anthropological way of observing and thinking, opening up a fruitful complement of sociological analysis à la Bauman. By approaching the processes of change from the perspective of the people involved who feel responsible for the(ir) future and are engaged in political efforts to steer the change, the top-to-bottom-view has been broadened and enriched. I have tried to show how in the context of decline the three narrative schemas of “crisis”, “shrinking”, and “disappearance” are rhetorically used to explain and to make sense of the situation, and to demand special kinds of action. They do so in a very similar manner.

(1) First of all, they all express a loss of familiar normality, especially since the breakdown of the socialist system. Europe has been seized by a tremendous acceleration of social and cultural change that has questioned basic certainties of modern societies such as unlimited growth, lasting increase of social security, stable nation-states and systems of equality, just to mention some. In times like this, these rhetorical concepts of decline seem well fit to grasp the growing uncertainties.


(2) As narrative schemas they feature a certain potential for dramatization, making them strong rhetorical forces in gaining attention particularly in post-industrial, so called knowledge societies, where attention represents a meager resource and an appreciated form of income within a powerful “economy of attention” organizing the flows of knowledge, as the Austrian philosopher Georg Franck notes. In his essay “The economy of attention” he argues that, in these societies, the ongoing over stimulation by the flood of information leads to an economic spending of attention on the one hand and a more and more professionalized way to attract attention on the other hand. In that context, the potential for dramatization turns out to be an efficient resource.

(3) All three schemas connect the experience of decline (which is a narrative in itself, because it is referring always to a better state at a former time) with narratives of a possible future, although each one does so in a distinct way. “Crisis” is the most open narrative because of the notion of long cycles almost automatically leading to a way out. Shrinking avoids the idea of an ending point altogether by postponing it to the not existing end of an infinite process. This concept can be elaborated as the German sociologists Häussermann and Siebel did in the 1980s. They embedded shrinking in a historical, long-term model built upon the idea that cities had always been dying somewhere, whereas, at the same time, others are flourishing. They argue that it has been a comparatively short historical period that has been determined by growth. What the narrative schema of shrinking avoids is the starting point of “disappearance”. It emphasizes the inevitable end and forces action to deal with it.

All these concepts or narrative schemas do not exist separately from each other. In their rhetorical use they often are mixed, strengthened or contradict each other or are just related by what Naomi Quinn calls nestedness. shrinking leads to disappearance, disappearance can induce or conclude crisis as shrinking can as well. That sometimes makes analysis difficult. Social scientists and anthropologists should be open to precisely this kind of complication without being enslaved by the rhetoricity of these concepts themselves. An anthropology of crisis, shrinking or disappearance should not diagnose from outside, but rather take seriously the persons involved who act according to those schemas, and it should ask what exactly that means.


53 Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 35.