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**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

Loss and change: Culture narratives in old industrial regions in East Germany

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Abstract

Culture is perceived as the main driver of the restructuring of former industrial centres in capitalist societies. Hence, it proves useful to adopt a cultural approach to regional development in different dimensions, that is, culture as a meaning-making process, a constitutive part of a community's identity, or in an aesthetic sense. The study focusses on culture narratives in two East German old industrial towns. Here, local actors refer to culture both in stories of loss as well as in stories of change. They consider culture as an important part of their development narratives, yet with different aims and outcomes depending on whether they promote an instrumental or functional understanding of culture. As a result, culture narratives can either open up new opportunities and thereby contribute to changes in old industrial towns and de-peripheralization, or they can foreclose specific development options and lead to further marginalization.

KEYWORDS

cultural political economy, culture-led development, East Germany, narratives, old industrial regions

JEL CLASSIFICATION

R11, R12, R58, Z10, Z11, Z13

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Old industrial places have been heavily affected by the shift from a production- to a consumption-based economy. Small- and medium-sized industrial towns outside agglomeration areas whose economies often built on only one or few industries have been hit particularly hard by factory closures. Yet, the transformation has not only entailed decisive changes in industrial structures and materialities, but also ‘broader political, economic and social shifts in terms of hegemonic concepts and discourses’ (Cruickshank et al., 2016, 147). Symbolic and cultural aspects are hence considered increasingly important for the development of such places (Gherhes et al., 2020).

Local actors in non-metropolitan old industrial places usually experienced a range of diverse losses (economic, demographic, functional) as well as processes of discursive marginalization (Bürk, 2013; Plüschke-Altöf, 2016). Such places are often perceived as structurally weak, economically and culturally backward and less prone to innovation and entrepreneurship than cities (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Vonnahme, 2021; Willett, 2016). However, local actors also try to counteract these images and exercise specific forms of local agency (Görmar & Lang, 2019). This potentially results not only in a reorientation of the economic activities, but also in changes of the social and cultural fabric (Görmar & Harfst, 2019; Görmar & Lang, 2019) and the discursive landscape.

For many years now, culture and creativity have been perceived as main drivers of the restructuring of former industrial centres in capitalist societies and key factors in the intermunicipal competition for businesses, residents and tourists. Buzzwords such as the ‘creative city’ or ‘the creative region’ became key concepts in current local strategies since Florida (2002) and Landry (2008) popularized them in their work. Still, culture and creativity are usually rather attributed to cities and metropolises than to small towns or even rural areas (Jayne et al., 2010). Likewise, scholarly work on the role of culture and culture-led discourses in industrial restructuring often still focusses on the cultural political economy of metropolitan regions such as the Ruhr area and largely neglects that smaller old industrial towns and regions aim to capitalize on cultural assets on their own to adapt to changing structural conditions (Lorentzen & van Heur, 2012). However, such towns and regions also develop local narratives and spatial imaginaries on the basis of culture (in the following culture narratives¹) which might either lead to the development of new industrial paths or the strengthening of existing ones (Görmar & Harfst, 2019). Accordingly, the present study asks how local actors in non-metropolitan old industrial regions refer to culture in their development narratives, what role(s) these culture narratives assume in local development and what their effects are.

To answer these research questions, I draw on field work in two old industrial towns in East Germany, Zeitz and Lauchhammer. Both towns have been considerably marked by their industrial past and are currently affected by the German decision to phase out coal-based energy production. This decision also influences the discursive landscape as both places gained more attention by policy makers and media alike. Local actors respond to the changes and aim to reorient local development strategies by discursively mobilizing the potential of culture. Analytically, I adopt a cultural political economy (CPE) perspective focussing both on the semiotic (here narrative) aspects of regional development as well as their materialization and embeddedness in material structures (e.g., Sum & Jessop, 2013).

This paper contributes to a growing although still undervalued body of research on the specific assets of regional and local development in non-metropolitan old industrial places. Although, for instance, scholarly work on local agency is increasingly concerned with peripheral regions (e.g., Baekkelund, 2021; Benner, 2022; Stihl, 2022), it still provides little insights as to ‘how change happens including the enabling motivations and narratives that bring about change’ (Beer et al., 2021, 3). Narratives and imaginaries can be understood as both specific representations of, as well as instruments for, local agency. Changes in narratives are hence precursors and results of changes in local

¹ I employ the term ‘culture narratives’ in this paper instead of the maybe more common ‘cultural narratives’ as the narratives I refer to have culture and its role for local development in the centre of their story and can hence be understood as narratives of culture (see also Jensen, 2007 who employs the term ‘culture stories’). ‘Culture narratives’ are also ‘cultural narratives’ in the sense that they are not individual, but collectively shared and dependent on the specific socio-cultural contexts in which they are embedded (Grenni et al., 2020; Lichrou et al., 2017). However, ‘cultural narratives’ do not need to have culture as a theme in their storylines. ‘Culture narratives’ in my understanding relate to different understandings of culture at the same time, that is, culture as a meaning-making process in general, culture as constitutive for a community’s identity and culture in a narrower aesthetic sense.



development activities, and research on them thus has the potential to shed light onto the very processes of change (e.g., Jessop, 2010; Lorentzen & van Heur, 2012; O'Connor, 2015).

Furthermore, the paper shifts the perspective from metropolitan culture narratives and strategies to small town actors' strategies to include culture in regional development. Shadowed by research on such 'paradigmatic' cases as Bilbao (e.g., Ortega Nuere & Bayon, 2015) or Detroit (e.g., Bolderman, 2022), smaller, peripheral places are less visible, and research on the role of culture and narratives in their development strategies is still in an early stage (Lorentzen & van Heur, 2012; Lysgård, 2016).

In the following section, I outline three dimensions of a cultural approach to regional development in old industrial places. They concern both my research perspective, which relies on the CPE approach, as well as the topics studied. I then outline my methodological approach before analysing the emergence and use of culture narratives in the two case studies. I conclude by calling for concrete awareness of policy makers to the outlined narrative strategies of local actors.

2 | A CULTURAL APPROACH TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF OLD INDUSTRIAL PLACES

Cultural approaches to regional and local development gained increasing momentum in economic geography, where scholars have lately acknowledged the stake of temporal, place-specific and cultural aspects as well as the importance of meaning-making processes (e.g., Beer et al., 2021; Benner, 2020; Cooke & Rehfeld, 2011; Huggins & Thompson, 2019; Isaksen et al., 2018; Paasi, 2010; Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023). However, how culture and discourse exactly shape a region's development is still not clear. Culture is a multidimensional, multilayered concept which is difficult to grasp and understand. In the following I refer to three different, albeit interconnected, dimensions of culture which are related to regional and local development. The distinction is conceptually driven based on Schmidt-Lux et al. (2016), although the different dimensions are hard to discern and often overlap.

First, I refer to culture as a meaning-making and sense-giving process with which social norms and values are defined, naturalized and contested (McCann, 2002, 387). This perspective focusses on 'the social practices which produce meaning as well as the practices which are regulated and organized by these shared meanings' [Hall (1995) 2008, 265]. Culture in this sense cannot be discerned from the economic and social realm but is a constitutive part of them (Jessop, 2012; Lysgård, 2016). Second, culture can be understood as a shared set of meanings and beliefs which contributes to identity building and thereby constitutes a specific 'community culture' (Huggins & Thompson, 2015). As such, it is a means to define and differentiate socio-spatial communities and their experiences. Third, culture refers to a rather narrow field of social relations characterized by aesthetic (mostly artistic) interpretations and practices (Schmidt-Lux et al., 2016). From this perspective, it is concerned with processes of cultural production and consumption including the valorization of cultural products, as art and culture themselves have become commodities in capitalist societies (Steyaert & Beyes, 2009, 210).

The present study is concerned with culture in all three dimensions, that is, culture as meaning-making process as the underlying perspective, culture as a community's shared set of meanings and beliefs constituting its identity, and culture in a narrow aesthetic sense of cultural production and consumption, or in other words the culture and creative industries.

2.1 | The research perspective: on the role of narratives and imaginaries in meaning-making processes

For a long time, economic geographers understood socio-cultural aspects including discourse mainly as either restraining or enabling factors in regional development and hence an important part of the structure in a



given region (Görmar & Harfst, 2019). Influential studies on lock-in and path dependency portrayed them as leading to cognitive lock-ins (Grabher, 1993; Hassink, 2010), hindering a region in repositioning itself in a capitalist globalizing world (Hudson, 1992). Such a hindering cultural atmosphere is expressed in 'a common language regarding technical matters, contracting rules, and knowledge [leading to] social processes such as "groupthink"' (Grabher, 1993, 262). In contrast, culture-based assets such as social capital, learning or trust can also be seen as enabling factors to create new endogenous development paths (Cooke & Rehfeld, 2011; Morgan, 1997).

Martin and Sunley (2006, 413) go beyond this structural understanding in emphasizing the 'coevolution of different "arenas" – such as the economic, technological, institutional and sociocultural' whereby acknowledging the scope for agency in shaping regional culture and related narratives (Garud et al., 2010). Different understandings of the opportunities and challenges a certain place or region faces as well as different visions about a place's future arise among different actors on multiple scales and at different points in time (Pike et al., 2010). Thus, studies should take the role of discourse seriously 'in shaping the vision or set of expectations for a region, thereby enabling the creation of new paths' (Beer et al., 2021, 2; see also Moulaert et al., 2016).

The cultural political economy approach which was developed primarily by Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum (e.g., Jessop, 2010; Sum & Jessop, 2013) and other related research (e.g., Lorentzen & van Heur, 2012; Lysgård, 2016; Ribera-Fumaz, 2009) responds to that call. It operates at the intersection of cultural, political and economic analysis viewing culture not as a separate field but 'folded together with economics' (Cruickshank et al., 2016, 147) and the political. Exploring the 'relations between space, culture and political economy within the urban political economic restructuring' (Ribera-Fumaz, 2009, 454), CPE focusses both on the semiotic processes of meaning-making (among others, imaginaries, discourses and narratives) pursued by various agents and their dialectic relation to the 'emergent extra-semiotic features of social relations' (Jessop, 2010). Thus, change in discourses, by varying themes and topics, foregrounding or backgrounding of specific aspects by local actors, for example, may potentially lead to social and material changes of a place as well. Corresponding visions do not emerge in 'a social and spatial vacuum' but are based on past developments and embedded in a region's spatial constitution or configurations (Pike et al., 2017, 32).

An important aspect of local development discourse is the use of narratives as specific discursive devices to make sense of the world (Garud et al., 2010). They create a certain order by 'narrating the unfolding of events over some passage of time and in some particular location' (Eckstein, 2003, 14; see also Jessop, 1997). Thereby, they reveal local actors' underlying political and economic imaginaries as to how regional development should look like. Narrators explicitly and implicitly value the narrated events and the connected actors by assigning specific roles to the characters in the stories, such as heroes, villains or victims (Shanahan et al., 2018). Furthermore, local narratives have an inherently temporal character. They interlink the past, present and future of a place. In particular, the 'futures or "becoming" within narratives are important political spaces for understanding the dynamics of regional inequality' (Willett, 2016, 436). Narratives oriented to the past may foreground either past glory times serving as role models for future development or emphasize the losses experienced which should be overcome. Future narratives, in contrast, allow for a reimagining of social identities and local economies (Jessop, 1997; Somers, 1994), whereby strengthening local agency. In this sense, local agency is deeply interconnected with the narratives and imaginaries which are collectively articulated and pushed forward or contested. Local actors identify development potentials and mobilize resources towards specific paths through narratives of change (Garud et al., 2010). They 'develop imaginaries of urban futures based on their interpretation of potentialities and informed by their own particular orientation, interests and biases' (Lorentzen & van Heur, 2012, 6). Finally, narratives articulate and materialize in specific places. Potential changes thus occur both in the social and political fabric of a place and in the prevailing language, be it in official policy documents or in the everyday narratives of local actors. The focus on local narratives thus seems useful for a culturally informed approach to the study of regional development and restructuring, such as CPE.



2.2 | Culture and narratives as constitutive of a place's identity

Culture, as part of narratives, is furthermore an integral part of identity and image-building processes (Grenni et al., 2020; Jensen, 2007; Somers, 1994; Vainikka, 2015). In this sense, culture can be defined as a set of beliefs, meanings and discourse (including narratives) shared by a group or community in a specific socio-spatial context (Clifton et al., 2011; Huggins & Thompson, 2019). Shared narratives create common bonds between people and give them a sense of belonging to an imagined community (Eckstein & Throgmorton, 2003; Hall, 2008). They anchor actors' identities in specific places and can thus be used to establish a sense of belonging towards a specific territory. By fostering the 'cultural identity, social cohesion, civic participation, learning and general well-being' (Lysgård, 2016, 2) within a community, they enhance a sense of local community (Garud et al., 2010; Miörner, 2020), albeit to the expense that some social groups might be excluded (Potter, 2020; Willett, 2016). The use of certain local narratives, collective memories and joint visions evokes specific spatial imaginaries (Moulaert et al., 2016). By these imaginaries, actors draw, consciously or not, social and spatial boundaries and delimit a region or place towards other regions or places, not only territorially but also qualitatively (Paasi, 2010).

In old industrial places, past and current industrial activities led to the emergence of a specific 'industrial culture' (Bole, 2021; Eriksen et al., 2023; Görmar & Harfst, 2019). However, in times of changes and uncertainty such places particularly struggle to find a new definition or identity (Cruickshank et al., 2016). Here culture narratives might offer new perspectives for old industrial regions.

2.3 | Culture narratives in old industrial towns

Culture and the creative industries are increasingly considered as drivers of innovation, economic growth and regional development (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Lysgård, 2011). In this sense, culture includes an aestheticization of a place's material assets, and refers among others, to a region's heritage, particular cultural experiences and events as well as architecture and culture places as materializations of place myths, ideologies and spatial narratives (Lichrou et al., 2017, 160). The valorization of cultural assets has become a considerable hard growth factor, with the cultural and creative industries making up a share of 2.8% of GDP in Germany in 2020 (BMWK, 2022). In recent years, there has been a proliferation of culture-led strategies and visions which were not only adopted by cities, but also by rural areas and small towns where agriculture and manufacturing industries have lost their importance, while the consumption and experience of leisure and recreation spaces have gained momentum (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Willett, 2016). Hence, it is deemed necessary to expand the reflection about 'how the relationship between cities, entrepreneurship and culture has been established in narratives of policy making' (Steyaert & Beyes, 2009, 208) to strategic narratives of small towns and rural areas and the interlinkages between local and global discourses on culture-led development (Lysgård, 2016).

According to Sacco et al. (2014), local actors refer in their narratives to different perspectives on culture that should be scrutinized: (1) an instrumental perspective considering culture as genuine source of economic value added, and (2) a more sophisticated functional perspective which understands culture as important asset for the organization and functioning of post-industrial places.

Narratives based on an instrumental understanding emphasize the role of culture in attracting resources and talents, and thus new investments, businesses, residents or tourists, to specific places. Culture is only valued 'in terms of its direct and indirect economic (and media) impact whatever the contents, rather than in terms of providing stimulating experience and fostering authentic local participation' (Sacco et al., 2014, 2811). Such strategies which promote concepts such as the 'creative city' or the 'creative countryside' aim at fostering rapid and substantial growth (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Florida, 2002; Landry, 2008). According to this logic, local actors work on enhancing a place's attractiveness for tourists, investors, entrepreneurs and qualified workforce and increasing local potential for consumption (see also Lichrou et al., 2017). Such visions materialize inter alia in place branding and



marketing campaigns and corresponding investments in the built environment, which should attract the so-called creative class.

A more functional but also partly instrumental approach considers cultural production and participation as important assets in the intermunicipal and interregional competition. This perspective acknowledges that intrinsic motivational commitment is an essential component of culture (Sacco et al., 2014, 2812), but places specific emphasis on top-down planning strategies such as the revitalization of industrial heritage buildings and facilities into culture-driven consumption spaces (Lichrou et al., 2017). Corresponding strategies primarily target a place's economic culture (Lysgård, 2016; also Huggins & Thompson, 2015, Eriksen et al., 2023) with the aim of enhancing entrepreneurship as well as the production and circulation of commercial cultural products (Lysgård, 2016).

In both approaches, local cultural and creative communities are often ignored in strategies and social conflicts and contestations may arise from this neglect. Willett (2016), for example, shows that in Cornwall lifestyle and/or heritage-based narratives might have attracted people from outside to the region, but did not prevent local people from leaving. She identified rather strong differences in the experiences and hence everyday narratives of the two groups, that is, native residents and newcomers to the region. Officially articulated, outward-oriented narratives focussed on enhancing visitor experiences and the consumption of place, which from the perspective of local insiders, hindered a progressive local development. Insiders felt not only structurally disadvantaged but also further victimized by narratives which did not take their own experiences seriously.

A strong functional perspective instead aims at community-building processes and thus appears more inclusive. Corresponding strategies focus on socio-cultural processes and internal processes of a place to 'create a sense of coherence, pride and common identity among its citizens' (Lysgård, 2016, 2), or in other words a 'community culture' (Huggins & Thompson, 2015).

Culture narratives and development strategies need to be contextualized according to the respective places in question but also linked to globally prevalent discourses as a reflection mirror. Lysgård emphasizes that they are 'not constructed as purely local narratives but are increasingly produced as part of a network, in which ideas flow through space and are reprocessed as grounded and territorial narratives in place' (Lysgård, 2016, 3; see also Sacco et al., 2014). Normative spatial imaginaries of idealized places such as the 'creative city', the 'liveable city' or the 'entrepreneurial city' (Watkins, 2015) are taken up by local actors orienting their visions and activities in specific directions and thereby foreclosing other opportunities (Jessop, 2012). Hence, narratives always work selectively, particularly when it comes to visions of the future in times of transformation and uncertainty (Beckert & Bronk, 2019). According to Willett (2016, 448), we hence do not only 'need to know [...] what they [narratives] are and how they are produced, but also how time operates within them and the futures that are made possible or closed off' (Willett, 2016, 448).

2.4 | Summary

The current study is informed by the cultural political economy approach and its focus on the interplay between discourse and material structures. In focussing on local culture narratives, I develop a framework that draws attention to local actors' narratives, their interlinkages with multi-scalar culture narratives and the socio-spatial context within which they are articulated. Local actors may employ either instrumental and economic or more functional, community-oriented perspectives on culture thereby shaping a place's development path. Culture narratives might contribute to the redevelopment and de-peripheralization of a given place but may also lead to its further discursive marginalization and stigmatization (see also Bürk, 2013). With empirical examples, I will show how actors in old industrial places mobilize culture in current development narratives, if they either refer to more instrumental or functional understandings of culture, and how normative imaginaries are taken up locally. I will also try to show what roles these culture narratives assume, what activities are made possible and what other futures might be closed off.



3 | METHODOLOGICAL PROCEEDING AND CASE SELECTION

The cultural political economy approach has some important methodological implications. The research process is not linear but rather an open process, switching between concept-building, retroductive moments, empirical inquiries, conceptual refinement and further reproduction (Sum & Jessop, 2013). The assumed complexity of the world calls for a pluralistic logic of discovery, calling for the application of several methods of data collection and their subsequent triangulation. The present study is thus built on several datasets which were collected between 2019 and 2022: 27 urban development, touristic and marketing documents of the two case study municipalities (19 for Zeitz; 8 for Lauchhammer), participant observation during 20 strategic events on urban development (12 in Zeitz; 8 in Lauchhammer) and 47 interviews with experts from municipal administrations, local and regional politicians, and civil society actors as well as economic actors (23 in Zeitz; 24 in Lauchhammer). Interviews have been recorded and transcribed, and meetings observed have been documented via extended protocols. The transcripts, observation protocols and documents have been coded in two ways: manually to identify the narrative structures such as characters and character roles (heroes, victims, villains, supporters), plot and settings (see Shanahan et al., 2018); and with MAXQDA to identify themes and topics discussed (including the role of culture and culture initiatives in local development).

The analysis combines critical discourse analysis (CDA) as elaborated by Fairclough (e.g., Fairclough, 1992, 2003, 2005) and narrative analysis (here especially Czarniawska, 2004; see also Sandercock, 2003) into the novel approach of critical narrative analysis (CNA) (Gavriely-Nuri, 2017; Görmär & Kinossian, 2022; Souto-Manning, 2014). In line with the CPE perspective, CNA allows for the focus to be first on the micro level, that is, individual texts as stories including narrative structures and content (Shanahan et al., 2018), and then in a second step, to go beyond the micro level of narrative analysis by triangulating the results from the different materials and examining the interrelations of the semiotic elements with extra-semiotic aspects of events and actions as well as social structures (as discussed, e.g., by Fairclough, 2013 in his approach to CDA). By integrating the two approaches in a coherent methodology, I have sought to build a bridge between the stories told by individuals, officially published narratives as they are inscribed in, among others, historic, touristic, marketing and urban development documents, and the structural context enabling or constraining local development. In official documents, I identify hegemonic narratives and imaginaries. Observation protocols and interviews served to further identify contestations and personal perspectives on the dominant narratives. The empirical part of this paper already shows a synthesis of the various results.

The cases, Zeitz in Saxony-Anhalt and Lauchhammer in Brandenburg, have been selected according to three criteria: (1) they are marked considerably by their industrial past; (2) they are located in non-metropolitan areas, and (3) at the time of research, they have been in a phase of strategic reorientation in which new narratives emerged and old ones were potentially contested and/or reformulated. Both are small towns in East Germany which have been considerably marked by manufacturing and extractive industries in the past and experienced a heavy deindustrialization and shrinkage in the aftermath of German reunification. Additionally, they are both affected by the German decision to phase out coal exploitation and coal-based power production. The role of culture in local development has not been a selection criterion but rather turned out to be central in the strategies of both towns during the research process.

There are also some great differences between the towns. Zeitz is looking back at over 1,000 years of history which is also visible in the built environment. The city is marked by buildings from different époques, with some churches from the medieval age to baroque buildings and nineteenth-century industrial buildings up until the panel houses of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). There are also several cultural institutions including seven libraries, the castle museum, industrial heritage sites, two lay theatres, etc. In recent years, the education and culture association of Kloster Posa, a former monastery, has aimed to foster alternative and inclusive culture projects in the town with multiplier effects for other projects. Zeitz is still the seat of the Central German lignite exploitation company MIBRAG, as well as of other energy-intensive industries such as a sugar factory, chemical industries and an iron foundry. It is hence heavily affected by the lignite phase out and therefore has gained considerable attention in recent years.



Culture narratives in Zeitz and Lauchhammer

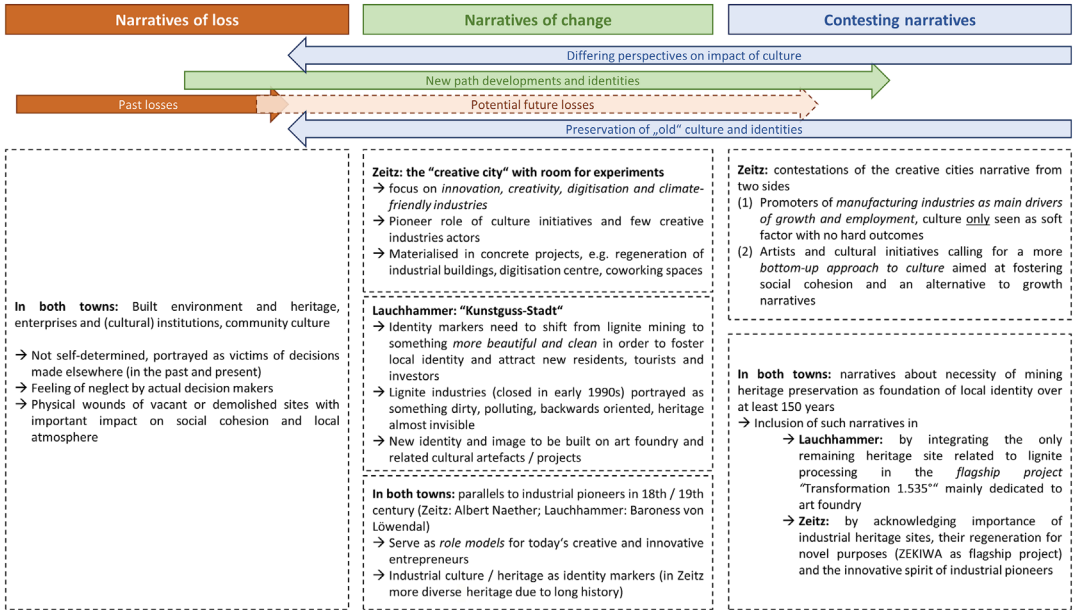


FIGURE 1 Culture narratives in Zeitz and Lauchhammer. Source: Author creation.

In contrast, Lauchhammer was founded only in 1950 as a merger of several villages due to the growth of lignite and heavy machinery industries and subsequent increased needs for coordination in the fields of housing, infrastructure and economic development. The built environment is still marked by former village structures. Until 1990, lignite extracting and processing industries as well as heavy machinery were the most important economic branches, but shrank considerably after reunification. The lignite industries were even totally closed. The most important cultural institution in Lauchhammer is the Museum for Art Foundry, in a neighbourhood close to the still operating art foundry business. Apart from that, there is the so-called castle park with the renovated castle church and some remaining buildings which are used for public events such as the town festival or concerts. Further, there is a rarely used culture house (*Kulturhaus*) and the so-called multigeneration house (*Mehrgenerationenhaus*), home to many of Lauchhammer's associations. These include inter alia a traditional association of miners (*Traditionsverein Braunkohle*) and a local heritage association (*Heimatverein*).

4 | CULTURE NARRATIVES IN ZEITZ AND LAUCHHAMMER²

On first sight, Zeitz seems to be more prone to adding culture to local development narratives than Lauchhammer, yet in both towns, culture plays a rather prominent, albeit ambiguous role in local strategies. It is related both to narratives of loss and narratives of change as well as their contestations (for a summary, see Figure 1).

Narratives of loss mainly developed in the 1990s and 2000s as a reaction to political and economic restructuring processes, yet they are still vivid in both towns. Besides the loss of political and economic functions, jobs, and subsequently residents, narratives of loss have been also related to culture. This concerned mainly cultural institutions and infrastructures (e.g., the public theatre in Zeitz, culture houses in Lauchhammer) and vacant or demolished industrial

²All quotes in this section were translated by the author if not stated otherwise.

heritage sites (e.g., factory buildings as in Figure 2), as well as immaterial heritage and community culture. Up to today, empty or demolished buildings left wounds in the physical fabric of the towns. In Lauchhammer, the traces of the lignite industry are even almost invisible today, as industrial sites have been mainly demolished, leaving only vast green spaces in the municipal area (except the so-called biotowers which are the last remnants of the industry, see Figure 3). Both destructions as well as vacancies had considerable effects on local identities and narratives, with residents feeling that a whole culture has been destructed, leaving some blind spots in local identities which need to be refilled.

'In the years after 1990, people tore down, threw away, threw out and fired people, so much that it hurt. It still hurts many people today, because they spent their lives here, experienced their best times, raised their children, celebrated their festivities and have remained connected to their home to this day. The vast wastelands between the former village centres, which grew together so quickly due to industry, make it difficult for strangers to understand this place. They are not just holes in the landscape, but holes in the hearts'.

(From an exhibition on Lauchhammer's industrial history in the Museum for Art Foundry, March 2022, translation: Pia Kahlfuß)

Actors in both towns have portrayed themselves as victims of decisions made elsewhere in the aftermath of German reunification, and reported in the interviews that in the past their towns had been largely neglected by regional and federal politicians. This is still felt particularly in Zeitz, where the planned lignite phase out is perceived as yet another decision which they could not influence. The nearby operating mines are still an important part of



FIGURE 2 Abandoned factory in Zeitz, photo: author.



FIGURE 3 The last remnants of lignite processing industries in Lauchhammer, the so-called biotowers, photo: author.



local identity and community culture (Huggins & Thompson, 2015) that seems to be lost now due to the decisions and missing commitment of supralocal actors such as the Saxony-Anhaltian and German governments.

However, today culture and creative industries are again in the focus of current development strategies and narratives of change in both towns. Local actors try to put their cultural capital to the fore either by emphasizing the instrumental or the functional inclusive dimension of culture and thereby linking up to current global discussions about culture and the creative industries as levers for local development. Zeitz is a culturally diverse town which aims at capitalizing on the free space it can offer for creativity and experiments. In particular, the department for economic development foregrounds the potential that recent initiatives in the field of cultural and creative industries offer, such as, for example, the former pasta factory which is currently an arts and virtual reality centre, or initiatives such as Kloster Posa. In an interview, Zeitz as a 'creative city' is explicitly mentioned as one of four main foci which are addressed by the current claim of the 'city of future' to raise the attractiveness of the town for residents, tourists and investors alike, to revalorize its industrial brownfields, and as a driver of further developments.

'Cultural and creative industries as well as information and communication technologies (ICT) will be the most important actors, as creativity is the driver of further developments and therefore we need to attach importance to that'.

(ZZ_IN_09)

With this statement, the municipality is also in line with regional and national strategies which see cultural and creative industries (CCI) and tourism as important economic factors in regional restructuring and culture as a means to strengthening the attractiveness of the coal mining region (STK Sachsen-Anhalt, 2022). It seems that, at least from the economic development point of view, a rather instrumental perception of culture is prevalent, and its potential to foster social cohesion at least undervalued, though with increasing contestations by civil society and arts-related actors (see below).

Lauchhammer has only recently put a strong focus on a particular part of its industrial history, namely, the foundation of the art foundry in early eighteenth century. The art foundry is considered to be something beautiful, unique and future oriented³ (as compared with the lignite industries which have been portrayed in interviews as dirty, polluting and backward oriented) which might foster a new local identity and pride among Lauchhammer's residents. The most prominent sign of this is the addendum to the town's name which since August 2022 is called 'Lauchhammer – Kunstguss-Stadt' (Lauchhammer – town of the art foundry). The story uses a rather neutral cultural product and its history to foster the attractiveness of the town.

'And in the frame of this concept to get the name "Kunstguss-Stadt" we develop a strategy which should pervade the whole town, which is oriented towards the art foundry but also will push the city marketing considerably. We need to achieve that people from the outside move to Lauchhammer and this will work only with corresponding attractive offers'.

(LH_IN_08)

However, the narrative also aims at strengthening social cohesion and inducing a new pride of local residents in their town although structurally important economic activities such as services or small manufacturing industries are rather unconnected to the art foundry. In Lauchhammer, local actors seem to particularly foreground the functional inclusive character of culture, which is mainly directed to the inside. Yet also refer to its instrumental use as an attractor to the outside.

³The art foundry in Lauchhammer is one of the oldest ones still existing in Europe, although today it only employs about 20 people. However, it is still operating, a contrast to the situation of the mines.



‘And here emerges a tiny piece of identity in the next years and decades that could engender a little bit of pride in the people’.

(LH_IN_06)

This new narrative is also planned to materialize in the form of an education and event centre with locations at the art foundry museum (Figure 4) and at the so-called biotowers (Figure 3). The project ‘Transformation 1.535°’ is considered as a strategic flagship project with the potential to create a coherent local identity across all parts of the town and with a certain attraction potential. Here as well, this is in line with state strategies to foster culture and arts as soft location factors and identity markers in former and current mining regions (MWFK, 2021).

In both towns, the narratives of change are populated with heroes which are considered entrepreneurial pioneers of innovation and creativity initiating by their activities future economic growth. In Lauchhammer, the heroine baroness von Löwendal founded the first iron foundry in the early eighteenth century and set the base for the art foundry and heavy machinery industries. In Zeitz, Ernst Albert Naether invented the pushchair and laid the cornerstone for Europe’s biggest pushchair factory, ZEKIWA. Today, some key actors want to revive that pioneering spirit of the nineteenth century’s industrialization as the current restructuring processes due to the lignite phase out that will require a reinvention of the town’s economic base. The creative cities story, placing the initiators of the culture and education centre Kloster Posa as heroes at the centre, fits very well in this understanding (Figure 5). Even in official documents of the town, such as the integrated urban development concept, they are portrayed as pioneers and drivers of development.



FIGURE 4 Statue in front of the art foundry museum in Lauchhammer, photo: author.



FIGURE 5 Posa Calling Festival, 2018, at Kloster Posa in Zeitz, photo: author.



'However, something has happened in Zeitz for a few years now: an increasing number of tourists discovers the city's treasures and young creative people from the surrounding area – especially from Leipzig – have realized the town's potential and revitalize the cultural landscape. They discover open spaces that are awaiting a new utilization – residential buildings, brownfields and industrial landmarks. Hence, vacancies are not only a great burden, but also a treasure to be recovered'.

(City of Zeitz 2020, 1)

However, the actors which are the subject of this appraisal instead contest the underlying concept of growth through cultural and creative industries and the increasing economization of culture. They portray themselves as 'space pioneers' (ZZ_IN_08; see also Matthiesen, 2005) with extensive networks who have attracted a number of people from beyond the region to come to Zeitz, including artists, media makers, politicians and culture supporting and funding organizations on multiple scales (ZZ_IN_08; ZZ_IN_13). However, they promote a rather inclusive functional understanding of culture, aiming to overcome negative perceptions of the town among residents and outsiders alike and foster identification with the town and its rich culture. This also resulted in extensive networking activities in the town and even in a strong engagement in local politics with the creation of a new city council group after the last elections. Similar contestations of growth-oriented narratives can also be found in Lauchhammer, particularly in the social and environmental fields, yet less prominently as in Zeitz. It seems quite surprising, for example, that the vast nature protection areas within the municipality, including former mining areas and brownfields, do not play an important role in local development narratives.

However, the culture and creative cities narrative is often contested from the perspective of growth promoting actors as well. The 'creative city' discourse is considered to be overrated (ZZ_IN_02). Culture is here only seen as a soft factor to attract new manufacturing industries which are considered to be the main driver for growth and employment. Its instrumental use as driver of growth is rather questioned.

'From my point of view, they [the creative industries] will not develop to the extent that I can say they will be a serious economic factor for the city of Zeitz'.

(ZZ_IN_21)

In particular, businesses and people affiliated to still existing extractive and manufacturing industries lament the overvaluation of the cultural and creative industries, and lack hard results in supporting such initiatives such as employment numbers or newly renovated houses. However, in Zeitz, for example, in recent years immigration numbers are continuously increasing and the impact of culture-led development is becoming increasingly visible, with a growing number of housing and cultural projects carried out by creative newcomers and returnees (e.g., the former pasta factory with artist studios, a coworking space and virtual reality centre; several multifamily houses; artistic walks through the city, and so on).

A last group of actors contesting, at least partly, recent culture-led developments are current and former miners and promoters of the preservation and revalorization of mining heritage. They fear that their heritage and culture which was the base for past growth and prosperity in both towns is devalued both by the state and local actors and will get lost and overwritten by other culture narratives focussing on the instrumental use of the creative industries or on different parts of the local past.

'300 years of history are the roots of our culture and region. That must not get lost'.

(ZZ_IN_15)

Both municipal administrations attempt to address this fear by either integrating the mining heritage in a planned flagship project as in Lauchhammer or by mobilizing particular funds to support and maintain the mining



heritage as in the case of the coal briquette factory Hermansschacht in Zeitz. In their activities, they are supported by regional governments coordinating the restructuring activities in current and former mining regions.

5 | DISCUSSION

The presented case studies show that culture narratives, questions of identity and local development are inherently intertwined. In both towns, economic decline, political stagnation and the resulting losses of industries, people and reputation left deep traces in the local identity, resulting in feelings of neglect and disappointment. Besides administrative and economic functions, both towns also experienced the closure of cultural institutions such as theatres or culture houses leading not only to a reduction in cultural and artistic offerings, but also a decline of the 'community culture', with a negative impact on social cohesion and local atmospheres. Thirty years after the economic and political changes in East Germany, the feelings of having been forgotten or even worse, that the social and economic base has been destroyed, are still major reference points in the narratives of a great share of actors. Current top-down decisions from national or federal state governments such as the exit from lignite mining further strengthen this feeling, nurturing fears for potential future losses in economic activities as well as for the last remnants of the former vivid mining culture (ZZ_IN_15; LH_IN_01).

However, these narratives of loss are also challenged by other, mostly younger local actors who actively aim to shape local narratives and thereby local identities by mobilizing the potential of culture and creativity (LH_IN_06; ZZ_IN_23). Actors in Zeitz and Lauchhammer pursue different aims with the mobilization of culture in current development narratives and deploy slightly different strategies. In Lauchhammer, any cultural development was historically strongly linked to industrial development. Hence, current strategies refer strongly to the industrial past and aim at its exploitation while providing links to existing industries. Culture is seen as a means to anchor the industrial past in the collective memory, thereby fostering local identity and social cohesion. However, actors decided to focus selectively on a specific industry, that is, the art foundry, which is considered to be clean and beautiful. The economically more important lignite industries which are deemed to be dirty and outdated are backgrounded by official narratives, leading to identity struggles with the still influential former miners association (LH_IN_01; LH_IN_02). However, the aims to induce more pride in local residents and foster social cohesion throughout the town point to a more functional and inclusive understanding of culture. It not only refers to economic opportunities, but also to the more general aim of raising the wellbeing of the region's residents.

In Zeitz, there is a bigger diversity of cultural assets from different historical periods which impact local identity. The industrial culture is only one of them, albeit an important one. Furthermore, a rising creative scene can be observed that even gets a political voice in the city council. Official narratives about local development mainly take up the latter observation, arguing for the creation of new development paths on the basis of CCI and digital industries. The municipality sees a potential here to foster innovation and economic growth on the one hand and to stop outmigration and demographic shrinkage on the other. CCI are seen as both employment providers themselves and an asset to attracting investors from other industries as well as tourists and residents to come to Zeitz, which is a rather instrumental perspective to culture. However, this perspective does not remain uncontested. The economic benefits of the creative industries are questioned particularly by promoters of a narrative still portraying Zeitz as an industrial town, and which argue for new industrial settlements to gain jobs and tax revenues as well as to preserve the industrial heritage from former times. There are also contestations from actors who favour a more functional understanding of culture emphasizing their role in fostering social cohesion and local identity.

The cases show that the past, present and future appear to be particularly intermingled in economic strategies and questions of identity of old industrial towns with mutual influence on each other. Culture is an important factor in this regard as it concerns identity and economic development alike in different dimensions, and is used in both of these cases to draw red lines from past developments to the future. Local actors mobilize culture to negotiate and



shape future directions of local development by explicitly taking up discourses and strategies from other scales. The ‘creative city’ is a reference point not only in the metropolises, but also in small towns (Lysgård, 2011), and regional strategies as to how to shape the current structural change also refer to culture as a location factor for increased attractivity and identity markers (ZZ_IN_16; LH_IN_23; MWFK, 2019; STK Sachsen-Anhalt, 2022).

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Old industrial places in processes of restructuring often experience a ‘struggle of definition’ (Cruikshank et al., 2016) as to their development. Narratives about the past and present (Henning, 2018; Martin & Sunley, 2006), as well as imaginations about places’ futures (Hassink et al., 2019), have to be renegotiated. Hence, changes do not only occur in the social and political fabrics of a place but also in language, be it in official policy documents or everyday narratives of local actors. Culture narratives or stories either dealing with past and future losses or changes often play an important role in this regard (Cruikshank et al., 2016; Jensen, 2007; Lorentzen & van Heur, 2012).

In the present study a cultural approach to the study of regional development in three different ways was adopted. First, on the basis of the cultural political economy approach I focussed on the semiotic processes of narratives. This allowed me to capture culture as a meaning-making process co-constituting both local strategies and their materializations in actual development projects in old industrial places. Local actors refer to culture both in stories of loss and stories of change which often overlap, refer to each other and contest each other, leaving material and immaterial traces in the urban fabric. However, narratives of loss and victimization are very persistent (Willett, 2021), as bad experiences seem to have a longer lasting effect than positive ones. Yet, such negative ascriptions are challenged particularly by future-oriented agents who aim to change development paths and mindsets. Hence, both stories of loss as well as stories of change contribute to the constitution of a community’s identity as a second understanding of culture. Last but not least, local actors increasingly consider culture (and the creative industries) as important component of new development narratives, but with different aims depending on whether they promote an instrumental or functional understanding of culture. However, this perspective does not remain uncontested and might even have different outcomes. Culture narratives can open up new opportunities and contribute to changes and a de-peripheralization of thus far marginalized old industrial places. That being said, they can also foreclose specific development options by reproducing existing structures and behaviours of local actors (Willett, 2016).

Policy makers should be aware of these mechanisms, as they create narratives on their own by elaborating local and regional strategies and development projects. They often refer, implicitly or explicitly, to broader overarching meta-narratives such as the global discourse on culture-led development. Once materialized and hence retained in strategic development documents or even built infrastructures and projects, narratives might foreclose other options which would require additional resources or changes in the very strategies (as in our cases the maintenance of mining heritage or the valorization of nature protection areas). These processes do not remain uncontested, but narratives are created in constant negotiations and struggles between different local actors from different fields. However, once certain narratives prevail, they give orientation and strategic guidelines to local actors, thereby shaping future development paths.

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Resumen. La cultura se percibe como el principal motor de la reestructuración de los antiguos centros industriales de las sociedades capitalistas. De ahí que resulte útil adoptar un enfoque cultural del desarrollo regional con diferentes dimensiones, es decir, la cultura como proceso de creación de significados, como parte constitutiva de la identidad de una comunidad o en su sentido estético. El estudio se centra en las narrativas culturales de dos antiguas ciudades industriales de Alemania Oriental. Aquí, los agentes locales se refieren a la cultura tanto en las historias de pérdida como en las de cambio. Consideran la cultura como una parte importante de sus narrativas de desarrollo, aunque con objetivos y resultados diferentes según promuevan una comprensión instrumental o funcional de la cultura. En consecuencia, las narrativas culturales pueden dar paso a nuevas oportunidades y contribuir así a los cambios en las antiguas ciudades industriales y a la desperiferización, o bien pueden descartar determinadas opciones de desarrollo y conducir a una mayor marginación.

抄録: 文化は、資本主義社会におけるかつての産業中心地の再構築の主要な推進力として認識されている。さらには、地域開発の様々な側面において文化的アプローチを採用することが有用であることが証明されている。すなわち、意味を生み出すプロセス、コミュニティのアイデンティティの構成要素、または美的な意味での文化である。本稿では、東ドイツの2つの古い工業都市における文化的なナラティブに注目する。ここで、地域の当事者は、喪失の物語と変化の物語の両方において文化に言及する。彼らは文化を自分たちの発展のナラティブの重要な部分と考えているが、文化の道具的理解を促進するか機能的理解を促進するかによって、その目的と成果は異なってくる。結論として、文化的なナラティブは、新しい機会を生みそれによって古い工業都市の変化と脱周辺化に貢献することもあれば、特定の開発選択肢を排除してさらなる周辺化につながることもある。