

## *Bitterfeld. Ruination, Restoration, and Reappropriation of Landscapes and Livelihoods in East Germany*

*Carolin Märtens*

“Bitteres aus Bitterfeld” (“Bitter stuff from Bitterfeld”) announces the title of a documentary film from 1988 about the outrageous level of pollution and environmental destruction caused by chemical industry and coal mining around Bitterfeld, a town in the then German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and always under a layer of black carbon dust. Once icon for the ignorance and irresponsibility on the part of the East German government and administration concerning the environment, Bitterfeld has been cleansed of pollutants and its reputation since the 1990s. Within three decades, the area surrounding the town of 37000 inhabitants transformed from the “most polluted place in Europe” to a pretty destination for recreation and tourism, offering beaches, holiday homes, wildlife, and nature reserves.

This is the significantly shortened success story of Bitterfeld that the fleetingly interested visitor reads about in brochures promoting tourist activities. Naturally, a closer look reveals a more ambivalent story; many stories, in fact, that both complicate the idyllic present and add some color to the sooty past.

Over a hundred years of mining and chemical production did both, providing livelihoods and destroying them. The overall record is very uneven for different species. But, to some extent, affected were all, including the human, by habitat destruction, pollution and displacement. Forests were logged, wetlands dried out, villages devastated, and riverbeds relocated – roads, railways, humans, and animals, too. The soil was dug up thirty to forty meters deep, in some places up to seventy meters; one hundred and eighty tons of fly ash drizzled down on Bitterfeld, daily. The handling of toxic fumes, substances, and waste of the chemical industries was at large inadequate, hazardous for workers and residents and not seldom disastrous for the general environment and its future.

In the face of these indisputably grave consequences, other aspects of life, living, and livelihoods substantially shaped and afforded by coal mining and the chemical industry often get out of sight for those that have not lived that life. There was work and a stable income, there was solid social cohesion (the opposite, too, of course). And there was, and is, humble pride – pride in contributing to the national economy, in providing medicines, pesticides and electricity, in developing state-of-the-art technology in few niches, and in keeping the business running against all odds of the planned economy.

Today, the restored landscape presents itself as idyll to the visitor as well as to the local resident. Restoration, however, remains incomplete. Waste deposits filled with in part extremely toxic chemicals have not been emptied and keep contaminating the groundwater and wider water network it is connected with. It is prohibited in Bitterfeld to use subterranean water in gardens.

From the beginning, renaturation was closely linked to the promotion of tourism as a post-mining economic strategy and, indeed, the area has grown into a popular local recreational destination. First explorative fieldwork suggests, however, that the collective, labor intense, and mostly publicly funded efforts invested into restoration effected more than a marketable scenery; they created an entire living space beyond mine reclamation. One of the central research interests of this project, then, is to understand the ways in which this living environment continues to be made and unmade as well as the contentions that accompany this process. For instance, while some contest the acquisition of restored land by private investors, others emphasize the potential contribution private investment will make to the economic development of the wider region, a core political concern since the declaration of ruin.

This research project seeks to explore livelihoods in landscapes that emerged, and ceased, together. In doing so, the project aims to trace the numerous and contradictory ways in which processes and practices of extraction and ruination, restoration and (re)appropriation of landscapes and livelihoods are related to one another.