

Volkswagen Foundation Awards Funding for Graduate Research School on the Transatlantic Reinvention of Postindustrial Urban Futures

It is a happy moment for a group of scholars who work together at the RuhrCenter of American Studies and the University Alliance Ruhr: Barbara Buchenau, Jens Martin Gurr, Josef Raab (University of Duisburg-Essen); Walter Grünzweig, Randi Gunzenhäuser (TU Dortmund); Kornelia Freitag and Michael Wala (Ruhr University Bochum). Within the framework of a unique call for applications called “Wissenschaft und berufliche Praxis in der Graduiertenausbildung” (Scholarship and Professional Practice in Graduate Programs), the Volkswagen Foundation has awarded funding for the establishment of a four-year graduate research school *Scripts for Postindustrial Urban Futures: American Models, Transatlantic Interventions* (2018—2022). Internships in the fields of city administration, urban development, culture, education, transport, and sustainable building and living will allow the humanities researchers involved to work in close contact with American and German companies and municipal authorities. The goal of the graduate research school is to discover what imaginative strategies and groundbreaking scenarios centers of old industries (steel, coal and cars) in the United States and Germany are devising to forge paths into their futures.

The Volkswagen Foundation program is designed to implement structural changes in the way doctorates in cultural studies and social sciences are conceived. For this reason, the foundation supports pilot projects which allow young researchers to gain insights into different professional fields in the course of their PhD and thus to qualify for a career outside the university. This innovative research and didactic concept – supported by 1.7 million euros of external funding – promises to look into the logics of normative texts, images, figures, and media. The goal is to stimulate a solid and, when needed, confrontational debate between academia and the world of urban business and administration. The following companies have agreed to participate in the project:

- For the study of the *creative city*: the cultural center Dortmunder U, the Regionalverband Ruhr, and the Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural in Los Angeles.
- For the study of the *inclusive city*: the educational initiative RuhrFutur, Quilomboarte Collective, New York City, and the California State University, Northridge.

- For the study of the *sustainable city*: the Öko-Zentrum NRW, the Environmental Office of Essen, the European Green Capital 2017, the urban planners Zachary & Associates in Detroit, the Duisburger Hafen AG, and the Zollverein Foundation.

Seven doctoral candidates and one postdoctoral researcher will have the rare opportunity to combine their academic qualifications in American Studies with professional experience outside of academia. In their one-year internship at a German or American company or municipality, they will have the chance to carry out detailed studies of three increasingly significant forms of city marketing. The objects of their research will be contemporary paradigms, processes of self-description, and operational strategies – in short, *scripts* – for the construction of ecologically sustainable, creative, but also socially and culturally inclusive futures for postindustrial cities. Professor Barbara Buchenau, spokesperson for the Graduate Research School, explains that “not only do these popular scripts tell persuasive tales of an accelerated development from the past into the present, they also, and more significantly, develop consequential scenarios for the future. Since the templates for most of these scripts came from North America, we are interested in the adaptations and the rewritings that become necessary whenever these future-oriented scripts are meant to serve as models for urban development in our region.”

The study of American postindustrial scripts will be conducted from the vantage point of the Ruhr region (aka Ruhrgebiet). With its groundbreaking de-/re-industrialization processes and its shrinking, aging, and yet increasingly diverse population, the Ruhr region resembles certain American cities, though this analogy never quite holds. Co-spokesperson Professor Jens Martin Gurr explains that “this transatlantic perspective shows that German cities like to base their self-representation on images, stories, and interpretive strategies of American cities, which often serve simultaneously as role models and as negative examples to be avoided.” After the closing of the Opel factory, for instance, the city of Bochum distanced itself from the archetype of declining industrial cities in America with the slogan “This is not Detroit.” At the same time, Detroit’s plans for the regeneration of its cultural scene are replicated in many cities in the Ruhr region.

After a year spent doing research, the doctoral candidates will conduct field research during their internships, and, as they apply their academic knowledge in the field, they will sample possible professional careers outside the university. Simone Raskob, Deputy Mayor and Head of the Department for Environment and Building of the city of Essen – one of the graduate school’s business partners – is pleased about the academic support her office will receive and describes the mutual benefits of this collaboration: “With their expertise in

cultural studies and their familiarity with American models of sustainable urban development, these American Studies scholars can support us very effectively in the implementation of creative, durable, and socially inclusive urban development strategies. And they can use the findings they have gathered as fieldwork for their dissertations.” The *Scripts* Graduate Research School will have its headquarters at the University of Duisburg-Essen, while the doctoral candidates will be trained at the RuhrCenter of American Studies, a center co-hosted by the Ruhr University Bochum, the TU Dortmund, and the University of Duisburg-Essen. The principal investigators of *Scripts for Postindustrial Urban Futures: American Models, Transatlantic Interventions* have already worked together in the MERCUR-project “Urban Transformations in the U.S.A.: Spaces, Communities, Representations,” headed by Professor Walter Grünzweig and coordinated by Dr. Julia Sattler (2012-2015). The UDE-based Main Research Area Urban Systems and the Competence Field Metropolitan Research of the University Alliance Ruhr provide the ideal research environment for this project.



The principal investigators with the UDE Vice-Rector for Research Prof. Jörg Schröder (left), researchers involved in the project (Courtney Moffett-Bateau and Dr. Dietmar Meinel, 2nd and 3rd from the right) and student assistants Juliane Borosch and Chris Katzenberg (3rd from the left and center).

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