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“We must find a common language that resonates across borders and experiences.”

A report about the “Allied Grounds” conference

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“Allied Grounds,” an international conference on the social question of the climate crisis, took place in early October in Berlin. The conference was the culmination of an annual project of the Berliner Gazette (BG) that explored two related, but rarely linked, constellations: “In the Global South, environmental concerns have been an integral part of working-class struggles against expropriation, exploitation, and extractivism literally since the colonial-capitalist conquest of the New World. In the Global North, on the other hand, working-class environmentalism emerged in the 19th century as a response to industrialization and urbanization, while labor and environmental movements have only in recent years reclaimed their potential for alliance.”

Experiments in form

While the evening panels were open to the general public, the daytime workshops brought together participants from countries as different as the Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Greece, Italy, Kenya, Iran, India, Indonesia, Peru, Mexico, Belarus, Portugal, Romania, South-Sudan, Spain, and Turkey. Organized by BG, an independent media outlet founded in 1999, the conference was supported by a wide range of institutions and organizations. Especially the workshops were unique in form and content. For three days, five working groups of about ten participants had the task of discussing an output that could be disseminated on several platforms. This "funnel" method, known as a hackathon (a contraction of hacking and marathon), is based on a delicate balance between horizontal exchange and the pursuit of a tangible goal to be achieved by the end of the conference.

The brainstorming sessions helped to identify a common problem and to steer the discussions towards collaborative work that would culminate in a joint creation. Five themes were proposed for debate, but without defining either how they were to be thought about or what might result from the discussion: "Eco-Internationalism for All?", "(Un)Working Balkans", "Jobs vs. Nature?", "Working Class Environmentalism", and "Dismantling Eco-Fascism".

To tackle these issues in advance, BG had created a forum in its online newspaper focusing on the key issues of the "Allied Grounds" theme. During the conference, this corpus served as a kind of implicit reference, which certainly facilitated dialog on very broad and interconnected issues. All participants in the conference were thus simultaneously actors, moderators, and audience.

Interweaving of issues and themes

One of the original features of the conference is the interweaving of issues and themes that are most often approached in the media and academia in a divided and juxtaposed manner. For example: The climate crisis has been approached from a global perspective, recognizing a geographical and social hierarchy of situations. The crisis of subsistence in the countries of the South and the phenomena of migration cannot be understood without taking into account the destruction of natural ecosystems, neoliberal globalization and the systemic crisis of capitalism.

It is therefore not surprising that "eco-fascism" was repeatedly discussed at the conference. This has become a right-wing battle term, used not least as a hashtag in social networks against the "eco-socialist government in Berlin," Fridays for Future, and Elon Musk, among others. They are all being accused of establishing an "eco-dictatorship." However, one look at Marine Le Pen in France is enough to understand the context. Like other right-wingers, Le Pen espouses an exclusionary ecological localism in which immigrants are likened to alien invasive species, while her openly radical right-wing party proclaims slogans such as "borders are the environment's greatest allies, through them we will save the planet." Similar discourses exist in countries as diverse as the United States and Austria. The right-wing fetishization of nature, as the discussions at the conference suggested, can be understood as a "response" to the climate crisis that follows the phase of denial (also read: climate change denialism), but still refuses to question the systemic nature of the climate crisis. In seeking to secure the conditions of existence of the rich and privileged (mostly white) classes in capitalism, the right also exposes the blind spots of green capitalism, which also seeks to contain (the links between) social and climate struggles, sabotage alliances among workers, and prevent global environmental justice.

But building sustainable alliances is anything but spontaneous. While there is a growing awareness that the causes of the climate crisis are the product of an adrift "racial capitalocene" (Françoise Vergès), it is not enough to bring together struggles that are both highly dispersed and fragmented. For Krystian Woznicki and Magdalena Taube, the curators and main organizers of the conference, this is precisely what justifies these conferences and the methodology they have been using for almost 24 years: "To form alliances and unite, to reach the unconvinced and the hesitant, we must find a common language that resonates across borders and experiences. Before we can tell a common story, we must understand each other and be able to talk to each other. This is first and foremost a practical issue, which is undoubtedly why we have always brought together such a wide range of people – activists, researchers, journalists and creative artists. The result is not guaranteed, it is open."

An exercise in creativity, collaboration, and learning to listen

The results of the workshops, at the end of three days of intense discussions, may seem modest, but they have considerable potential for multiplication. The group on ecofascism, whose insights I shared above, has produced a series of flashcards that counter the main ecofascist stereotypes. The group on working-class environmentalism has chosen to focus on sustainable work and the creation of an online glossary that brings together all the resources and experiences that can strengthen and expand the dynamics around these aspects. We could mention, in no particular order, the conversion of recuperated and self-managed factories, the struggles for health in the workplace and against the toxicity of production, both for workers and residents, the struggles of

peasants for the recommonization of arable land, the mobilizations for the development of public transport, and so on.

The group on eco-internationalism worked on a platform manifesto, the first lines of which read: "This Manifesto belongs to The Platform, a network of squatted oil rigs in the ocean. The Platform is a living body, inhabited by other bodies, which co-create their network of reliance. Weeds grow here, between solar panels and the hardware. The connections within the network are fragile and unstable. Behind this Manifesto, there is a dream of eco-internationalism for all." Meanwhile the group working on ecological and working-class struggles in the Balkans created a mobilization model inspired by climate camps for a meeting of networks and movements next June in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo or Serbia. Another group, dealing with the contradiction between labor and nature enforced by capitalism, left the conference venue, the Hourse of Democracy and Human Rights, to conduct micro-trottoir interviews, asking passers-by for their reactions to slogans previously posted on advertisements for ecologically destructive and economically unfair products at bus stops and train stations, such as "What do you want to produce with your work?"

Process-oriented, DIY, oppositional public spaces

For Krystian Woznicki and Magdalena Taube, each conference is both a new experience, different from previous ones, and the continuation of a creative experiment that has nothing to do with a seminar or an academic colloquium, but expresses the ephemeral appearance of a dissident public space. This approach has some affinities with the creation of oppositional public spaces advocated by Frankfurt School theorists such as Oskar Negt. It also echoes

the spirit of process-oriented projects (such as Documenta X in Kassel, curated by Catherine David). Or global DIY culture: Making what doesn't exist when it should. So the approach is boundless, evolutionary, and in some ways open-ended, and the traces it leaves ~~(seeds that are spread)~~ and the imitation it can provoke are certainly much broader than the immediately identifiable signals that such a project sends out to the world, and that's a good thing.

At the end of the day, after the hackathon-style sessions and a few breaks, workshop guests came together for public talks to which also the general public was invited.

Get rid of growth, but not the capitalism that produces it?

The first public talk on October 5 focused on potential actors for systemic change. It was moderated by Claudia Núñez, a Mexican-born journalist in the Migration and Borders section of the Los Angeles Times and co-founder of MigraHack. Presentations focused on the links between the climate crisis and migration flows, the rationale for borderization (from paper borders to barbed wire), and the resulting international division of labor. Jennifer Kamau, co-founder of the International Women Space in Berlin, an initiative of migrant and refugee women for migrant and refugee women, explained how the plight of rural people in Kenya is closely linked to local production being tailored to European markets, for example, 60% of the flowers sold in Germany come from Kenya. Industrial irrigation and monoculture lead to soil depletion and a huge dependence on grain imports, especially from Ukraine and Russia, which inevitably increases expropriation, displacement, and migration pressure.

Florin Poenaru, Bucharest, took the critical realist view that the current situation is unlikely to improve in the near future. Green capitalism is a magical vision that claims to solve the problem with the very thing that caused it in the first place. The idea of degrowth is equally "magical," since we want to get rid of growth, but not the capitalism that produces it. Isn't this reproducing the problem while claiming to offer the solution? In any case, a certain kind of bourgeois radical environmentalism will be just as futile: Those who advocate civil disobedience, slashing SUV tires, or sabotaging pipelines are really looking to the elites. The action is to get the elites' attention and convince them to solve the problem. It's still magic!

So the problem is also that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end or exit of capitalism. There is no easy answer, but there is work to be done in repoliticizing the natural environment, trying to restore or reestablish a natural balance as far as possible, while also taking up the cause of humanity, and empowering the most vulnerable and exploited: the refugee and migrant workforce.

Challenging the Green New Deal in Europe

The second public talk on October 6 was hosted by Rositsa Kratunkova, member of several collectives working on social justice issues in Bulgaria, and focused on working class environmentalism. Participants included Svjetlana Nedimović, Sarajevo, a thinker, activist, and moderator of Puls of Democracy – an online publication for critical analysis of the Balkans; Paola Imperatore, Turin, a scholar-activist involved in the fight for the ecological conversion of GKN in Florence; and Francesca Gabbriellini, Bologna, a historian and researcher, who is also involved in those

struggles. The speeches, as rich as those of the previous day, focused on the contradictory aspects of the Green New Deal in Europe.

Nedimović reflected on the environmental crisis and ecological transition in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where miners' communities are capable of exerting very strong pressure and leading the struggles for economic and ecological justice, but seem to have lost their momentum in a situation where the European agenda demands environmental measures while allowing extractivist predations to unfold. The experience of GKN, a former supplier of parts and components (driveshafts) to the automotive industry, a company that has been occupied since the summer of 2021 and whose factory committee is promoting a transition to supplying parts and components for public transportation (trains and buses) – this experience shows that creative and imaginative grassroots initiatives, when based on grounded alliances between those that are directly affected through work and employment and larger communities of mobilized habitants, can have an impact far beyond the immediate or local situation.

Conversation across spaces, scales and subjectivities

The third and final public talk on October 7 was hosted by eco-feminist researcher Anna Saave and dealt with questions of building bridges between struggles. Dario Azzelini, New York and Mexico City, presented his critical vision of sustainable jobs, which can be a focus for mobilization, as long as they raise the question of how production is carried out and what its goals are. Lorenzo Feltrin, Birmingham, looked back at workers' struggles against toxicity in the broadest sense, including both mental and physical health. Overcoming the divide between production and

reproduction is undoubtedly one of the conditions needed to steer mobilizations in a sustainable direction. At the same time, the value chains of capital are changing and expanding in ways that make it more difficult to identify and build links between workers in revolt.

Brett Neilson, Sydney, author of books such as "The Politics of Operation," focused his presentation on the question of translating and commonizing the languages of resistance. The issue is not linguistic, but social, in that it requires a similar subaltern positioning across territorial or cultural borders. A politics of translation must allow struggles and solidarities to be articulated and to enter into conversation across spaces, scales and subjectivities. Knowing how to decenter is certainly another important condition. For example, the critique of animal labor is both very North-centric and expresses a kind of ontological horizontality that confuses all forms of living beings. Moreover, recognizing the difference in nature between living forms does not necessarily imply a relationship of subjugation or exploitation.

The "Allied Grounds" conference was a unique, fleeting experience. While leaving its mark through collective production and output, this new edition of the Berliner Gazette's annual conferences was, like its predecessors, but undoubtedly in a different way, a source of inspiration and energy. These three days were a practical demonstration that collective intelligence, in a context of horizontality, and can ~~create~~ favor imagination, generate trust and amplify new narratives that should spread all the more easily because they respond to a real need.

The conference was the culmination of BG's annual project "Allied Grounds," which engaged researchers, activists, and cultural workers in a

variety of forms and encounters with the aim of co-producing knowledge resources, including audios, videos, and texts. Please take a look here: https://berlinergazette.de/projects/allied-grounds/