

# Beyond Copenhagen?

World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, Cochabamba, Bolivia, 19–22 April 2010

**T**he World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia, 19–22 April 2010, was essentially organized and promoted by the government of Evo Morales as a response to the failures of Copenhagen. The conference sought to provide an open platform for critical discussion about the environmental crisis and to make visible the plight of the communities that are most immediately damaged by it. The conference attracted more than 30,000 participants, twice the number anticipated, and included politicians, activists, scientists, farmers, academics and artists from across the globe. The political and intellectual range of views represented was remarkable, with amicable exchanges across gender, class and cultural demographics. The conference managed to avoid the exclusivist omission of voices that marred COP15. It was not unusual for a panel to receive comments from university professors and a campesino in the same set of exchanges. The mood throughout was positive with a readiness to listen and accept critique.

Although much of the publicity focused on projects such as a bill of rights for Mother Earth and a climate tribunal to investigate those responsible for environmental damage, these were organized around demands for a 'new system' to 'restore harmony with nature and among human beings'. This motivation to address structural changes was one noteworthy feature of the conference omitted from most mainstream reports: its overt anti-capitalist orientation.

This was apparent from the onset, with nearly all panels and working groups forthright in their call for an alternative polity. That polity would be anti-imperialist (environmental degradation was considered as a form of imperialism), it would recognize its citizens for who they are as opposed to 'what they own', and it would work towards 'collective well being and the satisfaction of the basic necessities of all'. Thus the goals envisioned transcended mere policy changes in North–South relations, or even reparations for environmental damages. There was a call for bold steps towards new and emancipatory ways of doing politics.

This was one reason for endorsing Morales' philosophy of 'living well', which urged us to reflect critically on the global environmental implications of our daily consumer impulses. Indeed, the recognition of quotidian concerns was constant throughout the discussion. There was resounding agreement on the fact that the desired structural changes cannot occur without first confronting our complicity with the damages done to the environment; the daily need to cultivate a responsible living routine was stressed alongside calls for environmentally responsible government. Thus capitalism was perceived, rightly, as not simply an economic system of exchange but a particular way of life. The everyday was emphasized as a site of resistance.

Disagreements, however, were as intriguing as they were frequent. Nowhere was this more apparent than on the question of industrialization. One concern was that problems of capital were too frequently simplified and equated with problems of industrialization in general, limiting the scope of discussion on concrete alternatives to the crisis. We were reminded that the socialist fight against capital has never entailed a rejection of industry and that the workings of capital are far too complicated to be understood and overcome by emotive appeals for a union with nature.

This absence of theoretical depth can be read as a reflection of the conference's prevalent indigenous trajectory. The working group on Structural Causes, for instance, opened with a

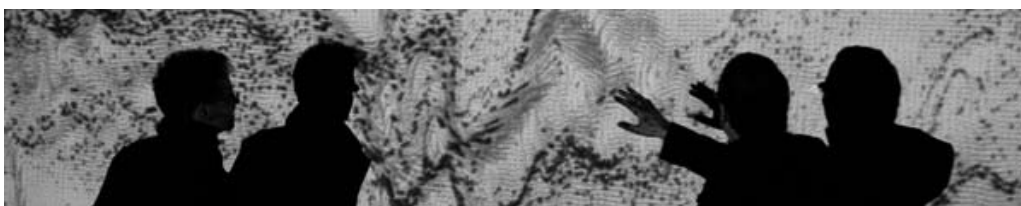
local ritual of blessing coca leaves. The working group on Living in Harmony with Nature began its work by burning a baby llama with beer. While such rituals were congruent with the conference's parallel objective to recover the values of indigenous people, they were also part of a larger push to centralize certain indigenous ideas. The main problem, as it turns out, was not just the heavily gendered connotations to such frequently used terms as 'Mother Earth' and its ensuing analogies (the rivers as her milk, for example); it was that particular indigenous assumptions about nature were taken to be of universal import and embedded into the central claims of the conference. For example, there was little clarity regarding how exactly we are to understand Mother Earth as being 'entitled' to rights or how 'she' 'teaches us' to live.

Many were willing to overlook the particularities of such terminology for the larger goal of articulating a comprehensive statement and agenda for resolution of the current impasse. But the terminology – with its specific allusions – does raise the issue of the conflicts between the differing political visions latent in the discussions. Socialism was constantly touted as an alternative, but what kind of socialism exactly? Whose history, or which legacy, of socialism is to be continued or revived? The push for a global referendum through which newer agendas for climate change can be discussed with genuine consensus is a significant attempt to develop the critique of capital. But the question of the purpose of such critique, and the political imagination from which the concepts derived, received very little reflection. At stake is the very value of universal progress that has historically defined the Left's project.

**Fuad Rahmat**



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### EVENTS

The Hole in Time: German-Jewish Political Philosophy and the Archive  
23 and 24 June 2010, University of Westminster, Little Titchfield St, W1W 7UW  
Speakers include: Howard Caygill, David Cunningham, Nitzan Lebovic.

The Whitechapel Salon: Performance Matters  
1 July 2010, Study Studio, Whitechapel Art Gallery, E1 7QX  
with Gavin Butt, Adrian Heathfield, Lois Keidan

How We Became Metadata Exhibition  
9 June–5 September 2010, 309 Regent Street, W1B 2UW  
Artists include: Eduardo Kac, Thomson & Craighead, Eunju Han, susan pui san lok.

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