



## The people's climate summit in Cochabamba: A tragedy in three acts<sup>\*</sup>

Tadzio Mueller

### Prologue

Most of the article below was written a year and a half ago, almost immediately after the end of the event described therein – the Global Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth – that was held in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in April of 2010, some four months after the disastrous failure of the ‘COP15’-climate summit in Copenhagen. Given that it was written only a few days after returning from Cochabamba, most of its conclusion necessarily remained speculative, as in: this or that *might* happen, alas, we don't know yet whether it will. To republish it now largely as it stood then, with a new final act, is not primarily a function of the author's laziness. Rather, it is intended to show the distance travelled since then by the global climate justice movement (such as it is), the change in strategic perspectives, its turning away from the kind of globality produced by global summits, counter or otherwise.

The situation then was rather different from the one social movements face in the world today. The slogan ‘we are the 99%’ had not yet captured the world's headlines, there was no Occupy-movement, no Arab spring, no Mediterranean summer, no American autumn. The second ‘dip’ in the double dip recession was not yet just around the corner as it is today. ‘Climate change’ had not been pushed quite as far off the political agenda as it is now and dreams of kicking off another round of Seattle-style protests around the issue still lingered in the movements. China, South Africa and Brazil had not yet been able to gloatingly remind the US and the EU of the need for ‘prudent macroeconomic policies’ in the wake of the latter's respective downgrades by the rating agencies – the shift in global political power-relations had not yet become as obvious.

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Think, then, of this Prologue as the Chorus in a play by Shakespeare. Its function is to draw you, the reader, into the story that is about to be told, to set the stage as it were: 'A movement and a government, both alike in dignity, in fair Cochabamba, where we lay our scene'... Well, there's a bit more context to it than that. In order to understand the events of Cochabamba, we must first turn our eyes to:

## Act I: The run-up

Copenhagen, Denmark, December 2009. The failure of the 'COP15' UN climate summit manages to underwhelm even the already low expectations of the emerging global climate justice movement. Once it becomes obvious that none of the major emitters, neither the US nor the EU, neither Japan nor Australia, has committed to the necessary dramatic emissions reductions, the so-called 'Copenhagen Accord' is being negotiated outside the official processes under the leadership of the United States. (And why should the major emitters reduce their emissions? In a fossil-fuel based capitalist economy, reducing emissions implies a politically unpalatable reduction of economic growth.) The Accord claims it wants to limit global warming to 2° Celsius, but in pursuit of this ambitious goal it proposes only voluntary emissions reductions, without any mechanisms for enforcing these commitments, or for penalising those countries that fail to meet their commitments.<sup>1</sup> It is the resistance of governments from Venezuela, Sudan and Bolivia that ultimately stops the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) from officially adopting the Accord. Instead, the text it is merely 'taken note of' – as is the quality of the catering at the summit. The worst-case scenario feared by many in the movements and in critical NGOs, that a bad deal might be greenwashed, thus does not come to pass. Only the politically colour-blind could see the Accord as being genuinely green. The supposedly 'last, best chance' to save the planet (Obama) thus passes, after a two-week summit during which the prospect of the disappearance of entire island states under water and the evacuation of their populations had become a new normality that people accepted without flinching.

Yet, not only to those who would prefer no climate deal at all to even a weak one, the two-week summit is far from a complete disaster. Many in the emerging global climate justice movement, especially those who from the beginning took the hope for a 'fair, ambitious and binding deal'<sup>2</sup> as pie-in-the-sky, can point to successes of their own: the demonstration on Saturday 12.12.09 was probably the single largest explicit 'climate change' demonstration ever (though its political intentions were fuzzy at best, ranging from the 'do something about climate change, please', to the traditionally anticapitalist 'shut down capitalism, now!'); over a two-week period, more than 50,000 people attended Klimaforum09, the counter-summit in Copenhagen, which produced a widely disseminated final declaration that effectively brought together the various political positions in the movement; while the last major action, Reclaim Power, expressed a new relationship between movements on the streets, NGOs and governments, between 'inside' and 'outside', in a way that augured in a new phase of global movement politics

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1 Even the 2-degrees target has attracted criticism: whose survival is being prioritised?

2 Greenpeace, Avaaz and the tck,tck,tck-campaign pushed for this goal until the bitter end.

(De Marcellus, 2010). In that sense it mattered that Hugo Chavez, in his address to the UNFCCC, quoted the slogan that the movements had been articulating for weeks in their workshops and chanting in the streets: *Change the system, not the climate!*

Given the obvious failure of official climate change politics on the one hand, and the possible emergence of a new social force on the other, Bolivia's president Evo Morales lays an interesting wager. He calls for an alternative climate summit – more precisely: a 'Global Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth' – to gather all those progressive forces that want to develop an explicitly anticapitalist climate politics. The meeting is to take place in Cochabamba, a city made famous ten years ago in the global movements by the *Guerra del Agua*, the 'water war' that brought together rural irrigators and *campesinos*, urban factory workers, unemployed miners and *cocaleros* (coca leaf growers), who successfully overturned the contract that had privatised the municipal water system and threw the US-based multinational Bechtel out of Bolivia. Much is at stake: so far, the left's response to the failure of official climate change politics consists of little more than the usual moralising appeals and demands, but lacking sufficient social force to implement them. Put differently: it may be technically correct to say that 'capitalism' is to blame for climate change, but it doesn't help us much in light of the continued expansion of the fossil-fuel system – attempts to institute a kind of 'green capitalism' notwithstanding (Mueller and Passadakis, 2010). What might an anticapitalist climate politics look like? How can it be implemented? And maybe most importantly: by whom?

### *Dramatis personae*

In Cochabamba, these and other questions were to be discussed by an almost unprecedented constellation of actors: not since the days of the 3rd International had progressive governments and movements been brought together on such an equal footing, outside the often stifling UN-framework and in the context of such an explicitly anticapitalist discourse.

On the one side, we get the progressive Latin American governments, some of them organised in the ALBA-bloc (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America: Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Ecuador). Of these, the Bolivian is by far the one closest to social movements,<sup>3</sup> being itself the result of an intense cycle of largely indigenous social struggles over the course of the last decade. The relevance of this lies in the fact that the movements for climate justice, even more so than other radical left movements, rely strongly on the agenda-setting, the political leadership of often indigenous 'frontline communities' (that is, of those groups who are most directly affected by climate change as well as by the so-called 'false solutions' like emissions trading or agrofuels).

But looking to the 'material basis' of the Bolivian economy, things suddenly look somewhat different. While there is much talk of *Pachamama*, of Mother Earth and its

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3 Evo Morales himself hails from the, by now relatively parti-fied, *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS), a movement that emerged from the coca-growing communities of the Bolivian highlands. He has been in power since 2006.

rights in the run-up to and during the summit, the left-wing Latin American project is in fact grounded in a political economy that the Uruguayan intellectual Eduardo Gudynas has dubbed the 'new extractivism' (Gudynas, 2010a). To be sure, progressive governments have made significant progress in poverty reduction and have accompanied (that is, have been produced by and have furthered) genuine transformations in social force relations. What is on display in Bolivia and elsewhere in the region is a sort of neo-Keynesian *desarrollismo* (developmentalism), with strongly redistributive policies. But these welcome policies are financed by the exploitation of the very *Pachamama* whose rights are on the agenda in Cochabamba: be it the exploitation of mines (coal, lithium, copper), the construction of dams, the pumping of oil, or the expansion of hyperintensive soy-monocultures. Gudynas argues that 'the progressive governments [in Latin America] reduce economic development to economic growth, which in turn can be achieved primarily by way of the expansion of exports and increasing investments. The new extractivism is one of the central means for reaching these goals' (Gudynas, 2010b: 7).

There are thus two tensions within the Bolivian as well as the broader Bolivarian project. First, a contradiction exists between discourse and material basis (a seemingly old-fashioned, but in this case definitely appropriate distinction): flowery talk notwithstanding, the Bolivian government's capacity to effectively raise living standards within the country largely depends on high prices for natural gas and other raw materials, that is, on a fossil fuel-based, extractive economy. This hardly looks like one of the 'real solutions' so often invoked by the climate justice movement, one that would quickly deliver significant emissions reductions while at the same time beginning to overturn the social relations that produce the crisis in the first place. Second, social conflicts seem to arise almost necessarily around traditional resource extraction. Two quick examples: just days before the climate meeting in Cochabamba, the Bolivian town of San Cristobal saw the occupation of corporate offices and blockades of train lines during protests against a local silver mine. The protesters' demands? End environmental devastation and supply the local communities with water and electricity (Democracy Now, 2010). In addition, intense protests are taking place in southwest Bolivia against hydroelectric power plants that the Bolivian government plans to build together with Brazil.

This neo-extractivist model of development, as well as the need for sometimes repressively controlling the conflicts that arise around it, clearly doesn't sit very well with a conference about the rights of *Pachamama*, where the global movements are supposed to get together with progressive governments to discuss socially just solutions to the climate crisis. What to do? The Bolivian government simply decided to exclude not only these kinds of local and national questions from the conference's agenda – with the fairly ludicrous justification that local questions had no place in an international conference – but also, as a result, those groups and movements critical of the government and its developmental model. Those for whom this move is eerily reminiscent of the cynical positions taken in Copenhagen by the likes of Angela Merkel, who likes to be feted internationally as the saviour of the climate, while continuing to build coal fired power plants at home at an alarming rate, may be forgiven. The exclusion of these questions and voices from the summit led groups critical of Evo Morales and the MAS to create the alternative *mesa 18*, the '18th working group',

where the Bolivian model as well as the new extractivism were openly criticised. To complicate things further, and to briefly jump ahead in the storytelling: the problem with criticising Morales from the left is the political right, which has organised a strong separatist movement in the comparatively wealthy 'Media Luna' region in Bolivia's lowlands, which constitutes a serious challenge to the coherence of the country and the continuation of Morales' government. Thus, when two right-wing members of parliament wanted to join the participants of the mesa 18, they were denounced as fascists and expelled from the proceedings. Why? Because the anti-MAS left has at all costs tried to avoid the impression of joining forces with the right against Morales.

On one side, then, the Bolivian government with all its contradictions – which are in turn a reflexion of the complexity of the 'new left' in Latin America. And on the other side? There we encounter a process that, with a certain dose of Gramscian optimism of the will, can be referred to as the emerging global climate justice movement.<sup>4</sup> This movement is itself the result of a fusion between parts of the alterglobalist summit protest- and social forum-milieus with radical environmental groups and activists (or those radicalised by the failure of the UNFCCC) at a time when, on the one hand, neoliberalism was rapidly losing its ideological and integrative power, and on the other hand, climate change had begun to force its way onto the political and economic agenda, both as a socio-environmental problem and as a new opportunity for 'green' development and growth (Bullard and Mueller, 2011).

What appears as a new movement from one vantage point, however, is at the same time simply the next phase of global social struggles in an age of what ten years ago was simply called 'globalisation'. The first phase was characterised by the common rejection of neoliberalism ('one no, many yeses'), the rejection of Thatcher's dogma that there is no alternative ('another world is possible') and the widespread refusal to work with institutional left-wing actors, not to mention governments. The World Social Forum's Charter, for example, explicitly prohibits the participation of parties, and one of the most popular leftist theory books of the last ten years was John Holloway's *Change the world without taking power* (Holloway, 2002).

In the second cycle, however, some things are shifting: due to, on the one hand, neoliberalism's waning strength in institutions such as left-wing and Social Democratic parties, trade unions and some governments; and, on the other, because this waning has highlighted the weakness of the anti-neoliberal movement, its inability to institutionalise, i.e. render permanent, its gains and victories, there has lately been a change in the way that the relationship to institutions is being thought in the global movements. Where a crass anti-institutionalism used to reign – which, to be clear, was *entirely appropriate* to the situation – today we encounter openness, questions and new connections (Turbulence Collective, 2009).<sup>5</sup> One example of this is the *Reclaim Power*-action mentioned above, during the preparation of which (post-)autonomous activists

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4 To be sure, there is also a wider 'climate movement', on the right of which we find actors such as Oxfam and others who, some five years ago, organised the rather revolting 'Make Poverty History' campaign.

5 But see the resurgence of a poetic, anti-institutional insurrectionism in, e.g., The Invisible Committee (2009).

collaborated, or at least negotiated, with governments and a whole range of actors that 'back in the days' would have been distrusted on account of their (ill-defined) status as 'NGOs' – another example is the movement's unclear relationship to the UNFCCC. A third, obviously, is the conference in Cochabamba itself.

The second strategic difference we encounter in this second cycle refers to the 'one no' and the 'many yeses'. After the end of neoliberalism's hegemony, there is no longer a unifying 'no', while at the same time there is much more political space within which radical, even anticapitalist, positions can be articulated. All this, coupled with the growing urgency of the climate crisis, has produced a situation where there is greater pressure on the emerging climate justice movements to produce 'positive' proposals that can be implemented at a global scale than there was on the alterglobalisation movement.

Building on the work of the environmental justice movement and networks like the *Durban Group for Climate Justice*, the idea of 'climate justice' has thus quickly established itself as an important new discursive common ground for the movement, a discourse that in fact contains a number of 'directions demands' (Trott, 2007): that fossil fuels be left in the ground; that industrial agriculture be replaced with local systems of food sovereignty; that the ecological debt owed by the global North to the South be recognised, among others (Climate Justice Now!, 2007). Obviously, these demands might sound different depending on where they are used and they might be more appropriate for struggles in the South than in the urban regions of the North: does climate justice mean the same thing in Europe as it does in Latin America? The same thing in Bolivia as it does in Brazil? In this sense, even if there is today greater pressure, and space, for positive proposals, one thing has not changed much from one phase to another: then, inspired by the poetry of the Zapatistas, the idea was to 'walk while asking questions' (*caminar preguntando*). While the conference thus gave very few answers, it raised many questions and gave space for problematics to emerge, without being solved – little else was, is, possible at this point. Problematics wouldn't be problematic if they were amenable to easy solutions...

## Act II: The conference<sup>6</sup>

More than 30,000 participants, almost 10,000 of them from abroad – mostly Latin American, a surprising number of North Americans. Europe and Asia are badly represented thanks to an Icelandic volcano; representation from Africa is even worse, probably thanks to the absence of funds. Nonetheless: now we are in Cochabamba to talk about the structural changes that we know to be necessary. Government delegations from countries all over the world, summit-hopping autonomists, UN-bureaucrats, Andean coca farmers. In the run-up to the summit, 17 working groups had been created to deal with a multiplicity of topics ranging from strategies for action to forests, from indigenous rights to migration, long discussions were conducted via email-lists. Imagine the difficulties of translation: not just linguistically, also culturally. How do indigenous activists and UN-bureaucrats talk to each other? In this regard it was especially the

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6 For a more in-depth, movementist analysis cf. Building Bridges Collective (2010).

central working structures of the conference, the *mesas* (working groups) that were interesting attempts to bring together the different languages, methods and goals of the various actors. In this sense, the *mesas* were certainly problematic: not (necessarily) because they were badly organised, but rather because they were an expression of *problematics*, of open questions marking this new phase of struggles.

Many stories could now be told of this conflictual cooperation. Of the working group on forests, where the movements managed to defeat an attempt by the Bolivian government to get them to support the UN-programme REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation), unpopular with many indigenous groups for threatening to take control of their ancestral forests out of their hands. Of *Via Campesina's* ultimately successful last-minute move to, together with some international allies, prevent the conference from adopting a document that proposed the creation of a new 'Global Alliance of Peoples and Movements', a kind of new 'International from Above' that would tie up movements' scarce resources while adding little to the already existing concert of international fora and networks. Of the many working groups where these kinds of conflicts did not arise, where either the government's agenda (e.g. to push for an international referendum on climate change), or the movements' agenda dominated (e.g. in the working group on climate financing). But these stories, interesting as they may be, might lead us a bit too far into the event's nitty-gritty details. For more of an overview of the conference's outcomes, it is probably most interesting to take a look at the final declaration. This long text definitely packs some political punch and unites within itself a sometimes confusing multiplicity of demands, many of which come directly from the movements, others emerge straight from the Bolivian government's strategic considerations (which, incidentally, raises the question of what happens to movements' demands that are taken up by governments?).

The 'Cochabamba People's Accord' opens with some choice bits of anticapitalist and anti-growth rhetoric: 'The capitalist system has imposed on us a logic of competition, progress and limitless growth... In order for there to be balance with nature, there must first be equity among human beings... The model we support is not a model of limitless and destructive development' (WPCCC, 2010). This definitely sounds good and is almost certainly useful in the debate about the possibility and desirability of 'infinite growth on a finite planet' that seems to be slowly taking off in parts of the global North (cf. Jackson, 2009). But what are the concrete strategic steps that are being proposed – and where do their problems lie?

The two suggestions emanating from the conference that received the most coverage were the plans to hold a 'global' referendum on climate change and the idea of setting up an international environmental/climate crimes court. On the first proposal: over the course of rather controversial discussions it became clear that the referendum is a project that would make a lot of sense in a Latin American context: there is a long history here of using referenda and *consultas* as tools of *concientización*, of consciousness-raising, for example in the resistance to the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Many activists from the North and from Asia, however, viewed it more critically. How would Europeans respond to questions about climate change and the necessary changes to patterns of production and consumption that dealing with it would

entail? How about North Americans? And finally: how do you hold a referendum in China?

The international climate court is a similarly vexed project. On the one hand, the legal institutionalisation of social movements' demands and successes is certainly an important part of 'winning'. On the other hand, the creation of such an institution would demand an amazing amount of work from all parts of the climate justice movement – and do we really, after 15 years of pointlessly working away inside the UNFCCC, want to direct all our constituent power into this kind of international institutional process?

One central demand of the climate justice movement, which was taken up and further amplified in Cochabamba, has always been that the global North recognise and start making reparations for its ecological/climate debt to the global South. Now the conference has put a figure to this demand: Northern governments are to spend some 6% of their annual GDP on this debt. In principle, this call is a good thing, no doubt. In practice, the demand runs up against some problems – not in principle insurmountable ones, but problems nonetheless. First, by way of which institutional mechanism are these funds going to flow? Not, one hopes, through the World Bank, an institution that has excelled at rebranding itself the new 'Green Bank' while at the same time continuing to pour significant funds into fossil-fuel projects. And indeed, here the proposals of the financing working group are clear: 'a new financial mechanism shall be established under the authority of the UNFCCC, replacing the Global Environment Facility and its intermediaries such as the World Bank and the Regional Development Banks' (WPCCC, 2010). *Second*, to whom will these funds be paid? (Here, both the question and the answer need to be formulated carefully). To Southern governments? Here, the term 'global South' might be covering up one too many conflicts between governments and sectors of society. Third, given that the payment of climate debt could be framed as yet another reason for draconian austerity measures in Europe and that people, as a discussion at a UK-climate camp once pointed out, are unlikely to riot *for* austerity, how can we turn this into a demand that won't leave us even more marginalised in the political battles raging on the continent? One way out of this would be for the movements to demand that payment of this ecological debt be tied to restrictions on where the money might come from. It would have to come from taxes on polluters that do not involve these costs being passed on to those who, say, need to consume energy to heat their homes.

In general, the 'global North' comes in for much criticism in the conference's final declaration: it is being urged to take responsibility for those displaced by the effects of climate change and to open its borders to them; and to reduce its emissions by 50% from 2013 to 2017, against a 1990 baseline. The text also repeatedly refers to 'indigenous peoples', their economies and their ways of life: on the one hand, as a source of legitimacy and moral anchor, and on the other hand, as a rhetorical anti-growth device. We can only hope that these ways of life and economies not only continue to survive their confrontation with the global North but also with the new extractivism of the Latin American New Left. In this regard it is interesting, although hardly surprising, to note that one central movement demand does not appear in the final document: to leave fossil fuels in the ground. Comrades Evo and Hugo would not have appreciated that one.

### Act III: Pessimism of the intellect?

*Chorus:*

*Our revels now are ended. These our actors,*

*As I foretold you, were all spirits and*

*Are melted into air, into thin air...*

*We are such stuff*

*As dreams are made on...*

Back in the future, in early 2012, the political optimism, indeed the cheerleading that dominates the above pages seems somewhat misplaced. To start with, the UNFCCC, after holding yet two more failed summits, is pretty much a dead letter, approaching WTO-status. Opinions diverged on COP16 in Cancun, but the failure of COP17 in Durban was so total that it almost failed to make international headlines – no one expected any different, at least not until, wait for it, 2020 (Harvey, 2011). The flipside of this entirely predictable failure from the perspective of the climate justice movement is that any attempt to use the UNFCCC's globality, its global institutional and discursive reach, to promote an agenda of climate justice and institutional change (such as the creation of an international climate court) is therefore also necessarily a failure. Maybe even more problematically, no strong global climate justice movement has emerged, in spite of activists' repeated attempts to sing it into being (cf. Bullard and Mueller, 2011). Meanwhile in Bolivia, where we had set our scene, conflicts around the 'new extractivism' have escalated and there has been a strong push-back against the Morales government precisely by some of the indigenous movements that helped propel him to victory – whether in the *gazolinazo*, where popular uprisings defeated a measure to reduce fuel subsidies, or in the ever-more protracted struggle around the TIPNIS-road project.

To be sure, there are powerful emancipatory struggles in the world that have managed to create their own globality, their own global resonances (the 'Arab Spring', the Occupy-movement), but it seems like climate change is one of the last things on their minds. In fact, in the global North – that is, in the place where 'mitigation', i.e. drastic greenhouse gas reductions, would have to start more or less yesterday – climate change is slipping ever further down the public agenda in the context of the economic crisis (Lovell, 2011), while it is in the South, battered by an ever-growing number of extreme weather events (Munich RE, 2010) that concern is rising (Lucas, 2011). After briefly pausing their inexorable rise on account of the world economic crisis, greenhouse gas emissions did more than return to their previous growth path. In 2010 they jumped 'by the largest amount on record, upending the notion that the brief decline during the recession might persist through the recovery' (Gillis, 2011). In addition, because the centre of global accumulation seems to be shifting away from (financial) services back to manufacturing, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are now growing faster than economic growth (PWC, 2011). And to top it off, in an influential 2009 paper a group of scientists asserts that out of nine 'planetary boundaries' within which we would have to stay in order to maintain the benign environmental conditions that have existed for the last roughly 12,000 years, humanity has already passed three: climate change, biodiversity loss and the so-called 'nitrogen cycle' (Rockström et al., 2009). In effect, there is neither real mitigation of, nor effective adaptation to, the global (if socially staggered) threat of runaway socio-

ecological collapse and the social conflict and unrest that are bound to follow in its wake (Parenti, 2011).

But pessimism of the intellect, the counterpart to the 'optimism of the will' that shone through the pages above, is not the same as simple defeatism. Indeed, it raises more sharply the strategic questions that necessarily arise at the end of this analysis: what is to be done? By whom? And at what scale? To start from the end: the weakening of global regulatory institutions in general and those supposed to manage environmental devastation in particular (cf. Brand and Wissen, 2011), has implied a turn away for climate (justice) movements from the global scale back to regional and national ones. In turn, this has meant that climate justice struggles in the North will diverge further from those in the South. In the South, they are likely to escalate as governments of both the right and the left drive forward rapid industrialisation projects, whether in Bolivia, China or Brazil.

In the North, from where this article is written, many climate (justice) activists have had to face up to the problem that political frames centred around climate change struggle to generate a mass base – both as a matter of empirical experience and based on the analysis here, most people's interests seem aligned with the further destruction of the planet. As a result, they have begun to focus on issue areas where this contradiction is not as clear-cut, trying, for example, to push for more rapid, fundamental and socially just transformations of their countries' energy sectors (Bricke and Mueller, 2011). There is, then, in short, no longer a global climate justice movement to speak of. But that does not mean that the struggle for climate justice has disappeared. Indeed, it is likely to escalate even in the near future.

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#### the author

Tadzio Mueller is a political scientist, climate justice activist and translator living in Berlin, where he works as postdoctoral research fellow for the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. He has coedited *Contours of Climate Justice*, is a founding member of *Turbulence: Ideas for Movement*, and has published a report on green capitalism, *Grüner Kapitalismus: Krise, Klima, und kein Ende des Wachstums*. His current research focuses on modes of organisation and strategies of social transformation in social movements working on questions of climate justice and energy democracy.  
E-mail: [tadzio.mueller@rosalux.de](mailto:tadzio.mueller@rosalux.de)