

A Most-People's Climate Movement?

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THE RIO+20 EARTH SUMMIT AND ITS BOISTEROUS, simultaneous counterpart, the People's Summit seemed, to show a world increasingly cut in two: confident proponents of a "green economy" on one side, rebellious networks of climate justice advocates on the other. At the summit's June 20, 2012 opening, the activists had already seized the momentum—one of their marches numbered 50,000 protesters. The dreamed-of convergence of social, economic, and climate justice causes appeared to be gelling as Xingu warriors threatened by the planned construction of the Belo Monte mega dam mixed with members of the Committee for Popular Struggles marching against urban displacements caused by preparations for the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Rio Olympics.

On June 21, most of the official summit's youth delegates and a swath of its NGOs defected noisily to the People's Summit. There, activists theatrically ripped up the official delegates' disappointing draft agreement. "We were promised leaps and bounds but this agreement barely moves us forward by inches," the U.K. *Guardian* reported one protester shouting during the action.

Twenty years had passed since the original 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Then, the world's governments had first agreed to tackle global warming, creating the Framework Convention on Climate Change that has structured international climate negotiations ever since. But those negotiations have almost entirely collapsed—most dramatically at Copenhagen in 2009. Since then, the already fraught program of sustainable development has given way to the "green economy," a euphemism for broad-based attempts to save the environment by pricing the ecological costs of production into the market—in other

words, to fight commodification with commodification.

Whatever the merits of particular proposals, as an overarching framework the green economy has been widely savaged by green activists. Rio+20 looked like a microcosm of recent developments: paralysis above and movement below, to paraphrase South African climate justice scholar Patrick Bond. In the months since, though, the euphoric energy has dimmed, and civil society is divided again. In Brazil's climate justice community, a defiant pessimism now reigns, while a triumphant state mostly gets its way.

Abroad and at home, President Dilma Rousseff's government continues to paint itself as a great green mediator between Global North and South, using regulation and market mechanisms to slow deforestation (at least for now) and to innovate in biofuels. Its enthusiasm for deepwater oil drilling, on the one hand, and on the other a ferocious commodification of nature exemplified by a new Rio-based stock market for "eco-system services," is encountering the stubborn resistance of a sprawling network of social movements, NGOs, churches, and intellectuals. But the government's developmentalist agenda remains broadly popular—even if most growth still goes to the wealthy and only a small portion to effective, high-profile anti-poverty spending. When on November 26, 200,000 people took to the streets of Rio de Janeiro, it was to protest a decision made by the state oil company, Petrobras, to more evenly distribute revenues across the country from dangerous deepwater oil drilling just off the city's coast.

The previous two years have featured lots of deadly extreme weather and a groundswell of opposition to government passage of a new forest code that substantially weakens the protection of the Amazon and of state support for the Belo Monte mega dam that will displace at least 14,000 indigenous people and flood 500 square kilometers of delicate ecosystems (in the process releasing massive amounts of carbon dioxide and methane). But the government has held firm. And the explosion of

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action around Rio+20 aside, the country's climate justice movement hasn't yet managed to seize the moment. Grassroots action is especially lacking in the country's coastal cities, where more than four in five Brazilians live. There are opportunities for the country's fledgling environmental justice moment, but for many of its key protagonists, key obstacles remain—especially the strength of the government's position and the difficulties of framing grinding problems of urban poverty in environmental terms, confining most urban environmental activism to the relatively affluent middle class. In both cases, climate justice activists are talking about similar solutions: making environmental and climate justice struggles more militant and more concrete, not so much shrinking their ambition as intensifying their focus.

In Brazil, it's getting more and more difficult to attack

the government. Juliana Russar, one of 350.org Brazil's two leaders, tells me. Brazil also has a half-decent national climate change law and has used progressive-pleasing rhetoric internationally. "They say in the international negotiations that they're decreasing deforestation, and they are," Russar says. But on the other side, emissions from energy are increasing. These emissions effectively pay for much of Brazilian civil society. Petrobras is the country's state-owned hydrocarbon powerhouse, and it uses its revenues to fund a huge swath of the country's non-profits and cultural activities. There is little incentive for groups without an already existing environmental agenda to turn against the country's engines of growth.

For over a decade, Brazil has successfully pursued a developmental trajectory in which huge infrastructure with partial green credentials plays a key role. The Belo



Demonstrators perform during the March of the People's Summit, Rio de Janeiro, June 20, 2012. PHOTO BY REUTERS

Monte dam is the most notorious, but wind also has a mixed record in Brazil. In the country's Northeast, local movements complain of widespread sexual assault from migrant workers and the construction of massive wind-farms much too close to communities. The problem here isn't wind power per se, but its deployment in the form of a top-down mega-development. And the federal government is going to the wall for an expensive Rio-São Paulo bullet train, while housing and community activists plead for local commuter rail to alleviate extremely congested commutes instead.

State encouragement of market mechanisms also resonates with the country's broadly popular developmentalist agenda. The government can say it's finally paying impoverished farmers for providing valuable "eco-system services" through divisive REDD pilot projects, like the agreement between California and Brazil's Acre state to pay for forest preservation in the Amazon through the sale of carbon credits in California. With such projects, the fine print matters a lot—and it's often unclear how much autonomy local communities charged with sustainable forest management will actually have. The larger problem comes from tying local livelihoods to unstable international carbon markets dominated by rich countries and powerful companies. Maureen Santos, a national adviser for the long-standing environmental-justice organization FASE, told me that the group is looking to create alternative, more community-driven models to offer financial sustenance to indigenous groups living in sensitive ecosystems. Meanwhile, however, Rio has opened Latin America's first "green stock market" to trade securities in a dazzling array of such services—although, as the *Financial Times* points out, it will face tough competition from São Paulo's own massive stock market, itself already trading in this new frontier market. The rampant financialization of nature is anathema to most of Brazil's climate-justice movement. But environmental groups in Brazil and elsewhere with more conservationist backgrounds have tended to support this ostensibly pragmatic turn.

Caught in the middle, the large NGO Vitae Civilis is trying to keep dialogue between these camps flowing through networks and working groups it helped establish in the 1990s and 2000s, when most Brazilian environmental NGOs ignored climate politics. Executive Director Rubens Harry Born, an accomplished environmental activist who was first active in the late 1970s, told me that his group, which helped found the global Climate Action Network and popularize the idea of sustainable development over a decade ago, is now trying to serve as a bridge builder. He wants to mediate between

groups with an anti-capitalist message and those more sympathetic to some market solutions.

"I think the concept of environmental or climate justice can be an axis of rapprochement," Born ventures. "I'm not saying it will be. But it can be."

If the intra-green split undermines green unity, it is also helping some radicals to expand their coalitions among groups not primarily identified with environmental politics. In late 2009, a slew of groups—from the Brazilian offices of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, to national environmental groups like FASE, major social movements like the landless people's movement (MST), a number of grassroots feminist groups, Catholic and evangelical associations, and others—forged the Carta de Belem group, named for a letter written in opposition to carbon markets, especially when used to "protect" the Amazon. Born lent his support to the process but ultimately declined to sign the final document, citing some incorrect and incomplete arguments.

Fabrina Furtado, a doctoral candidate at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, an activist with Jubilee South and several local groups, and the author of a short, new book attacking green markets, *The Environmentalism of the Spectacle*, told me that the members of Belem group decided in December to focus less on international negotiations and more on local, concrete struggles, which are easier to win and can set up momentum for bigger fights down the road. They also wanted to take on Petrobras and its involvement with global carbon markets. Climate activists are doing the same in the United States, where there is a growing feeling that in the short term, building grassroots movements through fighting fossil fuel interests should take priority over pressing for elusive legislative and treaty solutions

What about in cities, I ask—this is where most Brazilians live, but where there seems to be the least dynamic connection between environmental activism and poor people's movements. "Bringing the urban movements in is a big challenge that we haven't had a lot of success with," Furtado laments. Important links were forged at the Rio+20 people's summits, but they are delicate now. Most of the urban poor people's movements are focused now on defending communities from the 2014 World Cup happening across the country and the 2016 Olympics in Rio. The big events have only intensified the relentless grind of neoliberal urbanism—favelas are constantly invaded by police or cleared out completely, and cheap housing downtown is liquidated by gentrification. In São Paulo the favela population doubled during the 2000s even as the economy prospered. But for all the transparently unequal impacts of



“No to the demolition of the village of Maracana.”

PHOTO BY REUTERS

environmental injustice in Brazilian cities—the urban poor are disproportionately vulnerable to flooding and landslides (which climate change is already exacerbating), more often deprived of adequate sanitation, and more exposed to contamination where they live and to air pollution during their longer commutes—economic growth still reasonably appears like the best solution. The political-ecological critiques of productivism and consumerism are hard to sell to poor people’s movements or to unions.

Community leaders and organizers I have met in São Paulo are highly receptive to thoughtful ecological arguments—but using them to frame everyday struggles is another question. An organizer of street cardboard recyclers told me that the *catedores* he works with do not see themselves as environmental actors—in part because, as he put it, “the environment as a political issue has been ‘elitized’ here.” The situation is worse in São Paulo, where there are very few links between very white middle-class urban environmental NGOs and poor people’s movements of mainly people of color, and where the city’s last mayor, who governed from the

center-right, has been most identified with green city politics. But in Rio, too, the right has greenwashed anti-poor policies. In 2009, the city started building walls around favelas to “protect” the Atlantic rainforest—even though only 1% of the forest in question even borders the city. The men I met who were actually building the walls told me that they were working for the money but opposed the walls. The city stopped building walls, but kept invading and pacifying favelas; in at least one instance, Furtado tells me, the city and police claimed they would bring in “green jobs” to alleviate poverty and displace the informal economy.

The disconnect is not just intellectual—it’s also a matter of political culture. So long as middle-class activists’ concerns have been viewed either as remote or antagonistic by urban popular movements, it has been hard to build trust and a common program. This may be changing as some urban greens tilt left and some of the urban movements’ leaders and fellow travelers spend more time thinking through environmental and climate-justice issues.

In Rio, academics and activists are popularizing the notions of environmental racism and environmental justice in workshops for community organizers. São

Paulo urbanists—many of whom interact with urban movements on a daily basis through a handful of committed NGOs and institutes—are pressing the connections between housing and environmental and climate-justice in the same way.

Born of *Vitae Civilis* has been working hard on building solidarity in civil society to pressure the federal government to spend better and smarter on a range of climate priorities. But he also has plans he can take to urban contexts: to unite warring green factions over adaptation to climate change. “Adaptation,” he told me, “is an issue where there’s no question of market mechanisms. Public policies are key.” It is too soon to surrender on reducing greenhouse gases, but any project that would build policy momentum and—perhaps more importantly—expand and deepen the commitment to

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climate politics, would be a giant step forward.

The movement that has most dramatically adopted an environmentalist discourse in recent years is the MST. A militant and disciplined movement known for its land occupations and global bridge building, it plays a key role in Brazil’s left and is getting ever more involved in struggles around cities’ peripheries. Its biggest fight, however, is against the “big six” agribusiness corporations. Marina dos Santos, of the movement’s national leadership council, wrote to me in an email about the connections between food sovereignty and climate justice—each of which, she argued, must confront the basic logic of capitalism: its need “always to produce more so that a small portion of the population could profit ever more,” devouring more natural resources at every step. The biggest obstacles to a climate-justice movement, she wrote, were the big agro-businesses and resource-extraction companies that push the government to loosen environmental regulations. This means more toxins in the food supply, Santos argued, likely leading to hundreds of thousands of cancer deaths in

Brazil’s cities last year alone.

The urban and rural struggles are united, Santos insisted. She explains, “Unfortunately, we live in a period of declining mass struggle, where the greatest share of the working class isn’t mobilizing in struggle in a unified and structural way. Nevertheless,” she countered, “society is already perceiving what’s unsustainable in the current mode of production, as there’s a limit to how much one can successfully mask the contradictions of such a project.” If Santos is right, two things are needed: a more sophisticated analysis of, and engagement with, Rousseff’s left-of-center government and a reinvigoration of mass struggle. A promising program—but easier said than done.

The Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), which has been chipping away at the governing Workers Party’s (PT) left flank, is trying to make a similar argument. Georgia Mocelin, a legal researcher and militant in PSOL’s São Paulo environmental-justice nucleus, is unusually optimistic that an eco-socialist message can unify left struggles—greening socialists, turning ecologists into anti-capitalists, and building ties with São Paulo’s autonomist Occupy movement. “We’re really trying to rescue the idea of sustainability,” she tells me. “Right now, if you say ‘sustainable development,’ you’re a bour-

geois.” She sees an opening in recent mobilizations by the homeless and other housing activists, including a recent slew of land and building occupations, and she sees the past two years’ heavy flooding and convulsive national fights over the Forest Code and the Belo Monte dam as pushing environmental and climate issues to center stage.

Are activists and organizers converging on ecologically grounded political formulae that connect the aspirations of the urban and rural poor? And is this a moment when the patient, local-struggle-by-local-struggle strategy of the tortoise can succeed? Maybe. Henri Acselrad, a professor in Rio who pioneered environmental-justice scholarship in Brazil, wrote recently that the country is witnessing the “environmentalization” of its social struggles—affecting the government, business, civil society, and so on. If the optimistic Mocelin is right, and if efforts at bridge building are successful, Brazil’s climate-justice movement could grow at once more militant—and more effective. ■