

Report of the Ecosocialist Education Convergence (ECOEC), 2018 – Rostock, Germany

1. Introduction

“If we do not do the impossible, we shall be faced with the unthinkable.”

– Murray Bookchin

The 3E Collective held the first Ecosocialist Education Convergence (ECOEC) in May 2018 outside the Baltic city of Rostock, Germany. Events included structured lectures, discussions, infrastructure projects, excursions to local activist projects, and self-managed activities. The ECOEC had two primary goals. First, the programme was intended to improve the political consciousness of participants, develop new practical skills (e.g. building a windmill), and raise motivation for the struggles to come through revolutionary education. Second, this programme was convened to begin developing a European network based on the principles of ecosocialism. Participants travelled from many countries, including Germany, Italy, Greece, the United States, Spain, Canada, Slovenia, Estonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Turkey, Costa Rica and Kurdistan.

This document highlights some of the key points and issues that arose from our collective thinking over this experience. In the first section, we highlight what ECOEC means. We then focus on what radical education means to us. The third section explores the conceptual framing of discovery, engagement, and transformation. Fourth, we discuss the relationship between social movements, academia and research. And, finally, we highlight some tensions that arose during ECOEC, especially those regarding the transition from theory to practice.

2. Why an ecosocialist educational convergence?

“When there are no alternatives, it becomes necessary to make them.”

The common ground for ECOEC was the understanding that today we are facing deep, intertwined, social and ecological crises that are rooted in the problem of the social domination of humanity, and the attempt to dominate nature. In facing these problems, we are called to meet two important challenges. First, we must cope with the symptoms of a society built on domination and the many forms of oppression that characterise it. Second,

we must offer a reconstructive and revolutionary path in order to develop a truly democratic and ecologically oriented society.

ECOEC was comprised of participants who oppose all forms of domination and are aiming to construct a world based on freedom. We aim to appeal to people with backgrounds in various traditions and experiences, but united by a common concern for the current world situation. This convergence set out with the educational goal of deepening participants' understanding of the relationship between society and the natural world, and expanding their knowledge about the range of possible solutions to the current ecological crisis. We use *ecosocialism*¹ to refer to all anti-capitalist schools of thoughts that, in both theory and practice, link together ecological and social dimensions. We aim to work from the perspective of commonalities rather than differences, to include rather than exclude, and to create a positive unity in our diversity through a collective, participatory process.

Regarding the choice of the term *convergence*, it describes the tendency for people, objects, and other phenomena to come together. We see convergence in nature, for example in locations where airflows or ocean currents meet; when airflows converge, the result can be anything from a cloudy day to a raging storm. The outcome of a convergence is greater than the sum of its parts. With this in mind, the individuals who came together for ECOEC produced more than what they could have on their own, celebrating a unity in diversity, building new knowledge, creating new experiences and laying out a common ground for future synergies.

The ECOEC project intends to bring about a convergence of minds – a meeting of people committed to social change. This idea of convergence is inspired by the Zapatista practice of *encuentro* – a place for encounters, talking and questioning. When people converge, they come to understand themselves and each other, and construct a shared platform for creativity and resistance. As Subcomandante Marcos, spokesperson for the Zapatistas, explains, “Encuentro isn't about constructing a world rebellion. That already exists. It's about constructing a space where this rebellion encounters itself, shows itself, begins to know itself.”

This educational convergence seeks to build a culture of resistance – a culture in constant development, able to overcome the gap/divide between sporadic “activism” and the ordinary world. The process of building a culture of resistance (or of *resistances*, in order

¹ Given the unfortunate past tradition of authoritarian Socialism, the term *ecosocialism* has created some confusion, especially within certain language and cultural contexts. Discussions have been raised and the less problematic term “eco-social” has emerged as a possible alternative.

to underline the plurality and possibilities of the struggles) can be assisted through the process of *discover–engage–transform*. For this reason, all the activities in ECOEC were shaped around a framework of discovery, engagement, and transformation. The first step was to discover different kinds of knowledge, including militant knowledge. The second was to engage with our environment and reflect on existing examples of social change. The third was to apply and modify this new knowledge to transform our world and practices.

3. Revolutionary education

“Learn from life, learn from our people, learn from books, learn from the experience of others. Never stop learning.” – Amilcar Cabral

At the present historical moment, the Left is disorganized and in disarray. We need new ideas and new tools for social change. Thus, now more than ever, popular, radical and transformative forms of mutual education are needed to help create elements for a more powerful future for the Left. As social theorist Murray Bookchin put it, “Every revolutionary project is an educational project.”

Education for revolutionary change requires a particular intentionality; it is a continuous effort to embody the principles of an ecological society in its form, content, and institutional structures. The goal is to restore harmony and wellbeing for the creation of environmentally and socially resilient communities.

A revolutionary education is a never-ending process. It is an individual, as well as collective, effort and thus aims at both individual and collective transformation. Educational moments are not limited to structured formal learning moments, but include everyday activities in which collective moments of talking to each other become moments of learning from each other. From a revolutionary education perspective, all actions are a reflection of the transition towards a cyclic, holistic understanding of life, with its different forms and layers of communication and reflection.

Education is often linked to the concept of authority. Indeed it derives from the Latin root *ducere* meaning “to lead” or “to conduct”. For this reason, we feel the necessity to talk about revolutionary education, with a call for an education that equips people with tools for revolutionary social change, and which transforms individuals and society as a whole.

The horizontal aspect of revolutionary education aims to create a point of participation that

helps bring the individual's mind into a collective space, contributing to a communitarian form of transformation and holistic growth. Horizontal knowledge-sharing is part of the horizontal organization of society; social movements are a form of struggle that is valuable both for personal growth and for a balanced and healthy activism.

Based on libertarian ideologies and practices, the self and the collective permit themselves to be and act according to their own nature, creating safe spaces for the outgoing and incoming members of the community. The search is for balanced, interconnected humans.

As a part of a broader social movement, we have reflected on the necessity for this group to interact with the local community. A reflection on how the project impacted on the local community and how it can foster revolutionary actions beyond the participants is needed. However, as it was designed, ECOEC brings activists together without necessarily linking with the local German community; thus participants need to connect with their local communities once they return back home.

We learnt about social movements operating in different locations, such as the Zapatista and the Kurdish resistances. These presentations brought us ancestral conceptions of life, gender, education and ways of organization. This supported the opening of wider points of view related to human collective organic methods of resistance that arose from backgrounds not culturally colonized by capitalism.

Changes, despite all the limitations, can also be achieved using institutional means, and social movements need to establish a way to relate to the State that can go beyond a mere confrontational relation. In a regressive period like this, questioning how to bring about social change is necessary. We believe that we have to use an approach that Brazilian researcher Souza called “together with the State, despite the State, against the State”. If Capitalism is the enemy, we must navigate our opposition to the State, hack the system and find cracks. Our need as a social movement includes the need to resist – in a sustainable way – and to identify the kinds of resistance necessary at different levels of the organization, where the radical aspects of the movement receive support from different legal entities that can talk with governments. The relationship with formal systems needs to be one that supports the movement in the struggles to come.

Emma Goldman reminds us that education should insist “upon the free growth and development of the innate forces and tendencies of the child. In this way alone can we hope for a free community, which shall make interference and coercion of human growth

impossible.” It is useless to force your people, or even children, into anarchy; the point is not just to teach something but to educate and provide the tools for people to liberate themselves. A revolutionary education cannot force people into freedom – that would be a nonsense. The aim of revolutionary education is to pose the basis for freedom to flourish.

4. Discover, engage, transform

“Discovering, engaging and transforming our reality towards an ecological and democratic future”

The concepts of discover, engage, and transform worked transversally throughout ECOEC. Although initially presented by the organizers in a more linear didactic sense, the concepts of these terms evolved organically, weaving in and out of our experience.

The two-week convergence was structured in two chunks. The first half was centred around the discovery of new terms and concepts, with daily seminars and workshops. The second half emphasized the communitarian management of the space and the self-organization of thematic talks and workshops. Of course, the concepts of discover, engage, and transform were there all the time, more or less vivid or undercurrent. Indeed, at the end it was clear to everyone the organic way in which discover, engage and transform wove through every moment of our convergence, just as the nomenclature of a convergence or “encuentro” denoted the heterogeneity that was to be expected and which was, in the end, fully recognised and accepted.

The fact that this group was formed of activists from different backgrounds of culture, formation and praxis posed some challenges. But, conversely, this heterogeneity meant that every moment and every interaction was saturated with a web of discovery and engagement, which then grew to transformation. Though we recognize the centrality of the classes and workshops presented in the programme of the convergence, we are also fascinated by the moments of transformation that occurred in “informal” times. As expected, the communitarian process of washing dishes or cooking manifested an intimacy hard to express in a plenary or conference setting. These informal spaces became thick with meaning and dynamic change, forming a base for the horizontal community that we were trying to create.

This is a central point in our view of revolutionary education. A revolutionary education is based neither on pure praxis nor on strict memorization learning. Theory and praxis cannot

be disjunct from each other; we aim for a theory informed by actions and actions informed by theory.

As Bookchin stressed, in the past “the very psyche of the individual was divided against itself by establishing the supremacy of mind over body, of hierarchical rationality over sensuous experience”. We wish to re-appropriate ourselves of the sensuous approaches to learning and knowledge, reconnect with the mind and develop a holistic way of learning and seeing reality – a concept divested from the common utilitarian vision of education, even among radical milieux. By sensuous education we understand it as an organic, horizontal meeting place of ideas and praxis. To find similar revolutionary value in the communal washing of plates or communitarian conflict resolution as with the formation and organization of future political activities. This forms the backbone of the ever fluid concept of discover–engage–transform, something that is not limited to occasional convergences but that which can be reproduced in a new form of perception of the world around us.

In discussions about revolutionary education we came to the conclusion that it could be separated into three interrelated layers: (1) revolutionary education inside the movement; (2) revolutionary education between social movements and “what is not”; and (3) revolutionary education for the next generation. In response, the heterogeneous group that we found ourselves a part of implicitly focused on building trust and horizontality within our newly constituted group. During ECOEC a community was forged.

Indeed, the approach (discover–engage–transform) resonated not only in the more formal activities organized like classes, workshops or field trips but throughout ECOEC – in the kitchen, around the table, and around the fire at night. A coherent group emerged, forged by theoretically informed actions, daily discovering, engaging and transforming.

These are balances that must be struck in future convergences and our recently consolidated community must seek ways to create a more inclusive space – one that maintains a diversity of tactics that are empowering and collective, and not alienating.

This disconnect produced a certain confusion within our fledgling collective with respect to our aims and praxis. This is not necessarily problematic, or even unwarranted. We managed to be a basin for ideas, a place to connect with other struggles to encourage mutual aid and resource-sharing, and to propose a syncretism of knowledge. We developed a diversity of tactics of pedagogical frameworks in which the unification of diverse cultures, political struggles and praxes does not mean homogenization. It means

sustaining a base of understanding and empathy, fighting entropy and political burnout to create horizontal structures based on empathy and respect.

The points of political reference become more blurred, time is shorter, and the difficulties of re-inventing and updating methods of fighting are increasingly a bet that we fear losing from the beginning. The repression seems not to leave a margin of re-organization necessary to be able to respond to the continuous changes that increasingly dominate and oppress our lives. Fragmentation, alienation, and individualism are just some of the problems we face on a personal and collective level every day. And yet, even though the situation in which we collectively find ourselves sometimes seems to leave no way out, we can still plant seeds and find new paths along the way.

The fate of these seeds is not written; we do not know how many will grow and how many will remain underground. How can these seeds be left sterile? How can we renew ourselves? How can we reorganize our struggles effectively? How can we move from a state of resistance to attack and undermine the roots of the capitalist system? Can we create a cross-cutting and inclusive struggle by getting out of the self-referencing and stale rhetoric? These and other reflections have led to the birth of the ECOEC experience with the idea of trying to trace new paths by putting the focus of revolutionary education at the centre, and considering it a fundamental component in the transformation processes.

5. Importance of research/relations with the academy

“The goal of research is not the interpretation of the world, but the organization of transformation.” – Antonio Conti

During the conference, we discussed the relationship between knowledge creation, activism and academic circles. We agreed that research and knowledge production are fundamental to the advancement of social and political struggles. They need to be free from the interference of capitalist interests in order to help political groups and revolutionary social movements. The boundary between activism and research should be blurred because researchers are first and foremost committed to social change.

However, too often journalists and academics use information obtained while working with social movements in a distorting or denigratory manner, going so far as to leak information to the police that is then subsequently used for repression.

Very often researchers “steal” data from social movements, without any political

consideration and without any kind of return for the groups concerned. Research on social movements is often seen as a quick and viable way in academia to build a respectful career. However, those practices contribute to the growth of a deep separation between social movements and researchers, precisely because of the behaviour of the latter. Social movements increasingly lack trust in the academy, which only grew and developed thanks to the resources, knowledge and infrastructure of the social movements.

In the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach from 1845, Marx reminds us that “philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it”. Too often the academic world perpetuates the current system or remains in its ivory tower disconnected from the real world. For this reason, different research approaches, such as participatory action research or militant research, have been developed. Research and knowledge production are, indeed, key aspects for social movements that aim to change the social relations in today’s dominant capitalist system.

Through research, a critical reflection is realized, endowing the movement of specific and general knowledge to understand the society in which we live and, at the same time, to develop mechanisms that help in its transformation. Research organizes and systematizes knowledge, allowing new methods and analytic tools to support and improve the performance of groups and movements. In addition, research allows the possibility of socializing the knowledge produced.

According to these principles, universities and research should be at the service of social movements. Research is conducted by people who are willing to spend time and energy, and then return findings back into the hands of the movement. Research questions should arise collectively by researchers as activists or by any group or activist who wishes to participate in this process of knowledge construction.

There is a famous Aboriginal saying from the 1970s: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” Regardless of whether you are a citizen, activist, researcher, or someone from an international background, the common ground for any collaboration is being on the same side of the barricade for social change.

We reject the traditional way of producing knowledge adopted by the academy and influenced by the logic of market productivity. The university, its resources and its role in the transformation and production of knowledge are important. However, the interests of

the academic world today are very subservient to the logic of the market.

We realize the importance of research focused on social struggles and based on their demands, and we aim to be an alternative that recognizes the importance of the university and, at the same time, aim to give it another meaning. We believe that a university should serve the interests of the people and not private demands. Nowadays, universities are officially recognized as places where knowledge is produced and reproduced. A twofold mission is necessary: first, fighting inside the university; and, second, creating alternative spaces for research that builds knowledge free of any constraints imposed by academia or capital.

To do so, we not only aim to build bridges between academia and social movements, but to also encourage an autonomous construction of knowledge – the fruit of social movements and popular struggles.

The recurrent relationship that researchers have with social movements as objects to be observed, despite lengthy discussions about it in various areas, still produces a constant segregation between academic knowledge and popular knowledge in a hierarchical way. Moreover, despite more engaged discussions, academic structures do not permit overcoming this. Thus the knowledge produced by academia is restricted, often providing no return or benefit to the people being researched, who are frequently not seen as active subjects of change.

This knowledge needs to be collectively produced and shared. The research should not be restricted to the group, and it is not the sole responsibility of technicians or specialists, despite the importance of technical and specialized study. Social movements themselves should be the subject of knowledge production, geared to the needs of their struggles.

Research should come from actions, and questions raised by daily struggles. The research must remain in the hands of social movements. What we learn in the university, in life, in the street and at work should be used to fight, to help better understand the world, its conflicts and contradictions and, at the same time, think about and prepare for the most effective strategies for building a new society.

Research applies not only to achieve new results, but as a dynamic process of education, training and collective growth. Research is based on the principle of active participation, which starts with a collective formulation of objectives, developing dynamically, and involving all participants to produce useful knowledge in daily revolutionary practices.

The time has come for researchers to intervene and begin to think collectively about which paths to follow to protect their research, their areas of intervention and the actors involved. Security of informants is key – but not only so. The research topic should be chosen in accordance with relevance and security in mind. Moreover, the publication of research is a very crucial aspect in which accessibility, the language of publication, and the kinds of information presented enter the public domain.

6. ECOEC and the transition from week 1 to week 2

“I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things.” – Emma Goldman

In this section, we feel it is important to illustrate the main challenges that ECOEC faced in its organizational processes. From the outset we experienced three main challenges, the convergence being a first time in three main aspects.

First, the two organizing collectives were based in Germany and Italy and in their first experience organizing an event together. Despite the long process of logistical preparatory work (since September 2017) with online communication and a preparatory face-to-face meeting in Germany in February 2018, organizers were unsure how they would react working together on site, fearing different working approaches and expectations. Understandably, there were some differences as to how to synchronize these different groups into a collective capable of weathering the many organizational and relational challenges that such an event may spawn.

Second, it was the first time the space was used for an activity of this magnitude. The communal space where our convergence was held needed much preparation to host our 50 comrades from all around the world comfortably. Many works on site were required to make the space liveable. Moreover, despite all the planning, organizers could not have foreseen certain logistical problems regarding food, accommodation, participants' needs, schedules, and so on that invariably arise in events of this scale.

Third, by and large, the participants did not know each other and largely came from different struggles and cultural backgrounds. Contingencies due to our personal, political and cultural backgrounds were to be expected and, despite the fact that all participants were from an activist background, time was needed to build bonds of solidarity. It was to be expected that due to personal, political and cultural heterogeneity some

misunderstandings or disagreements would arise. Despite diverse activist militant backgrounds each arrived with their own subjective mental space.

To sum up, given the overall heterogeneity of the convergence, any possible tensions between organizers' and participants' aims and needs were foreseen.

Linked to the discovery phase, the organizers prepared a calendar for the first week with classes in the morning, and workshops and other events in the afternoon. A schedule full of activities was designed to make the most of the organization and the time available to participants. It was important that participants made an authentic discovery of theories and praxis.

Organizers deliberately decided on a top-down approach. They preferred to organize a more "traditional" vertical conference the first week, emphasizing didactic learning over participants' self-management.

Moreover, a key aspect of effective horizontal organization is for a community to work with people that know each other and/or share similar aims and visions. However, during the first week, this was not deemed by the organizers conducive to the aims set for that week. Participants did not know each other and some were unsure about the programme. From the beginning, it was clear that everyone needed time to build common ground and a feeling of trust.

Two documents prepared by the organizers served as laying the foundation for the community: one document explained the basic assumptions for ECOEC, and another listed guidelines for the programme, outlining some basic communication on locations and a set of social and behavioural guidelines for all participants (this last document was discussed and approved in a plenary the first day of ECOEC).

However, the intense programme consumed participants' energy very quickly and some were not committed to fully follow it, instead preferring social activities until the small hours in the morning. This led to delays of classes and workshops that then provoked a spiral of negativity, showing a lack of respect to the speakers and organizers whose practical work made the convergence possible. One or two plenaries in the first week could have helped to foster a better sense of community and improve communication, thus reducing some of the burden on organizers.

The organizers fell into the position of holding key information and directing tasks, leading to an unwanted power position. Some organizers had to adopt a position of leadership –

sometimes not desirable but necessary – in order to keep the programme running.

The organizers already planned a transition from the discovery to the engage/transform phases. Self-management was a prominent feature. A plenary was planned every two days to deal with logistical decisions and problem-solving. This plenary put together organizers and participants, based on consensus and working towards horizontality. All the activities of the transform phase were proposed in the plenary and self-managed. In the first week a cooking collective was on site in order to facilitate participation; in the second week on-site participants had to deal with food preparation. A new level of consciousness was needed and people worked together, facing the daily problem of self-management. For participants, on-site life changed drastically and a cohesive horizontal community started to be felt by everyone.

Also in the second week, inspired by the presentation on the Kurdish movement, time was dedicated to develop and implement some *tekmil* – moments of collective- and self-reflection and critique. We created safe spaces of voluntary participation where we could share our comments. This implementation helped us to learn from mistakes and improve the experience at ECOEC, especially the transition between week 1 and week 2.

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