After the Paris Treaty: Anti-coal Struggles in Turkey

The Istanbul Policy Center-Sabanci University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative organized a seminar entitled “After the Paris Treaty: Anti-coal Struggles in Turkey” by Bengi Akbulut (Political Economist, Member of Political Ecology Working Group and Ekoloji Kolektifi) on Thursday, March 31, 2016. This event was convened by 2015/16 Mercator-IPC Fellow Hande Paker. It was aimed at exploring current anti-coal struggles in Turkey in the context of transnational climate change and climate justice movements. The following summary provides a concise overview of the seminar with Bengi Akbulut and Hande Paker and the subsequent discussion.

Mercator-IPC Fellow Hande Paker opened the seminar by explaining the Mercator-IPC Fellowship Program as part of the IPC-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative. She further referred to Climate Change as the thematic specialization area for the research topic. After briefly introducing Bengi Akbulut and her research emphasis, Mercator-IPC Fellow Hande Paker highlighted the emerging interplay between increasingly connected civil society initiatives and the global climate movement relevant to the subject matter as a potentially promising mechanism for transition towards long-term, sustainable, green energy practices worldwide.

The key points discussed in this 2-hour session can be summarized as follows:

First, Bengi Akbulut gave a concise overview of different, contested notions of the so-called “commons” concept, i.e. collectively used resources, in existing strands of literature: Hardin’s Tragedy of the Commons, for instance, assumes that freeriding with regard to using a common by self-interested individuals leads to its overexploitation. This further implies that it is not possible to come to a community agreement regarding the common’s sustainable use but only by privatization or centralization. Ostrom et al., on the other hand, took a rather utilitarian stance and assumed that a community is in fact able to craft its own rules of access to a common and enforce them through mutual monitoring. These theories, however, both fail to acknowledge socio-economic, political, and thus institutional contexts such as existing power inequalities within societies regarding the use of a common. Marx, in contrast, made explicit reference to social relationships around commons, and in fact considered “commoning” as viable, a just alternative to capitalist accumulation.

Considering climate or nature as a common resource in this sense implies that overexploitation and climate change are pressing contemporary global policy challenges faced by the international community. It should be stressed that
there are needs for expanding both the “commons” concept from commodified natural resources to climate and nature itself as well as the variety of groups affected by climate change worldwide. This point, further, raises crucial questions for climate and adaptation justice, with least developed regions of the world that contributed less to natural resource exploitation and pollution being affected by consequences of global climate change the most. Obviously, there are major power imbalances and thus conflict potential involved in civil society initiatives against ongoing natural exploitation and climate change, such as the ultimately unsuccessful case studies of Ecuador’s Yasuni ITT proposal or the Bolivian constitution show.

By having established the theoretical framework to put local anti-coal struggles in Turkey into the context of the international climate change and climate justice discourse, Bengi Akbulut continued to outline the case study of Gerze: Local resistance against plans to build a coal-fired power plant in this village on the Black Sea coast was mainly based on a more inclusive notion of natural commons rather than being considered as an economic resource only. More specifically, it featured a united language of the different groups affected that not only opposed the detrimental health effects of the power plant but also meant to criticize the overall increasingly neoliberal socio-economic and political developments in Turkey. Ultimately, civil society resistance in Gerze was able to halt the power plant construction. It can thus be considered as a successful example of transcending concerns for local natural commons and identifying with large-scale, global climate change concerns.

Mercator-IPC Fellow Hande Paker further added to this argument that there is great potential for specific, local concerns for commons and transnational climate change concerns to mutually reinforce each other. For example, as civil society anti-coal resistance initiatives in Turkey have been intensifying their common discourse, accordingly networks of information, experience, and power have increasingly started to emerge. International alliances also play a crucial role by legitimizing and thus supporting local anti-coal struggles, for instance, with ratifying the recent Paris Treaty. In fact, this mutually reinforcing interplay of both local and international actors promises to form a powerful mobilization for adaptation and mitigation against climate change and long-term, sustainable, green energy-based global development.

Finally, the seminar was concluded with a discussion session. It was stressed that the historical development and thus the institutional, socio-economic, and political setting following an increasingly neoliberal agenda in Turkey has in fact given rise to local anti-coal movements, and that civil society resistance was not only directed towards the destruction of natural habitat but also against ongoing state transformations that increasingly impede social reproduction mechanisms. In addition, it was assessed that potential conflicts within civil society movements are outweighed by a consistent, common stance in successful cases of local anti-climate change struggles. A key
prevailing challenge pointed out, in conclusion, was the lack of information on local levels with regard to the actual impacts of climate change: This need to “spread the word” and ultimately empower local societies can be targeted by transnational alliances and social media as they have major potential to help and increase global mobilization against actions inducing further natural exploitation and climate change.