

ARNE HARMS

## What kinds of activism do regenerative cultures fuel and how might we research them?

A substantial part of climate activism does not take place on the street. Of course, any political movement requires invisible work, such as strategising or persuasion. And long-term political activists of different leanings emphasise the need to regularly pause and pamper oneself in order to remain strong for the movement. The climate movement Extinction Rebellion embraces the latter approach under what is being called 'regenerative culture'. But there is more to calls for regenerative culture(s), I would suggest, than the observation that worn-out activists must recharge themselves for the next battle. Regenerative cultures in the plural call attention to forms of political action that are decidedly off-street and non-public while aiming to foster new forms of collectives. And I would argue that to attend to these calls has implications for how we think and research activism. Here I throw some light on two articulations of what I introduce as regenerative cultures in the plural and consider their potential to rethink the political amid planetary injury.

One instantiation of regenerative cultures revolves around turning inward and reworking the self in a more or less directly political but straightforward ecologically sensitive manner. Philosopher Timothy Morton (2009) invites us: 'Don't just do something, sit there!' To him, contemplation of ethical commitments is key to get priorities and strategies straight. Similarly, Charles Eisenstein (2018), as always straddling inquiry and activist envisioning, calls for a revolution of the heart. Shunning technical fixes, such as CO<sub>2</sub> pricing or green consumerism, both advocate techniques of realising connectedness between people and animate or inanimate life as a precondition for realigning society. In seminars across the globe, educators take up these threads, to name just one example, and attempt to enable a sense of connectedness across species boundaries in hurt and joy by fusing Buddhist practices, nature contemplation and storytelling. In such endeavours, the private and intimate appears to be much more than just the prerequisite to political action. Indeed, proponents see intimate realignments as, among others, a political practice allowing and articulating commitment to others, be they two-legged, feathered or rooted in the ground. And both advocate inward and contemplative off-street activisms that reach far beyond frequently ridiculed, market-compatible forms greenwashing. After all, changing intimate relations and outlooks seems worlds apart from 'change-your lightbulb activism'.

Another instantiation involves implementing regenerative cultures through practices that appear as gardening but are meant to be much more. I am referring to attempts to implement and integrate biodiversity islands within urban or agro-industrial landscapes. In this iteration, regenerative cultures overlap, among other things, with permaculture. Both share a commitment to reforming everyday attitudes toward nourishment – a coupled nourishment of environment, society and the self. Drawing on notions of more-than-human entanglements that reach both outwards into the world and inwards into the intimate, a reform of gardening – if done well – brings about a reformed self and vice versa.

Regenerative cultures, as I am using it here, appears to be a heterogeneous, globe-spanning and only loosely aligned set of practices cohering around nourishment within more-than-human relations. The craft of regenerating selves and others contrasts with late capitalist notions of growth. And it also exceeds the tenet of degrowth in embodying what I call altergrowth. In engaging soils and selves, a politics of life emerges that stands in tension with mainstream biopolitics. Altergrowth appears as an instance of what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) calls alterbiopolitics. And as all politics of life, it involves reflecting on its object – life in a specific form – while bringing it about through embodied practices and material arrangements. Reflection on interconnection or re-organising urban wastes, proponents of regenerative cultures seek to embody practices of mutual reform driven by transspecies commitment and attempt to be the seed of change, reworking society from within one step at a time. Yet, regenerative cultures are neither simply intimate nor local. Gardeners or seminar facilitators appear to be concerned with extending the sphere of the political even further. After all, it is not just the private that is political, the private has implications across the globe (via commodity chains), in time (across future generations) and beyond the human (across species boundaries).

To the degree that regenerative cultures embody shifts in political action amid planetary injury, their ethnographic explorations require changed sensibilities. This involves, on one hand, turning to modes of reworking the self that are not (only) concerned with improvement, efficiency or fitness as neoliberal formations routinely demand. Instead, it involves tracing practices that are oriented (at least partly) toward nourishment and getting away from seeing society as a set of neatly bounded individuals. Cultivating wholesomeness and interrelation, as such a political ethics attempts to do, may invite rather unexpected bedfellows. In turning inward and outward at the same time, political practice may intersect with (religious) ritual in surprising ways. What to make of monks meditating on the street as part of a blockade, as members of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship regularly do, and what kind of radical politics do they embody? And how to reconcile Marx with Gaia, the vision of earth as sentient being?

Researching regenerative cultures as climate activism requires, on the other hand, the exploration of the work of building collectives and alliances that reach beyond species boundaries. It calls attention to the work of literally seeding change by, say, establishing more nourishing and more resilient neighbourhoods and not just thriving plots promising rich harvests. Gardening, for instance, needs to be addressed not as the establishment of neatly separated bubbles, but as sites of incubating transformation and as instigating seepage of life into, what appears as, dead zones. These collectives not only reach beyond species boundaries, often they are also seen to involve other than human forces, incorporating geological forces and at times also spirits or ghosts. If and how the mobilisation of animism as an ecopolitical stance feeds into the

re-enchanting of politics or of the West warrants further attention. At the very least, however, these figurations provide fertile ground to rethink animism.

Researching regenerative cultures provides scope for theorising intimate forms of activism. As a scientific project, it calls attention to attempts to cultivate selves differently and to insert desires and affects into the sphere of politics, thereby articulating novel figurations of freedom and fulfilment. In place of accelerating and endlessly diversifying consumption, proponents of such an intimate activism devise means to realise fulfilment and freedom precisely in abstaining from unwholesome practices and realigning toward extra-individual nourishment.

Arne Harms   
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology  
Halle  
Germany

## References

- Bellacasa, M. P. de la 2017. *Matters of care: speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Eisenstein, C. 2018. *Climate: a new story*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Morton, T. 2009. Don't just do something, sit there!, in *Rethink: contemporary art & climate change*, edited by A. S. Spanner Witzke. Copenhagen: Alexandra Institute.