Tools for Representation: How Indigenous Peoples Leverage Maps, Technology, and Built Spaces in Global Environmental Governance

Abstract

Although non-state actors, including Indigenous Peoples, are central to the production of global environmental governance, there is little attention directed to the politics of representation in global environmental governance. Instead, scholars commonly suggest that Indigenous Peoples have limited, if any, influence in international environmental politics. They argue that Indigenous Peoples are, at best, co opted and at worst further marginalized through their engagement at international policy events. Such findings not only demean the significance of Indigenous presence at these events, but further reinforces dominant power hierarchies embedded in international relations scholarship. In this paper, we ask how do Indigenous Peoples carve out space for meaningful and influential representation at state-dominated sites? We argue that maps, technology, and built spaces are leveraged by Indigenous Peoples to expand and make their voices legible in spaces where Indigenous representation might otherwise be rendered insignificant. By utilizing visual ethnography of images triangulated with field notes collected through collaborative event ethnographies (CEE) at three different sites of global environmental governance (COP10, WCC and COP21), we show the ways in which Indigenous Peoples reclaim self-determination and cultural identity through the intentional use or exploitation of structurally embedded systems in global environmental governance in order to exercise influence.

Research Questions

1. What forms of representation do maps, technologies, and built spaces reflect?
2. How are maps, technologies, and built spaces transformed as a means of resistance/means of control?
3. How are maps, technologies, and built spaces leveraged as tools to affect political change/as pathways or modes of power?

Results

Our analysis demonstrates how Indigenous People utilize informal processes to gain representation and influence in global environmental governance events. Maps, technologies, and built spaces were formed and presented in various ways across the three events. All three structures acted as barriers and entry-points of representation for Indigenous People at the three events.

- Maps from Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources were used to present environmental and political WORD at the three events. While maps were primarily from non-Indigenous sources (including NGOs, secretariat, governments), maps were utilized by Indigenous people to represent their territories, identities, and relationships with surrounding environments.
- Built Space in the conferences provided both an opportunity for self-determination and also a device of hindrance for Indigenous Peoples. Frequently, across the three conferences, Indigenous groups would take space to their advantage, using it not for its original intended function and therefore subverting expectations and drawing audience. The spaces still enforced Western ideas of power and discourse, however.
- Technology at the three events was generally used as a means of communication of ideas and knowledge, such as through film and translation devices. Obstacles to Indigenous influence were shown by lack of access to technology, presentation of Indigenous People through technology without having representatives present, and a lack of capacity for utilizing technology.

Acknowledgements

This research is the result of a collaborative project in POL395 (W18) "Global Environmental Justice"

Poster created by: Luke Kleekamp and Dorothy Hogg
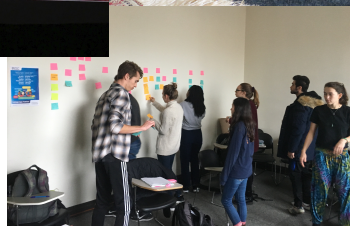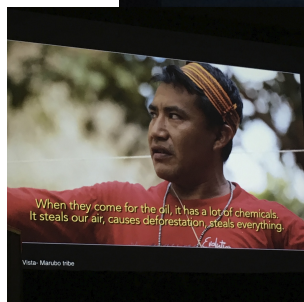PIs: Kim Marion Suiseeya and Laura Zanotti
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Data Snapshot
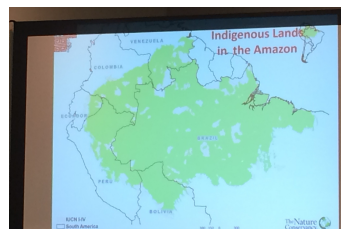
Map at WCC (left); Built space at COP21 (below)

Technology at WCC (below)

Students in POL395 brainstorm thinking about the research process (right)

Background

Representation encompasses strategies through which political actors attempt to influence opinion or action (Schweber, 2016, Celis, 2013)

- There are two forms of political representation: responsiveness and inclusiveness. Inclusiveness refers to the presence of political groups in political institutions, while responsiveness refers to the degree of change in an outcome as a result of an actor's agency (Celis, 2013).
- Political entrepreneurs respond to both internal and external incentives: personal drive to foster change, and the goal of accumulating political capital in the forms of support and votes (Fischer, 2016).
- Scholars of indigenous representation have identified specific goals for indigenous representation, primarily: maintaining cultural identities and prevention of extinction (Strang, 2007)

Environmental justice comprises a universal dimension, concerning procedural and distributional notion of justice (de Bres, 2013; Harris, 1997; Ottinger, 2013), and a particular dimension, related to the specific puzzle of identifying responsibility and recognitional rights (LaBelle, 2017; Mason, 2001)

- Other scholars of GEP, have defined the latter in terms of "accountability", identifying who is to be responsible for social and ecological impact (Mason, 2001).

The relationship between representation and justice can be analyzed in terms of how indigenous representation affects the procedural, distributional and recognitional rights of indigenous groups. For instance, the degree of inclusiveness is central to understand the outcome of decision-making bodies, whose power influences the procedural justice among groups, as fostering inclusion of diverse groups enhances procedural justice (Azzi, 1993; Kim & Siddiki, 2018).

Methods

Using data from collaborative event ethnography (CEE) at three different field sites:

- COP10: 2010 Convention on Biological Diversity
- COP21: 2015 UN Climate Change Conference
- WCC: 2016 IUCN World Conservation Congress

Undergraduate seminar research team

- Practiced qualitative research methods and learned about research process
- Teams divided by *theme* (maps, technology, built space) and *event* (COP10, COP21, WCC)

Qualitative analysis of over one thousand images using Nvivo

- Teams created codes for categorizing images
- Took note of themes and distinctions across tools and events
- Content analysis of image metadata (including demographics, environmental focus, etc.)
- Triangulation of coded images with corresponding field notes

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