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## Collaborative Event Ethnography: Between Structural Power and Empirical Nuance?

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Global Environmental Politics, Volume 14, Number 3, August 2014,  
pp. 132-138 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



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# Collaborative Event Ethnography: Between Structural Power and Empirical Nuance?

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*Bram Büscher*

Collaborative event ethnography (CEE) is a powerful new methodological tool to study global environmental politics and governance in practice. The authors of the various articles in this special issue have done much to develop, conceptualize, and fine tune CEE in order to understand global environmental meetings and how they “work” in terms of producing knowledge, relationships, solutions, and compliance mechanisms, among others. In this forum article I interrogate the power of CEE and how CEE performs in the study of power in global environmental politics.

In one way or another, all the articles in this issue of *GEP* employ CEE to refer to and study power. Through a focus on the politics of translation, scale, and performance this is very much an engagement with agentic forms of power: the emphasis is on *who* is able to do what type of translation between what type of knowledges, variables, metrics, or norms (see Scott et al., Marion Suiseeya); *who* defines scale or “scalar narratives” (Gray, Gruby, and Campbell); and *who* performs or “enacts” what type of role or behavior (Campbell, Corson, et al.; Marion Suiseeya). This, in turn, leads to interesting and important research findings that stress “the importance of understanding meetings as social devices subject to orchestration through which institutional and organizational ends can be achieved, legitimized, and contested” (Campbell, Corson, et al., p. 7). For example, Campbell, Hagerman, and Gray (p. 42) show how the Aichi biodiversity targets for 2020 became “increasingly ‘naturalized’ objects detached from the negotiations that produced them.” Through CEE the authors “seek to re-embed the 2020 Targets in their production, by revealing the scientific and political arguments that were invoked during negotiations, but are masked in the final language.” This is a way in which the power of CEE becomes apparent.

Another way to testify to the power of CEE is by highlighting its ability to “tap into” forms of neoliberal diffused power. As several of the articles note, “COP10 featured mostly economic tools for mainstreaming, in recognition that, in the words of a representative from the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, ‘economics has become the currency of policy . . . whether you like it or I like it.’” (Campbell, Hagerman, and Gray, p. 49). Tracking this new

“currency of policy” can be exceedingly difficult in a time when connections between sign, value, commodity, and their origins have become fuzzy and self-referential,<sup>1</sup> making it hard to hold specific actors accountable or trace power relations. This, to be sure, is part of the broader neoliberal political economy highlighted by Peck and Tickell: “one of the fundamental features of neoliberalism is its pervasiveness as a system of *diffused power*.”<sup>2</sup> By this they mean that power works both as a direct material and as a more ephemeral disciplinary force, spreading the workings of power across a multitude of actors. Global environmental events temporarily bring important parts of this multitude together, making it possible to study diffused power in a concentrated way.

The broader question I want to pose in this forum piece, however, is how well CEE does in terms of addressing structural forms of power. This is important given that the authors rightly emphasize the centrality of market mechanisms in contemporary global environmental governance, something that is backed up by a fast-growing critical literature in global environmental politics.<sup>3</sup> Yet, more attention to and a more radical critique of structural forms of power, particularly as they relate to the historical development of capitalism in the environmental realm and the place of meetings such as the CBD COPs in this overall context, would be appropriate in the further development of CEE. This brings me to the title of this piece, namely the question of whether CEE, through both its collaborative setup and its focus on global meetings, is caught between structural power and empirical nuance.

## Empirical Nuance

CEE, as its name suggests, stands or falls with collaboration. Collaborative research can yield fruitful results, and keep others on their (empirical, conceptual) toes. In describing the benefits of collaboration, Campbell, Corson, et al. state: “As we challenge each other’s observations and interpretations, we renegotiate our own understandings” (p. 12). Corson, Campbell, and MacDonald further argue that collaboration results in a specific type of analysis: “As collaborators discuss and debate each other’s observations and interpretations, they produce a nuanced and powerful analysis” (p. 23).

The authors of this special issue rightly indicate the many advantages of working with a team, including being able to see more aspects of complex meetings such as the COP, helping each other interpret what is going on, and so forth. At the same time, analyzing politically complex and loaded dynamics as a team might lead to a “nuanced analysis” that loses some of the critical edge that is potentially one of the most important aspects of this type of research. The danger here is that analyses become a “lowest common denominator” of the

1. Büscher 2014.

2. Peck and Tickell 2002, 400, emphasis in original.

3. Arsel and Büscher 2012; Brockington and Duffy 2010; Brockington et al. 2008; Büscher et al. 2012, 2014; Castree 2008; Corson et al. 2013; Fairhead et al. 2012; Fletcher 2010; Heynen et al. 2007; Igoo and Brockington 2007; McAfee 1999; McCarthy 2012; Roth and Dressler 2012.

various team members' perspectives and that "theory building"—particularly of the more radical kind—suffers as a consequence. I am here specifically referring to a type of analysis and theory building that David Harvey calls "bottom up theorizing," which "entails viewing any particular event set as an internalisation of fundamental underlying guiding forces." "The task of enquiry," according to Harvey, is then "to identify these underlying forces by critical analysis and detailed inspection of the individual instance."<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, CEE is an appropriate methodology to go about a "detailed inspection of the individual instance," in this case global environmental meetings like the CBD COP. At the same time, Harvey stresses that his conception of theory is a "loose conception," which is "one that acknowledges the power and importance of certain processes that are specifiable independently of each other but which can and must be brought together in a dynamic field of interaction."<sup>5</sup> As several of the articles acknowledge, many of these processes are not easily captured through CEE, as they have occurred in the past or occur outside an observed meeting, yet may nonetheless influence and inform the meeting in critical ways. An important question then becomes: how do we know exactly where meetings begin and end? Following from this: how do we know where the study of meetings begins and ends? Or in more abstract terms: what is the appropriate place of CEE in relation to (meta)theory, historical analysis, and other activities and methods needed to uncover and the structural forms power that influence and inform global environmental meetings?

I argue that two things must be done through and with CEE: to use it to further understand—and perhaps radically challenge—"fundamental underlying forces," and to place processes in a "dynamic field of interaction." To be sure, several articles in this special issue attempt to do the latter. Corson, Campbell, and MacDonald (pp. 32–33), for example, argue that "the subteam was able to bring historical knowledge of TEEB's roll-out at the WCC and CBD, and then witness its transformation across multiple events at Rio+20." They also observed how these transformations "spread to other nodes in the 'distended network' of global environmental governance, reshaping conservation discourse in sites distant from the CBD."

In this way, CEE helps to study the politics and political economy of conservation as it plays out in important sites such as global environmental meetings. Yet at the same time, we need to understand these meetings as an expression of broader "underlying forces." As Paterson et al. have said, if these meetings are crucial parts of global environmental governance (GEG), it is clear that "GEG cannot be understood separately from the broader shifts in authority in global politics."<sup>6</sup> Hence the question is how CEE can help to understand the role and position of conservation within broader political economies and political structures, or, the "current political climate" (Corson et al.). For this, I argue,

4. Harvey 2006, 86.

5. Harvey 2006, 76.

6. Paterson et al. 2003, 7.

we need more (explicit) attention to and theorization of the historical and structural power of neoliberal capitalism in relation to CEE as a methodology and political practice.

## The Structural Power of Neoliberal Capitalism

Neoliberal capitalism is the latest phase in a long historical political economy of accumulation focused on capital defined as money sent in pursuit of more money.<sup>7</sup> Particularly important for my objectives in this forum piece is to focus attention on the historical element, and its relation to power, particularly in its “structural” mode (hinting both at Foucauldian disciplinary or biopower forms and (post) Marxian political economic forms). *Over time* a specific type of global power framework with accordant institutional, social, political-economic, organizational, and political forms has developed that uniquely relates to and is dialectically co-constituted by the production of ecology and nature. Jason Moore refers to this as the “capitalist world-ecology,” “a world-historical matrix of human- and extra-human nature premised on endless commodification.”<sup>8</sup> Global environmental meetings are a small but not insignificant part of this overall, *structural* power equation and the methodological and political question is how CEE can take this into account or be combined with other endeavors to enable a deeper understanding of not only the political economy of conservation, but of the role of conservation in the broader political economy.

To be sure, authors of the articles in this special issue do pay attention to this issue, particularly in their other work. For example, Corson and MacDonald argue that CEE makes visible “how institutions like the CBD work to circulate and sanction forms of knowledge; legitimate and institutionalize associated programs; and align and articulate critical actors.”<sup>9</sup> In turn, this “reveals the integral role that the CBD plays in contemporary processes of accumulation that operate under the guise of conservation.” They conclude, “As an institution born of neoliberal environmental politics and produced within the cultural logics of capitalism and the long histories of state support for the neoclassical economics that underpin those logics, the CBD has, from its inception, been a political arena that could be directed toward the extension of capital accumulation.”

This type of explicit formulation, and particularly its methodological and political consequences in relation to CEE, scarcely feature in the current special issue. For example, when the authors of the introduction refer to scale, they refer to geographical or governance scales (global, local, etc.) and not temporal scale. But it is the temporal scale, or the accumulated set of institutions, mechanisms, and cultural, political-economic, and social dynamics *over time* that helps to

7. Harvey 2010.

8. Moore 2010, 108.

9. Corson and MacDonald 2012, 280.

understand how—and to what extent—structural power, in particular as it relates to neoliberal capitalism or the “capitalist world-ecology,” influences and shapes environmental politics and governance. Corson et al. are similarly tentative about structural power: “In paying attention to the role of historical contingency, context, and conjuncture as conditioned by structural forces, we focus on how particular actors use political space in pursuit of outcomes at certain moments in time” (p. 27).

At the same time, these lines show the power of CEE, in that it brings much needed nuance in terms of the empirical study of structural power. One could argue, however, that structural power needs more than empirical nuance, for example by using “ethnography to document the production of hegemonic discourse” (Corson et al., p. 40); it also needs to be confronted by radical critique. Can CEE provide a basis for or be a companion to radical critique and related theory building? And, can CEE be used in some way as a basis for radical political action?

## The Dialectics of Radical Critique and Empirical Nuance

These questions arrive from a broader conundrum when faced with structural power of the neoliberal capitalist kind, namely how to do justice to empirical nuance, while at the same time aiming to put forth or build a radical critique and political agenda based on “bottom up theorizing”? It is clear that the special issue, and CEE more generally, speaks to this conundrum. CEE—as defined by the authors—is definitely “critical” if we take Ford’s definition, following Cox, that “a critical approach distinguishes critical theory from problem-solving theory, where the latter takes for granted the framework of existing power relations and institutions and is concerned with the smooth functioning of the system. By contrast, critical theory calls the very framework into question and seeks to analyze how it is maintained and changed.”<sup>10</sup>

In the process of doing this type of *critical* research, it might perhaps be interesting to expand the correct observation by all the authors in the special issue that knowledge construction and science at the CBD COP is driven by politics. This, of course, goes for CEE itself as well. The question then is, how can one promote a potentially more radical political agenda through CEE? I do not have the answer, but a key benefit of the CEE approach is that while the investigators critically examine the dynamics of important global environmental meetings, they simultaneously create opportunities for research outcomes to be shared. After all, their research “subjects” and the important policy and governance communities that need to hear the outcomes of this research are one and the same. This provides *powerful* possibilities to bring a more radical critique to the attention of important actors in global environmental politics.

10. Ford 2003, 121.

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