The Colonisation of Thought in Contemporary Climate Change Governance Models

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Indigenous peoples have consistently been ostracised, fetishised, marginalised, dispossessed, and excluded from participating in political processes by colonial, and now state, powers. The same rings true for their role in climate change discourse. This essay will argue that as indigenous communities will be at the forefront of consequential suffering from climate change and have an array of so-far largely ignored ontological and epistemological knowledge to offer, they should have an active, collaborative, and participatory role in international and national climate change mitigation negotiations and initiatives. To do this, this essay will begin by briefly discussing the broad consequences of climate change, as well as the current international governance regimes in place. Following this, colonialism and environmental injustice will be examined. Thirdly, the effects of climate change on indigenous communities will be highlighted. Finally, indigenous epistemologies and ontologies will be analysed to demonstrate the necessity of the genuine inclusion of indigenous peoples into international and national climate change negotiations.

Climate change will have severe consequences globally. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2014 report concluded that by the end of the 21st century, global surface temperatures are likely to exceed the warming targets of 1.5 degrees Celsius and are also likely to exceed 2 degrees Celsius (IPCC 2014, p. 10). This report also indicated that rising sea levels are very likely, wherein about 95% of the ocean area will experience a rise in sea level by the end of the 21st century (IPCC 2014, p. 13). By limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius rather than the previous target of 2 degrees Celsius, it increases the variety and efficacy of the adaptive mechanisms different populations can implement, as well as limiting the increases in ocean temperatures and associated acidification processes (IPCC 2018, pp. 14-15). It has been estimated that by 2050, climate change will cause 200 million people to become refugees (Brindal 2007, p. 240; Myers 2005; Potter 2013, p. 30). Climate change has global consequences, however indigenous communities are particularly vulnerable to the effects.

Global governance regimes have provided an inadequate platform for the inclusion of indigenous communities. Paragraph 134 of the Paris Agreement invites subnational authorities, such as civil society and the private sector, to engage in mitigation efforts; while paragraph 136 calls for the establishment of a platform for indigenous peoples to share their experience and knowledge regarding mitigation and adaptation mechanisms (UNFCCC 2015, p. 19). The Local Communities and Indigenous Platform was created in response to this and does provide a platform for the contribution of indigenous perspectives in climate change governance models, however it still has similar post-colonial Eurocentric power structures within the Platform. The document also outlines the prioritisation of state, over indigenous, sovereignty in absolute terms. (UNFCCC 2018, pp. 1-2). While this is progress towards recognising the validity of indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, it is only operationalised within traditional governance models. This hierarchical institutional model does not provide an appropriate framework for indigenous perspectives to be genuinely included in global climate change deliberation processes (Nursey-Bray, Palmer, Smith & Rist 2019, p. 474). This is further exemplified by the REDD+, which aimed to create and conserve carbon sinks through the protection of forests, initiative negotiations. While indigenous peoples were invited to participate in these negotiations and their consultation was sought, their agency was denied as they had no way in which they could meaningfully contribute to determine the outcome of the negotiations. This is further exacerbated by national governments determining what constitutes indigeneity (Fjortoft, Hirsch, Krause, Loaiza, Tompsett & Loaiza 2012, pp. 5-7; Nursey-Bray et. al. 2019, pp. 474-475). These exclusionary and hierarchical governance models are rooted in neo-colonial

practices.

The effects of colonial practices are still felt by indigenous peoples. During the colonial period, many indigenous communities were forcibly relocated to areas considered less desirable at the time; while their ancestral and spiritual home may not necessarily be the region they inhabit now, many indigenous communities now have legal ties to the land they were assigned. (Abate & Kronk 2013, p. 184 & pp. 188-189; Figueroa 2011, pp. 235-236). The regions indigenous peoples were relocated to, and now inhabit, are generally remote and distant from centralised national governing bodies, and this acts to further isolate indigenous communities from decision making processes (Brugnach, Craps & Dewulf 2017, p. 24; Figueroa 2011, p. 235). These areas are typically vulnerable to climate change, and indigenous communities no longer have the freedom of mobility they traditionally would have had; therefore, it is in their interest to preserve what comparatively little land they have legal recognition over (Abate & Kronk 2013, pp. 182-183). As many indigenous peoples and communities suffered dispossession, marginalisation and genocide under colonial and post-colonial rule, they generally have not had the political or societal space to generate transgenerational economic or political capital (Abate & Kronk 2013, p. 180; Brugnach et. al. 2017, p. 23). Although they were once independent and autonomous communities and nations, they are often politically weak and marginalised in contemporary post-colonial societies. While indigenous voices are included in international governance regimes, their voices are still comparatively weak when contrasted to those of their national governments. This shortfall means that indigenous communities' clout in international deliberation are often dependent on their political strength in the domestic sphere; which due to colonial processes and histories is often weak (Fjortoft et. al. 2012, p. 7; Brugnach et. al. 2017, p. 23). This lack of political capital makes it difficult for indigenous communities to make their voices heard in a meaningful way.

Environmental injustice is most evident when discussed in the context of indigenous communities. Climate change and environmental degradation has largely been driven by developed states, with seventy-four per cent of all economic activity since 1950 being conducted by states that account for eighteen per cent of the world's population (Atapattu & Gonzalez 2016, pp. 229-230). This economic activity is the driver of climate change, and while the rewards are largely reaped by the Global North, these rewards are not evenly distributed throughout their societies, and indigenous communities often do not benefit from this activity. Typically, greenhouse gas emissions caused by indigenous peoples are limited, yet the adverse consequences of climate change will disproportionately affect indigenous communities (Atapattu & Gonzalez 2016, p. 235; Abate & Kronk 2013, p. 179; Brugnach et. al. 2017, pp. 22-23; Nursey-Bray, Palmer, Smith & Rist 2019, p. 473). This injustice intersects with other forms of injustices, and for indigenous communities is another impediment to their self-determination. Climate change mitigation initiatives have also been implemented at the expense of indigenous communities. The expansion of palm oil plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia, the two largest global exporters accounting for 93% of all palm oil exports, have displaced indigenous communities and led to conflict (Abate & Kronk 2013, p. 185; Brugnach et. al. 2017, p. 24; Nesadurai 2018, p. 207). The development of traditionally indigenous land into palm oil plantations largely have failed to materialise into any tangible economic benefits for many indigenous communities in Malaysia and Indonesia (Nesadurai 2018, p. 209). This trend of ignoring indigenous perspectives in mitigation initiatives leads to maladaptive and abusive outcomes.

Indigenous communities are already experiencing the effects of climate change. The effects of climate change are directly threatening the livelihoods of the Inuvialuit people in Sachs Harbour in north-west Canada, as well as other arctic indigenous communities. Travel has become more difficult and dangerous, as the stability of sea and river ice has weakened and has become more unpredictable, while snow has become softer and looser, so that it is becoming increasingly difficult to traverse across it. In addition to this, the loss of sea ice has made the hunting of seals more difficult, while what seals they do find generally have less fat (Berkes 2017, pp. 187-190). This accumulates to a vast reduction in opportunities for acquiring sustenance through agriculture, aquaculture, hunting and foraging. Around 85 per cent of the coastline in Australia's Northern Territory is owned by Indigenous communities (Green et. al. 2009, p. 9). This makes them vulnerable to storm surges and king tides, as rising sea levels and extreme weather events will increase the severity of these occurrences. (Green et. al. 2009, pp. 25-26). Throughout coastal and inland northern Australia mean annual temperatures are expected to increase between 0.7 and 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2030, while by 2070 it is expected to increase between 1.5 and 3 degrees Celsius. It has also been indicated that by both 2030 and 2070, the amount and intensity of precipitation during the monsoon seasons will increase, while the dry season

will likely become drier (Green et. al. 2009, pp. 19-24). These communities are still largely denied agency in affecting global governance regimes.

Indigenous peoples in polar regions are losing both home and livelihood, which severely limits the adaptive capacities of these communities. Throughout the world, indigenous communities are often among the first to report on, and feel, the effects of climate change (Green, Jackson & Morrison 2009, p. 10). The loss of sea ice, alongside unpredictable and shifting climate patterns, made the effects felt by these communities among the most immediately obvious (Abate & Kronk 2013, p. 183 & 192; Berkes 2017, pp. 179-180; IPCC 2007, p. 15). Within the arctic polar regions, the detrimental impacts of climate change would be most felt by indigenous communities (IPCC 2007, p. 15). The Inuvialuit people have voiced such concerns since the 1990's and have conducted collaborative research with Western scientists to form a complementary nexus of understanding between indigenous and Western epistemologies (Berkes 2017, pp. 186-188; IPCC 2007, p. 112). Exploring differing epistemologies and ontologies can have complementary effects in knowledge sharing and is particularly useful in creating solutions that are applicable on a local level. The formation of a shared nexus of knowledge and understanding between Western climate science, indigenous communities, and climate change mitigation programmes has largely been lacking on a global scale.

Industrialising developmental policy and the historical lack of environmental protection laws found in states are the root cause of the ongoing climate crisis. In contemporary international and domestic law, it is still these sovereign states that have the highest capacity to mitigate climate change (Tsosie 2013, pp. 239-240). This leaves little room for indigenous perspectives, and to help further mitigation efforts, indigenous sovereignty should be further addressed worldwide, and a stronger collaborative initiative should be propelled. Further, colonial ideas and thought have been prioritised over indigenous epistemologies while also being lauded as the only correct way of thinking. In the colonisation of Australia, Aboriginal law, ontology, sovereignty, and epistemology were denied in favour of the colonisers' (Potter 2013, p. 33). The recognition of indigenous sovereignty in Australia is necessary to further address climate change mitigation efforts. Aboriginal sovereignty existed prior to colonisation, and through colonial processes Aboriginal communities within Australia have suffered dispossession (Potter 2013, p. 32). Historical injustices, of both greenhouse gas emissions and colonisation, require addressing to help mitigate the shortcomings in climate change policy.

Contemporary discourses that focus on human rights and environmentalism often neglect non-Western ontologies. In North America, most indigenous communities have commonalities in their understanding of land maintenance, wherein the land should be taken care of in a way that is beneficial to the present occupants as well as future generations. Linkages between past, present, and future are inherent to many indigenous spiritual and cultural connections to the land, and this ontology could be useful in generating a more holistic paradigm in approaching climate change mitigation efforts (Brugnach et. al. 2017, p. 21; IPCC 2007, p. 866; Palmer 2006, p. 34; Tsosie 2013, p. 244). Whether the conservation and stewardship of the environment is intentional or an accidental by-product, the result is still the same (Dove 2006, pp. 196-197). Within many of these communities, as well as Australian Aboriginal communities, the Earth is a conscious being that requires respect and care, while also being capable of destroying human persons. Reciprocity and respect are the basis of this understanding, and this understanding has far more normative value in mitigating climate change than European based ideas of property and dominion, which are heavily predicated on violence, whether it be directed at human persons or the environment (Green et. al. 2009, p. 11 & 89; Palmer 2006, pp. 38-39; Tsosie 2013, p. 245). The destruction and degradation of ecosystems is an abuse upon a person and the self for many indigenous peoples, as land, air, water, animals, plants, and inorganic matter have the potential to be non-human persons.

Resource management in contemporary settler states are based on liberal deliberative policy making; wherein modernity and detached reason are the baseline for deliberating outcomes (Palmer 2006, p. 35). This deliberation process neglects the role ontology and power dynamics play in shaping outcomes. Through treating indigenous peoples and communities as political peers, and engaging in these ontological differences, a more inclusive, holistic, and collaborative governance model is achievable in regards to addressing climate change mitigation efforts as well as environmental injustice (IPCC 2007, p. 866; Palmer 2006, pp. 35-36). There are many different epistemological and ontological frameworks through which climate change can be discussed, and from an ethical and utilitarian lens,

indigenous perspectives could provide an invaluable tool in climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives (Brugnach et. al. 2017, pp. 21-22). Knowledge is not value neutral and is born from culturally and historically specific forces and junctions. Public and mass mobilisation in favour of climate change action could be furthered if there was a more blatant connection with nature in developed societies, and the exclusion of indigenous perspectives in this sense appears maladaptive (Brugnach et. al. 2017, p. 25). By including a new framework of knowledge, a more holistic, rather than exploitative, view of the environment is a possible outcome. Fostering connecting with the land and environment is a useful tool in creating a shift in individual and mass perceptions regarding climate change.

Active participatory and deliberative involvement in climate change mitigation regimes for indigenous peoples will help ensure successful operationalisation, as these initiatives are more likely to be seen in favour of the communal interest. This involvement will also act to facilitate indigenous agency, as well as help legitimise their sovereignty. (Brugnach et. al. 2017, p. 20). Localised, decentralised, and collaborative initiatives between indigenous communities, state governments, and scientists offer a path forward to enhancing carbon sinks, mitigating emissions, and increasing the quality of life for indigenous communities (Brugnach et. al. 2017, p. 20). Governance models that intersect the local, national, and international are fundamental to actively including and respecting indigenous perspectives on climate change. Maladaptive mitigation initiatives can be avoided, if genuine and equitable local collaboration is sought to produce an outcome that furthers and respects the agency of local indigenous communities (Brugnach et. al. 2017, pp. 26-27). Collaboration of knowledge sharing, and deliberation, must be done as peers and equals, otherwise it risks reinforcing and reifying underlying colonial power dynamics.

Indigenous peoples have largely been denied agency and excluded from meaningful deliberation in international and national climate change mitigation regimes and initiatives. Current governance models that have been formed for the inclusion of indigenous perspectives are based on a top-down hierarchy that reinforces the status quo, rather than inviting meaningful indigenous discourse. The development of the Global North has driven climate change, and yet the economic and social rewards enjoyed by these states has not been evenly distributed, even among their own people. Many indigenous peoples live in areas that are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and are currently experiencing the consequences of the industrial development of others. Despite this, indigenous perspectives have so far largely only been sought in a tokenistic sense. These consequences are directly threatening indigenous livelihoods, and yet in order for their voices to be heard on an international scale, they are dependent on their political strength on the national level. Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies have been ignored in international and national climate change governance regimes, and a shift in knowledge production and sharing is required to overcome this. Indigenous peoples have legitimate knowledge, and a collaborative as well as inclusive platform is necessary in creating a paradigm shift wherein indigenous communities are able to exercise their agency on the national and international level.

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