



Practices, politics, performativities: Documents in the international negotiations on climate change



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A B S T R A C T

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This article challenges the predominant occupation with documents as text in international relations theory and critical geopolitics and advances a new understanding of documents. First, it unpacks the manifold practical and material entanglements of documents that are crucial for their production. Second, it discloses the political dimensions of routinised action and its supporting infrastructures by shedding light on the conflicting practices behind agreed documents. Third, it reconsiders the role of documents as neutral media in politics by paying tribute to the performative role they play in organisational action. By regarding documents as 'effects of organisational practice' and as having 'effects in organisational practice', the article grounds international politics at its site of production, points to the mundane practices and tacit politics of policy-making, and thus goes beyond explanations referring to *realpolitik* based on manifest interests or poststructuralist constructivism. The empirical background that illustrates the argument derives from the 2012 Doha Conference of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), with a special focus on the National Adaptation Plans. The paper concludes by arguing that documents are not only the necessary condition for international politics but might also inform a social ontology called 'documentality', as developed by the new realism philosopher, Maurizio Ferraris.

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Documents: the little things that let big things happen

Notwithstanding profound technological transformations in recording practices (Liu, 2004), documents – 'the paradigmatic artefacts of modernity' (Riles, 2006b) – provide the lubricant for governing society, from grass-root organisations to international politics (Freeman & Maybin, 2011). Documents are not just 'accessorial element[s] of social reality' but 'its condition of possibility' (Ferraris, 2012b, p. 41). The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is a case in point. As large-scale organisations specifically depend on stable texts (Putnam & Cooren, 2004), documents are ubiquitous in the regime. After committing itself to paper-reduction measures, the secretariat of the Convention, by its own account, saved 2,164,602 sheets of paper during the Doha climate talks in 2012. This does not mean that documents have disappeared from the organisation's life. More and more digitalised and distributed electronically, they order the negotiations on how to govern climate change. Agendas structure the negotiations in the

various bodies of the Convention; reports inform the parties on diverse matters such as the latest findings of climate science; submissions express states' and observer organisations' interests in the negotiation process; draft texts indicate a common ground on which to start negotiating; decisions launch and determine worldwide implementation; technical guidelines specify and demonstrate what this might look like. This paper asks what role documents play in organisations and policy formulation, how documents may be conceived, and what can be gained from a perspective that places documents centre stage in international politics and beyond.

The empirical background that informs the argument is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It is the institutional framework where 'climate governmentalities' (Oels, 2013) are modulated, and, at the same time, the organisation where the international political economy of climate change is subject to heavy disputes. The time and space of international conferences serve as critical moments of emerging environmental discourses (MacDonald & Carson, 2012; Suarez & Carson, 2013). In order to understand governmentalities pertaining to climate change one has to understand the organisational context they emerge from. By now, a number of studies have

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highlighted the epistemes, rationalities, techniques and effects of global environmental agreements and policies (for the case of climate change see for instance Bassett & Fogelmann, 2013; Bulkeley, 2012; Demeritt, 2001; Hulme, 2008; Mahony & Hulme, 2012; Oels, 2013). Far less attention has been paid to how policies are formed in international organisations in the first place (Bachmann, 2013).

There have been attempts in international relations theory to examine how negotiation processes under the UNFCCC influence the outcomes of the regime (Andonova & Alexieva, 2012; Bailer, 2012; Betzold, Castro, & Weiler, 2012; Michaelowa & Michaelowa, 2012). These studies have analysed text-based datasets, such as formal interviews with delegates, country submissions to the UNFCCC secretariat, or reports in the Earth Negotiations Bulletin that chronicles the negotiations. As I shall argue, negotiating climate change, drafting documents and passing decisions should not be reduced to a mere linguistic enterprise.

In the wake of a 'practice turn' in the study of international relations (Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Bueger, 2013; Neumann, 2002), Andrew Barry argues, 'political situations are not merely discursive constructs (...) [but] assemblages that include material artefacts and technologies [which] are grounded in material forms as well as the ideas, passions and interests with which these forms become associated' (Barry, 2013, p. 428). In this vein, this paper follows a recent call in political geography to open the black box of the organisation (Müller, 2012) and cast light on what is inside. Geopolitical action is not only about 'big-picture data' (Kuus, 2010), but concerns the 'little things', too (Thrift, 2000): practices, affect and things (Müller, 2013). Comprehending documents as entangled in practice, the approach followed here does justice to Thrift's 'little things' without neglecting the 'big things' that are defended, for instance, by Dalby (2010). Understanding documents and the policies they contain as 'effects of practice' allows for explaining how they are assembled and how they came into existence in the first instance. Recognising, in turn, that documents have 'effects in practice' does justice to the central but often neglected performative role of documents in organisational action. Either way, documents' various entanglements in organisations' practices and material arrangements show effects in the mundane practices and tacit politics of policy-making beyond *realpolitik* or competing ideas as hypothesised in poststructuralist constructivism in the study of international relations.

I begin by reviewing the role documents have played in policy analysis so far. Then, I put documents centre stage and outline how to approach them analytically. The remainder of this paper demonstrates the value of such a take. I do so by showing how documents are entangled in the organisational action of the international climate regime under the UNFCCC, focussing particularly on the National Adaptation Plan process. I conclude by arguing that documents are the necessary condition of more than international politics: they constitute a social ontology called 'documentality', as developed by the new realism thinker, Maurizio Ferraris.

Documents in policy analysis

Preoccupied with text

Policy research has been concerned with documents all along. However, most studies have been lopsided in favour of what could broadly be considered as representational approaches on the one side and positivist accounts on the other (Freeman & Maybin, 2011; Prior, 2003, 2008). From a positivist angle, the document is treated as if its content represents the organisation *per se* (Codd, 1988). By contrast, representational accounts – here foremost in the sense of

poststructuralist discourse theory – view documents not so much as the manifestation of a particular organisation's agency but as 'vehicles of discourse' containing rationalities which are not reducible to a certain authorship but pertain to broader regimes of knowledge (Freeman & Maybin, 2011). Notwithstanding differences in epistemology, both takes share an interest in the document's text and view documents as either neutral reflections of organisations or embodiments of discourse (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011). The approach pursued here does not abandon these arguments entirely but contends that both of them are problematic in so far as they reflect just the textual dimension of documents while blurring others.

With the assumption that the document represents the organisation as a whole, the heterogeneity of the latter disappears from the positivist's view. Simply looking at the text of the issued policy document would mean ignoring its sociology, 'the arguments, interests and divergent points of view, that [it] encode[s]' (Mosse, 2005, p. 15). The same holds true for poststructuralist accounts. While emphasising the constructed character of the document, they shed little light on the contested process of construction itself (Freeman & Maybin, 2011; Hunter, 2008). These characteristics of policy research and the role of documents in its accounts recall studies in critical geopolitics. As Thrift argued, it is the prevailing tendency to utilise poststructuralist discourse theories with a predominantly representational stance at the expense of approaches that are more sensitive to the embodied practice and materiality of geopolitical action (Thrift, 2000). In studies scrutinising geopolitics, these latter aspects have been epistemologically sidelined by linguistic preoccupations up until now (Megeran, 2006; Müller, 2008, 2013). In sum, both epistemologies – positivist and poststructuralist – with their focus on content do not account for documents' various entanglements in organisational action. While Mosse made an important point, there is more to the document than sociology. In the next section, I refer to geographical work which in one way or the other investigates the socio-spatial dimensions of drafting policies. Though it does not focus on documents *per se* but on policy formulation in broader organisational contexts, it provides stimuli for how to comprehend documents.

Beyond content

Geographical inquiry into the socio-spatial conditions of policy formulation draws – sometimes implicitly, at other times more explicitly – from more general arguments for a new ontology of organisations, mainly from an actor-network perspective (Latour, 1986, 1987; Law, 1992, 1994) or a more practice-oriented perspective (Schatzki, 2005, 2006). The adjective 'new' indicates that organisations are no longer regarded as 'organic totalities' but as assembled from parts (DeLanda, 2006). Latour encourages us to pay attention to 'the practical details that make it possible for these entities to last for more than a minute' (1986, p. 277), later echoed by Schatzki who contends that no organisation exists *per se*, but, like any other social phenomenon, is performatively constituted over and over again, arranging practices and material worlds in a particular way (2006). In other words, if we really seek to understand organisational action we must not start out by taking for granted what we wish to explain (Law, 1992, p. 380) – the organisation – but pay attention to the indwelling 'collective of action' (Latour, 1987). There is some geographical literature at hand that has done so, relying mainly on practice theory, geographies of resistance in political economic reasoning, and assemblage thinking.

Following Neumann's call to return practice to the linguistic turn in the discipline of international relations (2002), Clark and Jones, for example, have shown how the European Union orders,

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