



The power of discourse: Hard lessons for traditional forest communities in the Amazon[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary Amazon, 'discourse' is increasingly a new means of exercising power, influencing local society and the ways in which natural resources are managed. As society becomes ever more complex, direct means of exercising power no longer enjoy the same legitimacy and efficacy. Discourses are instead now assuming a dominant role in defining governance regimes; the sense of what is correct and socially acceptable, and what is not. This is particularly relevant for the rapidly advancing development frontiers in the Amazon region, where local communities are coming into contact with external players highly interested in their forest resources. This study focuses on understanding how external discourses can restrict the Amazonian communities' options for using their forests, but also how communities can harness these discourses to achieve their own claims and objectives. Empirical evidence from four study areas in the Bolivian, Brazilian and Peruvian Amazon regions is used to show how discourses on sustainable forest management are moulding forestry governance. The conclusion shows that while the discourses used by loggers and development organisations are strongly influencing the way communities manage their forests, some communities are also successfully using these discourses in alliances with environmental organisations to achieve acknowledgment of their demands.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the role of discourses as a means of exercising power and influencing the governance of natural resources. An issue that is particularly pertinent to the rapidly advancing development frontiers in the Amazon region where local communities are coming into contact with external players highly interested in their forest resources. In this context, an intense debate emerges about how communities should better use their forests as the Amazon frontier represents a multiplicity of simultaneous and overlapping local and external interests (Martins, 1997), ultimately provoking an uneasy contest between definitions of what resources are to be appropriated, how, and by whom (Schmink and Wood, 1992:19). The paper highlights how external players, as well as local communities, are using discourses on sustainable forest management to support their interests.

In the history of the Amazon development frontiers, external players commonly used coercion to bend local communities to their

will (Santos, 1996). In the era of globalisation, however, mass media expose such actions to national and international audiences. Given this situation, players have adopted more sophisticated and indirect means to impose their objectives, such as expert discourses. As a consequence, discourse has now become one of the main factors influencing the governance of natural resources.

After the 1992 Rio summit, the idea of local Amazon communities managing their forests was advocated as a pathway to sustainable development. It was assumed that—as local communities control considerable forest areas—the growing markets for forest products, in particular timber, offer opportunities for communities to improve their livelihoods. Since then, discourses on how Amazonian communities should manage their forests have proliferated. According to Schmink and Wood (1992), a 'greening of the discourse' has occurred in the Amazon, with nearly all actors—including unlikely groups such as ranchers and loggers—recasting the justification for their respective interests in environmental terms. Two groups in particular are strategically using discourses to highlight the social and environmental benefits of their forest management schemes: logging companies seeking to satisfy their need for tropical timber, and development organisations engaged in forest conservation, including international NGOs and government agencies. This paper intends to better understand how the discourses used by loggers and development organisations may restrict how local communities can use their forests, but also how communities may use discourses as a mechanism to promote their own claims and objectives.

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To answer the questions above, the next section presents a theoretical framework conceptualising discourses as a means of exercising power. The third section presents the case studies in Brazil, Bolivia and Peru that provided the empirical information. The fourth section describes discourses used by loggers and development organisations. The influence of these discourses on the possibilities for Amazonian communities to develop their own forest management schemes is analysed in the fifth section. The sixth section assesses the opportunities for local communities to use these discourses for their own purposes. Finally, the principal conclusions are presented. The paper argues that the systematic use of discourses by loggers, and governmental and non-governmental development organisations hinders local communities in developing and articulating their own forest management schemes, but communities also adopt discourses as a strategy to get their interests acknowledged nationally and internationally.

2. Theoretical framework

To answer how discourses may constrain or increase opportunities for Amazonian communities, a theoretical framework is proposed that locates discourses within the analysis of power. The framework builds upon local communities' ability to influence policy processes and a model of the discursive construction of forest governance.

2.1. Discourses and power

Power relationships are often complex, as power may be exerted by different means and at different levels. Current debates have benefited from the notion of 'circuits of power' (Clegg, 1989). According to Clegg's model, power may move through circuits in which relations of meaning and membership are fixed and re-fixed, and agencies are empowered and disempowered. Neither the intentions of subjects nor the determination of structures explain power. Instead, power is best approached from the viewpoint of more or less complex organised agents engaged in more or less complex organised games (Clegg, 1989). In short, power is exercised rather than possessed.

Direct means of exercising power still occur in the Amazon new frontiers (Santos, 1996). This form of direct (episodic) power is highly efficient as it relies on only one circuit and does not need to work against relations of meaning and membership, nor to empower or disempower agencies (Clegg, 1989). But power exerted directly and coercively also provokes reactions and conflicts, and may not be efficient in situations where the subjects are not completely submissive. In contrast, power can be exerted amicably through indirect means moving through circuits of power that fix relations of meaning and membership and empower agencies. This concept follows the assumption of Foucault (1978, p86), who suggests that power is tolerable only when it masks a substantial part of itself. Consequently, the success of power is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms. Discourse is one of these indirect means of exercising hidden power.

According to Foucault (1978, p23), a discourse can be interpreted as a political, economic and technical incitement to talk about given subjects in an institutionalised way. Discourse exists independently of the actors' interests, however actors can strategically employ discourses to achieve certain ends. Discursive relations determine the group of relations that a

discourse must establish in order to speak of this or that object (Foucault, 1972, p46).

Foucault (1978) highlighted the proliferation of discourse as a means of exercising power. For instance, at the end of the 18th Century, Europe experienced an unprecedented proliferation of discourses about sex (ibid, p23). An 'economy of discourses' was created, which referred to 'a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions' (ibid, p33). This economy of discourses did not emerge 'apart from or against power, but in the very space and as the means of its exercise' (ibid, p32).

2.2. Between sidelining and bargaining: local communities and discourses

Discourses play an important role in the ability of actors to influence and determine socially constructed power relations, for instance those that drive management schemes for Amazonian forests. Phillips et al.'s (2004) 'discursive model of institutionalisation' outlines how discourses lead to institutions and demonstrates that some actors are better positioned to influence institutionalisation than others. Building on the work on 'organisational outflanking' by Mann (1986), subordinate agencies are only able to effectively resist through collective organisation. The prospects for poor communities to reach this organisational level are bleak, as they lack the organisational resources required to outmanoeuvre competing networks and alliances of power.

Living conditions characterised by poverty, poor organisation and socio-communicative isolation mean that local Amazon communities may encounter significant difficulties in influencing discourses on forest management. The lack of social and political capital, and the institutional and organisational environment, tend to entrench these communities' handicaps (World Bank, 2001, p35; Rauch et al., 2001, p20). In contrast, environmental agencies, logging companies, and other actors also interested in the communities' forests are in a better position to influence forest governance in the pursuit of their own objectives (Larson, 2005).

However, when changes in the context disturb the established circuits of power, opportunities for local communities to make themselves heard might emerge. The global environmental discourse, for example, resulted in new actors entering the political scene, and also offered opportunities for communities to put forward their claims by overcoming the weakness or absence of local institutions (Muñoz et al., 2007). In particular, alliances with powerful external players, such as environmental organisations, have been an important tool for local communities to express their interests. Schmink and Wood (1992) demonstrated that indigenous groups and rubber-tappers extolled the wisdom of traditional culture and the virtues of conserving the forest, in their attempt to protect themselves from encroaching ranchers. In doing so, they established an affinity with, and to some degree were prompted by, the international environmental movement.

3. Study region and methodology

The research leading to this paper was carried out between 2005 and 2008 in four study areas: one each in Bolivia and Peru, and two in Brazil (Table 1). The study areas were located in typical frontier

Table 1
Study areas and case studies.

	Bolivia	Brazil, Acre	Brazil, Pará	Peru
Study area	Vaca Diez Province, Department of Beni	Municipality of Xapuri, State of Acre	Municipality of Porto de Moz, State of Pará	Masisea District, Department of Ucayali
Case studies	Former rubber tappers, gathering Brazil nuts and practising small-scale agriculture for local consumption	Ex-rubber tappers, gathering Brazil nuts, practising agriculture and rearing cattle	Riparian families, fishing and practising agriculture for local consumption and markets	Indigenous Shipibo-Conibo, hunters and extr activists, practising subsistence agriculture

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