Counter-Summitry: La Via Campesina, the People’s Summit, and Rio+20

David Meek

Summitry, the official meeting process of political leaders at the highest possible diplomatic level, is increasingly a focus of scholarship in global environmental politics.¹ ² This forum argues that counter-summits, which occur alongside official summits, are equally important arenas of global environmental politics.³ In these spaces strategic meetings between social movement leaders occur, grassroots alternatives are advocated, and theatrical resistance is deployed.

Counter-summits have become a nearly ubiquitous feature of contemporary grassroots politics.⁴ Environmental subjectivities in these fora are strengthened through practices that I term counter-summitry.⁵ In explicating this concept, the forum focuses on Brazil’s 2012 People’s Summit, which arose in counterpoint to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, or Rio+20. Two recent Global Environmental Politics forums have placed Rio+20 within the global political system, analyzing the conditions that resulted in low expectations for the event and the conference’s subtle effects on the reform of international institutions, and sustainable development.⁶ The forum contributes to these debates by exploring the critical, yet ultimately mutually constitutive, relations between Brazil’s People’s Summit and the main summit. While the People’s Summit organizers position it in opposition to the main summit, these sites are interlinked stages of a larger narrative performance. From a theatrical perspective, the counter-summit is similar to a “Greek chorus” or English court masques, where subversive actors present a critical perspective to the main stage narrative.⁷ The conclusions pose future questions to guide research on counter-summits’ role in global environmental politics.

1. Dunn 1996.
5. Counter-summitry can be seen as similar to Foucault’s concept of ‘counter-conducts,’ which has proven fruitful in analyses of summit protests; see Death 2011.

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Rio+20 or Rio–20?

Both Rio+20 and the People’s Summit were held between June 15 and 23, 2012, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The name “Rio+20” signifies that this UN conference took place two decades after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Rio 1992 was the first major summit on sustainable development, and it was critiqued for not producing more concrete results. In retrospect, Rio 1992 did set historic reference points, such as Agenda 21, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Rio Declaration, the Statement of Forest Principles, and the Convention on Biodiversity.

While Rio+20 was heavily attended, hopes for far-reaching declarations were not high, since policies and global funding to encourage sustainable development have stagnated. The UN summit drew approximately 45,000 participants from over 190 countries, representing non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and industry interests. The major issues included economic development, sustainable development and poverty alleviation, and the institutional processes for implementing sustainable development. No major international treaties were debated, discussed, or signed, and there were no binding regulations.

The People’s Summit was organized as the counterpoint to the official UN meeting and invited participants to “come re-invent the world.” The People’s Summit brought together 15,000 people from various social movements, NGOs, and indigenous communities. Its first two days were devoted to workshops and panel sessions. Following this, civil society organizations set up exhibits demonstrating grassroots pathways to sustainable development. The People’s Assembly, a massive civil society dialogue, then met over three days, during which participants debated causes and new forms of expanded capital accumulation; solutions and new paradigms for sustainable development; and future campaigns and mobilizations.

Counter-Summits or Congruent Summits?

The relationship between the official UN Summit and the People’s Summit is debatable. One reading is that they were not opposed, but rather congruent, interconnected performances. The UN’s Rio+20 Internet portal, for example, describes the People’s Summit as not “a parallel summit nor a counter-summit, but rather a fundamental actor for Rio + 20.” An alternative reading is that the summits were diametrically opposed in terms of ideology and purpose. Scholars argue the People’s Summit was never intended to be a “fundamental actor,” and that such framing language was part of a UN attempt to orchestrate the civil society summit by structuring the organizing space—an effort that ultimately

11. UN 2011a.
Early in the stages of the preparatory process, the Brazilian Facilitating Committee (BFC), charged with organizing the People’s Summit, used the UN web portal to define itself in opposition to the traditional summit. The BFC call asked participants to “reject the marketization of life and nature, the false solutions and the old and new technologies that deepen inequalities or hurt the precautionary principle.” Exemplifying its alter-identity, the summit was symbolically renamed the “People’s Summit in Rio+20 for Social and Environmental Justice in Defense of the Commons, Against the Commodification of Life.” The World Social Forum, which helped plan the People’s Summit, engaged in this counter- framing, because it had moved from a perspective of political dialogue to targeted political intervention. One way to reconcile these different readings sees the respective summits as sharing a larger stage, where competing perspectives are interwoven. The play “King Cotton,” for example has a divided stage simultaneously representing a southern plantation and an English mill. The rebranding of the summit, and its oppositional nature, are best understood through attention to the concept of the “green economy,” debated at both summits.

The Green Economy Versus Bio-Civilization

Little consensus exists on the meaning of the term green economy. The Rio+20 Preparatory Committee’s synthesis report indicated that there was “no consensus definition or model of a “green economy.” Bina synthesizes institutional reports and characterizes the poles of the concept, ranging from environmentally friendly production to the redefinition of all aspects of a country’s economy. This lack of clarity is partially responsible for fierce objections from various countries and sections of civil society at Rio+20.

Resistance to the green economy concept arose at Rio+20 because the term had largely changed “from government intervention to create ‘green jobs’ into a universal agenda for the financialisation of environmental crisis.” This shift is evident in the various preparatory documents that emphasize the commodification and privatization of natural resources. Concerns about commercialization began coalescing when the preparatory report highlighted that the UN’s “challenge” was to develop a “green economy” road map that would limit the “burden on business” and negate “the creation of new barriers to trade.” The World Bank argued that exclusive property rights needed to be assigned to “common property

13. UN 2011b.
17. UN 2011b, para 118.
20. UN 2011b, paras 69, 79.
resources,” enabling them to be placed on the market.\footnote{World Bank 2011, 125.} In addition, the Green Economy Coalition, prioritized in its March 2011 Road to Rio submission the “recapitalisation of our natural resource base” to “incentivise investment.”\footnote{Green Economy Coalition 2011, 7.} However, not all perspectives were market-centered and economistic. In December 2011, UNESCO issued a report “From Green Economies to Green Societies” offering an anomalous human development–oriented perspective. While various conceptions of “green economy” exist, the dominance of privatization and commercialization of natural resources in many conceptions led Bolivia’s representative during Rio+20’s closing plenary to express “reservations regarding all references to the green economy and any interpretation that may be construed as commodification of the functions and cycles of nature.”\footnote{IISD 2012, 18.} Such similarities in discourse between the People’s and UN Summits exemplify a shared script, albeit performed on separate stages.

The People’s Summit defined itself in opposition to a perceived dominant narrative surrounding the commercialization of nature. The BFC put out a global call in October 2011 asking “How to stop the commodification (marketization) of life, nature and the privatization of the commons?”\footnote{CSFC 2011.} To address this question, a thematic World Social Forum took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2012 that focused “on the agenda to be disputed at Rio + 20” and the formulation of specific proposals and “a strategic analysis capable of setting a horizon of actions.”\footnote{WSF 2011, 8 (author’s italics) and 11.} At the forum, a civil society response to Rio+20 was codified as a provisional document entitled “Another Future is Possible” (AFIP).

AFIP is clearly opposed to conceptions of the green economy as commercialization of common resources. It argues that “shared ownership and collective management of livelihood resources must apply to all forms of resource use” and that “the private benefits of resource exploitation thus need to be socially managed to account for the public costs they generate.”\footnote{Goodman and Salleh 2013, 419.} Its alternative proposal is for a bio-civilization, based in ethical principles of care-giving, cultural autonomy, and “being more,” not “having more.”\footnote{Goodman and Salleh 2013, 414.} The draft document was circulated prior to the People’s Summit, and a final version was amended and ratified at the People’s Assembly.

**The Performance of Summity and Counter-Summitry**

Characteristic elements of summity include moments of political theater, performative enactments of legitimacy and authority, and communication of examples of responsible conduct.\footnote{Death 2011.} Following Carl Death, “the procedural dimensions

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23. IISD 2012, 18.
24. CSFC 2011.
25. WSF 2011, 8 (author’s italics) and 11.
of summitry—the theatre, ceremony, ritual, and institutional context—are of particular interest....the ways in which summits construct the meaning and spaces of global politics, the norms they inculcate, and the forms of agency and subjectivity they produce are important facets of the government of sustainable development.” As an aspect of environmentality, summitry is government at a distance. Counter-summits are similarly important arenas of global environmental politics and efforts at environmentality. In these spaces, various international movements—and importantly their intellectual vanguard—convene, formulate critical analyses of transnational governance, and propose collaborative trajectories of actions.

Counter-summitry is perhaps most easily identified by political theater. The theatrical metaphor is historically used to undercut political sincerity. Summits are frequently decried as mere photo ops. However, political theater is a means of constituting subjectivities and political relationships. The political theater of counter-summitry ranges from indigenous adornment in traditional body paint and costume to more significant acts, such as South Korean Lee Kyang Hae’s suicide at the 2003 Cancun World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings, in which he climbed a fence and stabbed himself in the chest while wearing a sign that read “WTO kills farmers.”

The performance of counter-summitry can be understood as an act of symbolic politics. Drawing on Blühdorn, symbolic politics are forms of communication that reduce complicated issues to easily understandable visual symbols. Participants of the People’s Summit staged various impromptu events that signaled the importance of symbolic politics. One mobilization was La Via Campesina’s occupation of the Brazilian Confederation of Agriculture (CNA) exhibit—entitled AgroBrasil. On June 21st, several hundred LVC members occupied the exhibit, splashing red paint on a large diorama, distributing pamphlets, denouncing the hegemonic agro-industrial complex in Brazil, and proclaiming small-scale agroecological practices as a truly sustainable alternative. Performers tactically utilized symbolic props to communicate that the CNA’s model of agriculture is associated with violence, and that viable alternatives exist. Counter-summitry strengthens alternative conceptions of political models and inverts traditional conceptions of the actors and the audience. These performances are media spectacles that carry messages to larger global audiences, informing some and galvanizing others.

Counter-summits are spaces where subaltern movements exert legitimacy and agency. They communicate that important cross-cutting relationships between movements are developing, and that this larger networked movement is poised to make direct intervention. The rituals of subaltern diplomacy were

32. Death 2011, 7.
evident at Rio+20 when leaders from La Via Campesina’s various national chapters met for a roundtable to develop a common response to Rio+20’s green economy. Social movements also exert legitimacy and agency through the process of developing resolutions that feed into the larger counter-summit’s final document.

The AFIP document underlies the codes of responsible conduct that the People’s Summit produces. While only a small fraction of a national social movement participates in a counter-summit, the event has far-reaching ramifications in influencing members’ perspectives, ideologies, and behaviors. Details of counter-summits and movement actions are widely disseminated through avenues such as blogs and social media. Movement representatives also have a social multiplier effect in their communities. These forms of communication serve crucial functions within counter-summitry, communicating “particular norms, expectations, and standards of conduct to watching audiences.”

**Future Directions**

How different are traditional summits and counter-summits? The Brazilian People’s Summit organizers perceived their venue as diametrically opposed to the official summit. At Rio+20, this divergence was ostensibly based on categorically different approaches to the green economy. However, the resistance of various nations to the green economy concept and the official document indicate that the two venues are not diametrically opposed. Although counter-summits work from a sometimes-different ideological script, their tactics (counter-summitry) share many similarities with official delegates’ practices. These ideological and strategic similarities make sense if we conceive of counter-summits and traditional summits as parts of a larger performance of global environmental politics. The interrelationships between the two venues are similar to a chorus or stage division in various theatrical traditions that allow interplay between the dominant narrative and critical commentary. While they purposefully frame themselves as *alter*, counter-summits are “fundamental actors” as envisioned by the UN. The counter-summit’s performative critique feeds into the main proceedings through representative state-sanctioned actors.

Counter-summits warrant focused scholarly attention. Social movements, NGOs, and concerned citizens construct these spaces to influence global environmental politics. The People’s Summit offers opportunities to explore the role of counter-summitry in producing environmental subjects. The symbolic mobilizations, debates surrounding the green economy, and development of grassroots alternatives help mold participants’ environmental subjectivities. Just as traditional summits deserve focused academic analysis to understand changes in institutional discourse, counter-summits are important locales for future research.

34. Death 2011, 7.
Future scholarship needs to explore the roles of counter-summits in global environmental politics. One important question concerns how counter-summitry influences the discourse of social movements. Scholars might ask whether in 10 years it will be clear that at Rio+20 popular movements developed a discourse around the green economy. Similarly, a gap in our knowledge exists regarding how counter-summits influence networks between social movements. Do social movements forge links at these fora that influence their tactics and campaigns? Lastly, given summits’ aggregate impact, does counter-summitry feed back into official global environmental governance? Analysis of whether popular calls for increased civil society participation translate into changes in traditional summit organization would enrich the study of global environmental politics. These questions are theoretical starting points. The field needs scholars to engage in research that elucidates the interconnections between traditional and popular global environmental politics.

References


