

Student Feature – Theory in Action: Critical Geography and Inuit Views

Written by Irena Leisbet Ceridwen Connon and Archie W. Simpson

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This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.

The Inuit are a group of culturally similar indigenous people living in the Arctic regions of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Denmark and Russia. Their view of territorial space is based upon cultural similarity and use of land for traditional hunting practices rather than nation-state boundaries. The spatial extent of Inuit occupancy of Arctic territory reaches across five states, illustrating their historic sovereignty over a large area. Yet political maps of the world do not represent this area as Inuit territory. Rather, the area that Inuit territory covers is broken down and subsumed within individual state boundaries. When Inuit territories were colonised by European, American and Russian powers, their territories became part of colonial nation-state territories and the Inuit became subject to the colonial state governments. Today, the legacy of colonialism can still be seen in representations of the international political space, as the majority of membership within international political institutions continues to be designated on the basis of sovereign states, resulting in the ongoing political marginalisation of the Inuit.

Without adequate representation at the international political level, Inuit concerns about security and environmental sustainability cannot influence international policy to the same extent that state governments can. Furthermore, the extent to which Inuit interests are represented in the decisions made at the international level is poor. This is especially so when Inuit interests conflict with the interests of governments, such as over pipeline constructions through Inuit territory to transport oil between states. However, by adopting an Inuit perspective of territory that rejects nation-state delineation of the global space, critical geographers can offer alternative definitions of territory and provide more accurate representations.

The Inuit Way of Life

The Inuit represent only a small segment of the total population of residents within an individual state – for example, only 0.2% of the total Canadian population were registered as Inuit in the 2011 census. But, when thinking about how Arctic sea ice loss (due to climate change) affects the total numbers of Inuit across each of the five nation states by defining territory as consisting of cultural commonality rather than state boundaries, a much spatially larger picture emerges (Huntington 2013). The loss of ice endangers the economic and cultural livelihoods of the Inuit, as it affects hunting activities and puts coastal villages at risk of erosion and flooding.

Inuit Sovereignty

An Introduction to Inuit Rights and Arctic Sovereignty

When viewed from this perspective, the security risk to the wellbeing of people right across such a large area of the globe appears much more prominent than that afforded by most other IR theories. When scholars adopt traditional spatial definitions, they over-simplify the global space and, as we can see in this example, oversimplify the

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geographic extent of threats to human security. Furthermore, when scholars define space as existing solely of independent states, it limits the examination of the impacts of environmental disaster to simple comparisons between two or more nations, such as between Canada and United States. This undermines differences in the severity of impacts of natural disasters within particular regions of the world. Moreover, this traditional method of analysis also overlooks how the human security threats posed by environmental disasters are not evenly spread within individual state territories. For example, it downplays the fact that the Inuit living in Alaska are at risk of far greater disruption from the effects of melting sea ice than people living in other areas of the United States. It also downplays how coastal communities within Alaska are at a greater risk from the devastation caused by flooding and erosion than communities located within the interior of the state.

Inuit Perspectives on Security, Sovereignty, Patriotism

<http://www.inuitknowledge.ca/sites/naasautit/files/attachments/20130125-En-Nilliajut-InuitPerspectivesSecuritySovereigntyPatriotism.pdf>

Inuit understandings of territorial space can also provide scholars with an alternative tool to make assessments of international political action taken to mitigate the impacts of global environmental change. Critical geographers contend that traditional analyses of patterns of international political activity are prone to focus on actions taken by formal institutions, like the United Nations, that use a nation-state means of political representation – but stress that this places limits on our appreciation of the wider forms of political action that have been taken to mitigate climate change.

Climate Change and Inuit Life

<https://www.climatechangenunavut.ca/en/knowledge/voices-land>

For example, the majority of the scholarly analyses of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in Copenhagen in Denmark in 2009 described how opinions of state representatives regarding action on climate change and emission on greenhouse gases fell into three camps that consisted of: 1) North America and Europe, whose past industrial activities contributed to most of the problems of climate change, 2) industrialising countries such as the BRICS nations, which tended to see no alternative to carbon emissions as a means to fuel economic growth, and 3) poorer countries, which were more likely to disagree to changes on the basis that development and poverty alleviation represented more pressing goals (Meena 2013). However, this mode of analysis is based on divisions of territory defined by tiers of industrial development and ignores differences in influential capacities across and within nations grouped within each tier – for example, between Brazil and China, or between large segments of the South African population.

Over-simplistic ways of thinking about the international political space lead to a lack of consideration for alternative forms of political action, particularly action that takes place outside formal international political institutions including that taken by indigenous organisations, whose spheres of representation and governance transcend nation state boundaries. For example, the Inuit are members of the Arctic Council, which is an international governmental organisation that addresses issues faced by Arctic governments and indigenous people. The Inuit take prominent decision-making roles in the Council rather than having their participation restricted to mere observer status – as at the United Nations climate summits. The decisions the Inuit take are based upon their sense of commonality that transcends state boundaries. Because of their influence in the Arctic Council they have been able to achieve success in fostering a culture of collective governance on environmental management by seeking discussion and resolution of a matter of common concern to all Inuit.

However, despite the success of Inuit representation in the Arctic Council, the vast majority of indigenous governmental bodies continue to fall outside the formal political representational structure in larger international climate change negotiations. The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) is a United Nations-recognised non-governmental organisation that defines its constituency as Inuit populations in Greenland, Alaska, Canada and Russia. However, their participation is restricted at UN summits on climate change to that of ‘observer’ status as it is not a sovereign

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state – thereby constraining its voice. It is on this basis that the state system of representation within the United Nations climate summits can be argued to further marginalise indigenous groups like the Inuit. As representation is afforded on the basis of state territory rather than Inuit conceptions of territory it reinforces the decision-making power of the former colonial governments, enabling them to exercise greater control over international affairs, which hinders Inuit self-determination efforts.

Maps on Arctic Indigenous Peoples, Languages, Physiography

<https://arctic-council.org/index.php/en/learn-more/maps>

The power of the Inuit to shape international political decision-making risks becoming further marginalised if IR scholarship does not critically question nation-state ideas about territory and representation. By bringing alternative conceptualisations of territory to the foreground, critical geography opens up a space for recognising and exploring alternative modes of representation that reduce inequality between indigenous people and state governments. If the Inuit are at greater direct risk from the impacts of global climate change, representational reform would enable them to have a greater voice in managing these risks.

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