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The Global Environmental Politics of Resistance, Revisited

Eve Bratman*, Adam Jadhav, Jeff Vance Martin,
Jane Henderson, and Ronnie D. Lipschutz

Abstract

In the inaugural issue of *Global Environmental Politics*, three scholars debated how social movements could or should address the role of resistance in environmental politics. In this essay, we revisit and renew dialogue around the scholarship of resistance for environmental politics. This intervention serves to reignite discussion and scholarship about resistance in our current conjuncture. We suggest that environmental research should address the tumultuous, turbulent, and ruinous times for environmental concerns and environmental institutions through leveraging the concept of resistance and should engage studies of resistance using an increased focus on multiscalar geographies, intersectional critiques, and collaborative potentials of coalitions and scholar-activist praxis. Doing so will not only make resistance studies in the present moment a more relevant and serious focus of inquiry and practice but will also give relevance to studies of environmental politics in the face of backsliding and backlash more generally.

Keywords: Activism, protest, conflict, social movements, subaltern, advocacy, tactics

Twenty-five years ago, a lively debate in the first issue of *Global Environmental Politics* (GEP) focused on "Globalization and Resistance." Contributions examined how social movements and progressive greens could respond to globalization while advancing social justice and environmental protection (Dryzek 2001; Lipschutz 2001; Paehlke 2001). In the years since, the global political, economic, and biotic landscape has shifted dramatically; yet resistance, we argue, remains a potent political concept.

We revisit questions of resistance amid our current conjuncture, especially considering global trends toward nationalism and antiliberal politics. On the basis of a series of conversations begun in early 2025, we ask how we might effectively meet the current moment. We argue that global environmental politics, as both a journal and a discipline, has much to offer amid contemporary geopolitical and economic realignments and should thus recommit to engaging questions of resistance. Doing so, however, requires looking beyond traditional

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disciplinary boundaries and approaches—including critical reflection on liberalism and its institutions. It also raises questions of how *GEP* scholars and fellow travelers might move from scholarship to praxis and into thinking and acting beyond the academy.

Background

The 2001 *GEP* exchange reflected general optimism surrounding liberal environmental governance. Resistance then was largely coded as *reformist*, geared toward improving global institutions through multilateral cooperation, regulation, and science while blunting critiques of global political economy. Both the resulting institutionalist bent of much subsequent *GEP* scholarship and that early optimism feel disconnected from current realities as national and international environmental institutions face crises of legitimacy while key global actors (notably the United States) turn (further) away from multilateral cooperation and environmental protection.

We see three major themes within *GEP*'s generally limited engagements with resistance since 2001. First, the journal has published several case studies of environmental activism—antidam, antimining, or antideforestation movements; coalitions, discourses, and tactics—which emphasize anticolonial and Indigenous perspectives (Neville and Coulthard 2019). Second, many articles use “resistance” in a negative sense, identifying *antienvironmentalist* orientations, climate denialism, and/or rejection of scientific evidence (Forsyth 2012; Young and Coutinho 2013). Third, resistance-related political economic perspectives in the journal have focused on social forces and processes that bolster or impede green energy transitions (Nahm and Urpelainen 2021). Such contributions are valuable yet limited in their conceptual treatments of resistance, which, as a theme, has not been consistently foregrounded within *GEP*.

We argue that *GEP*, as both a journal and a field, can and should again take up questions of resistance. History usually points to new coalitions and alliances emerging out of periods of systemic change. We note the present conjuncture—in which “the ruins of neoliberalism” (Brown 2019) meet new authoritarianism(s), climate change, wars, and diverse localized fight-backs—is likely to give rise to such shifts. However, we simultaneously argue that to remain relevant and trenchant, *GEP* scholars must expand their gaze beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and commitments. We particularly call for more integrative and transdisciplinary approaches (Bernstein 2015; Luker 2008) that engage *across* disciplines and the theory–praxis divide.

Scholarship on environmental resistance and related questions grew substantially in the early twenty-first century. Numerous interdisciplinary fields deploy cross-scalar, intersectional, and hybrid analyses of contemporary socio-environmental challenges through a resistance lens. Resistance scholarship has also extended beyond studying social movements and charting the lines between nonviolent and violent forms of activism and their impacts (Beck et al.

2022). Recent scholarship about climate-related issues considers the value of strategic property destruction (Malm 2021), while other works address the obstructionist discourses impeding progress on the issue (cf. Brulle et al. 2024; Edwards et al. 2023). Critical development studies often chart how projects and policies for sustainable development and conservation involve resistance to environmental dispossession, degradation, or exclusion (cf. Bratman 2019; Brockington and Duffy 2011; Graddy 2014; Jadhav 2023). When seen through decolonial lenses, survival itself can constitute resistance for Indigenous scholars, activists, and communities (cf. Estes 2019; Latulippe and Klenk 2020; Liboiron 2021; Vizenour 2008). Studying environmental resistance can also include pedagogical questions—for example, whether/how to convey hope amid a crisis (Suarez et al. 2024) or how to reflexively incorporate anti-racist and anticolonial critique into the environmental canon (Bratman and De Lince 2022). Transdisciplinary resistance also enrolls a broad audience in considering societal transformation by decolonial, Indigenous, or feminist leadership (Baptista et al. 2023; Figueroa Helland 2023; Johnson and Wilkinson 2020). Beyond *GEP*, scholarship on resistance has expanded, as has the conceptualization of what resistance itself can mean as a political concept.

Eager to reignite and grow a conversation, we convened in May 2025 at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York for a daylong symposium on “the environmental politics of resistance.” Two of the contributors to the original *GEP* forum participated, and our group reflected a diversity of perspectives and positionalities. We share a Global North academic training, though most of us research subaltern groups in a variety of contexts globally. The AMNH itself, reckoning with its legacies of colonial science and imperialism, served as a symbolic and provocative setting for our reflections (cf. Ashby and Machin 2021; Goss 2021) as we considered today’s diverse political and ecological crises and uncertainties.

We limit our discussion here to two central questions surfaced by our dialogues, oriented by our sense of urgency as scientists, academics, and activists. First, what constitutes meaningful resistance today, in terms of both its definition and its dynamics? Second, what is the role and utility of scholarship of resistance?

What Is Meaningful Resistance Today?

A thematic question arose repeatedly in our symposium, without consensus about the answer: What constitutes resistance that is adequate to the present moment? We understand our current conjunctural moment as the outcome of more than eighty years of mounting contradictions of the world political economic system that resulted from the global system shock that was World War II. In the present, however, ongoing system change may be more the result of numerous smaller shocks occurring alongside the continued penetration of economic (neo)liberalism that has undermined the ideological foundations of

postwar, postcolonial settlements. From this perspective, a now decades-long rise in revanchist nationalisms and reactionary authoritarianisms is topped by the coup de grace of the “Trump shock” and its intentional destruction of institutions and norms via the still-hegemonic status of the United States. Generations of academic research have assumed the relative durability of liberal principles and practices and their observance by countries, governments, and capital. The question now is the extent to which the Trump-era turmoil will endure or be seen in hindsight as some kind of interregnum.

Our author team holds numerous misgivings about resistance in the *abstract*—protest or actions disconnected from the specifics of time and place and/or from a broader political program or theory of change. We note particularly in the United States a renewed number of baseball caps, T-shirts, protest signs, and hashtags utilizing the singular, ambiguous signifier “Resist.” We recognize the value of public anger, of course, yet there is danger that this sort of “resistance” remains merely performative—for example, sloganeering turned merchandizing opportunity. Is “resistance” in 2025 simply a placeholder for dissent, so wrapped in commodified and aestheticized cultural performance as to be rendered counterproductive or obsolete (Frank 1993; Marcuse 1964)? We certainly hope not. To avoid the problems of co-optation and commodification, resistance may require a *positive political program*. Put another way, we suggest that resistance becomes meaningful when attached to specific “political fights we want to win, not merely protest” (Brown 2025). The stakes are certainly real, with approximately 200 environmental activists killed annually amid their resistances on behalf of nature.

We follow Baaz et al. (2016, 142) in understanding resistance as “a response to power from ‘below’; a subaltern practice, which has the possibility to negotiate and/or undermine power.” Central to identifying and understanding meaningful resistance, then, is the scholarly and activist work of historicizing and exposing *power relations*—which, of course, function across numerous axes (Nightingale 2019). Any number of protest movements include “contradictory consciousness” (Gramsci 2000) and/or are inflected with cultural idioms that make them difficult to neatly categorize. For instance, Indian farmers forced Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist government into legislative retreat from proposed agrarian economic reforms in 2021 and 2022. For over a year, tens of thousands of farm families provisioned siege camps outside the national capital and inspired episodic protests, marches, and work stoppages by millions nationally (Baviskar and Levien 2021). Yet these farmers largely rejected epithets of revolution, rebellion, or resistance. Instead, they adopted a pro-nation and pro-development stance while organizing to defend their lifeways from capitalist incursions. Their multilayered narrative, shot through with tensions, demonstrates the complexities of resistance movements and pushes us to insist upon critical attention to just what is being resisted, and by whom. Simplistically linear axes of power (above/below) are also inadequate when we consider examples like the complex positionality of many rural white workers in the United

States, who suffer under neoliberal capitalism but are also the beneficiaries of historical dispossession and inequality, and for whom environmental values are contested or at best ambiguously situated (Jadhav 2021; Martin 2024; McCarthy 2002).

Considering such complexities, we offer three major arenas for revitalizing thinking/doing resistance scholarship in the field of GEP. They center questions of *what is to be done* and *by whom*. Specifically, we call for critical attention to the *multiscalar* geographies, *intersectional* critiques, and *collaborative* potential of environmental resistance in the present moment.

First, the multivariate instability of the current interregnum asks us to reconsider the multiple scales or levels of resistance. States, institutions, civil society, national politics, and even global political alliances have been shaken, winnowed, or hollowed, captured, and redirected, including the Bretton Woods institutions that were the targets of considerable resistance twenty-five years ago. In this political landscape, the conventional local–global dichotomy and focal points fail to account for what can be thought of as multisited, translocal resistance movements, where specific place-based struggles transcend local cultural forms and often histories of influence (Banerjee et al. 2023). National frames appear less relevant today when considering subaltern transboundary movements (i.e., Via Campesina, International Youth Climate Movement). This does not deny the potential for deepening place-based life as a radical resistance act (Bacon 2013; Solnit 2008) but rather acknowledges the value of linking up place-based struggles for generating new forms of solidarity—for example, new environmental coalitions emergent in climate justice movements (Baptista et al. 2023; Janzwood et al. 2023). Illustratively, the Pacific Climate Warriors, a youth-led movement against climate change, frame their activism in terms of *staying in place* (“standing their ground”) to “serve those who cannot fight for themselves—future generations, animals, plants, and environments” (Sankofa Impact 2024). Indigenous thinking, as well as critical approaches to the Anthropocene debates, points to possibilities for environmental politics to consider longer, even geologic timescales (Terry et al. 2024; Whyte 2017b). Such shifts might help alter the paradigm of environmental work within ever-present, intersecting crises instead toward slower wisdom from ancient stories or future-oriented creative visioning of political possibilities.

Second, contemporary resistance movements and critical scholars increasingly utilize intersectional critiques that contain environmental concerns (e.g., Malin and Ryder 2018; Mohai et al. 2009; Pulido 2000; Ranganathan and Balazs 2015). The need for critical intersectional analysis emerged around 1991, when the now-foundational seventeen environmental justice principles called for a capacious environmental movement that could connect, for example, racial oppression in the United States to international militarism and violations of human rights (United Church of Christ 1991). In 2025, we see the renewed importance of multiple, complex, global, and intersectional struggles as central to environmental politics. Issues as disparate as farmworker protests

in California against immigration round-ups and international concern over the ecocidal implications of Gazans in Israel's war with Hamas (Contreras 2025; Joseph 2025) can inform contemporary understandings of how the environment is elided from human and institutional concerns, and how unequal land and power relations are bound up with contemporary sociopolitical, cultural, and militarized conflicts. GEP scholars would be well positioned to interrogate how movements for healthier, supportive, free environments can simultaneously enact resistance to police oppression and gentrification. If the environmental movement is losing steam today or converging with other social justice movements, political science approaches and frameworks that unpack discourses, narratives, institutions, actor coalitions, and material power struggles can help scholars understand why and how those shifts are occurring and where they may be headed. Scholarship could also help shed light on new and emerging tactics and dynamics of environmental activism, using theories of resistance to inform their scholarship.

Third, we suggest engaging resistance from GEP necessitates reconsidering what counts as resistance politics (De Heredia 2017), emphasizing collaborative, "bottom-up" energies in contrast with top-down, institutionalist biases of the past. In 2001, a focus on (neo)liberal institutions and environmental governance made sense; from a seat in Global North academia, it was then plausible to imagine a future World Environment Organization. Global conservation was dominated by a few large international NGOs. In the intervening years, however, the enthusiasm for a groundswell of civil society actors to catalyze institutional change appears exhausted, and multiple vectors of global climate organizing—for example, 350.org, Fridays for Future—have stalled (Malm 2021). Meanwhile, recent UNFCCC CoPs have been captured by the interests of fossil fuel capital, the World Bank has jettisoned environmental safeguards to remain relevant, and even supposedly liberal states have turned repressive toward environmental protests (Berglund et al. 2024; Middeldorp and Le Billon 2019). Given bleak prospects for much liberal international environmental governance, we highlight the renewed interest in the commons and commoning efforts that link livelihood, community, identity, and environment (Bollier 2025; Martin 2024; Nightingale 2019) as a productive scholarly path. An array of efforts that assert Indigenous sovereignty via legal fights, direct action, and Land Back campaigns is also especially heartening, particularly as the risks and legal consequences are arguably more severe now than in the recent past (cf. Blumm and Illowsky 2022; Racehorse and Hohag 2023; Whyte 2017a). Taken together—and without flattening their differences—we suggest that these demonstrate alternative "modes of consolidating decentralized popular power to organize it strategically" (Brown 2025) in the contemporary moment, when traditional institutions and electoral means seem weakened. In these new resistance nodes, we see a protective countermovement (Polanyi [1944] 2001) that is also a "third" alternative seeking emancipatory aims outside traditional corridors of power (Fraser 2013).

The (F)utility of Scholarship?

We encourage renewed academic attention to resistance as an essential and evident feature of the current moment. We also suggest that GEP, as both a journal and a community, can play a specific role in fostering understanding and analysis of new, resistant modes of environmental politics. The imperative for GEP to remain relevant in the present moment can also be achieved by strengthening or expanding engagements beyond the traditional boundaries and commitments of scholarship. Simply put, grappling with contemporary environmental politics will require more inter- and transdisciplinary approaches that engage both the concept of resistance and the people resisting. Theorizing resistance *in direct partnership* with resisters through collaborative coproduction might offer a more nuanced understanding of how new actors and coalitions seek to end a status quo of environmental destruction and human suffering. Scholars who write within these pages should also be well placed to connect such bottom-up environmental politics—emergent outside traditional institutions of power—to the commanding heights of international affairs.

Such scholarship must also think and work across traditional divides between theory and praxis, with no small amount of reflexivity. There is a long history of academics problematically appropriating the knowledge of the people they study—in particular, marginalized and subaltern communities—while positioning themselves as vanguards, experts, leaders, or authorities. The disconnect of scholars from activists and of theory from praxis is at best unproductive and often deeply extractive and unjust. Following insinuations from political ecology, we suggest that the GEP field must also reflexively and transparently put politics, ethics, care, and responsibility in the foreground (Liboiron 2021; Sundberg 2017). Doing so would privilege engaged, anticolonial, and critical methodologies and pedagogies. We already have the tools, including participatory action research and scientific extension, among other models. Using them actively and purposefully can function as resistance to the structural inequalities often perpetuated through scholarship as usual, which often paradoxically perpetuates the injustices it seeks to call out (al-Gharbi 2024).

At present, many of the traditional bastions of the academy—scientific data, universities, libraries, museums, and elite civil society—find themselves destabilized. Even as we decry the often authoritarian and illiberal causes of such instability, we see an opportunity herein to birth a more equitable and just knowledge politics. Robust transdisciplinarity, through which scholars adopt positions of service, has the potential to shift power balances and research agendas toward the needs and values of communities and movements (Toomey 2024; Yua et al. 2022). We also note that the broader GEP community, especially members beyond the academy in public-serving work, are well positioned to play critical *and* constructive roles in defending and shaping future public policy and programs (Winthrop 2025).

That, however, cannot be the end of it. The scholarship of resistance has fleeting value in this moment of multivariate crises. Actual resistance movements continue to emerge and reshape the meaning of environmental politics as they confront today's problematics. We feel pushed to (re)consider ourselves as contributors to those movements we study, as well as those extant in our professional spaces. We ask ourselves, What might our positions be *within* resistance movements or spaces? How might we act not only as scholars of resistance—but also as *resistant scholars*? To what *end* do we study, interpret, or opine? What is our responsibility to enact something *beyond* our present, a normative alternative to the “barbarous” present (Stengers 2015), toward which resistance struggles aim?

These questions are not easily answered, but raising them nevertheless remains important. We see value in solidarity with resistance movements around the world, and we call on our peers and comrades to consider how they might spend their energies engaging and supporting cranky, rebellious, and resistant politics, new and old. We further propose that *GEP*, as a journal and a community, can engage these conversations more explicitly as it moves into its next quarter century.

Finally, we suggest that the current moment of destabilization offers a prime opportunity for (re)thinking resistance—not just as a reaction to the policies and activities of states and corporations but rather, paraphrasing Gramsci (2000), as efforts that help to midwife the “new” as it struggles to be born from old “morbid systems.” We can't say what that “new” might entail and do not presume to offer instructions. Instead, we take Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2022) open-ended definition of abolition as “life in rehearsal” as inspiration for what becomes possible through repeated, deliberate attempts to bring into being a more just, equitable, diverse, and inclusive future. Resistance might then be (re)imagined as praxis, enabling humans and nature to discover new ways to survive and thrive in a transformed world. After all, the point must be to change it.

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