

## Book Review Essay

# Pipeline Politics and the Future of Environmental Justice Struggles in North America

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Bosworth, Kai. 2022. *Pipeline Populism: Grassroots Environmentalism in the Twenty-First Century*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Boudet, Hilary, and Hazboun, Shawn, editors. 2022. *Public Responses to Fossil Fuel Export: Exporting Energy and Emissions in a Time of Transition*. 1st ed. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Elsevier.

Hoberg, George. 2021. *The Resistance Dilemma: Place-Based Movements and the Climate Crisis. American and Comparative Environmental Policy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Resistance to fossil fuel infrastructure has gained remarkable momentum, reshaping the climate movement in the United States, Canada, and beyond. The rampant and persistent development of fossil fuel infrastructure has prompted diverse concerns associated with climate change, resolving Indigenous land claims, habitat fragmentation, oil spill risks, land-based livelihood impacts, and community disruption (Janzwood et al. 2023). The result is increased demands on regulatory processes, the formation of new coalitions, the emergence of social movements and new repertoires of contention, and state violence. These complex dynamics, which we are only beginning to understand, have far-reaching impacts and implications for environmentally and socially just energy transitions.

How have affected communities responded to proposals related to fossil fuel export? Has place-based resistance to fossil fuel development effectively promoted climate action? Does this strategy risk the unintended consequence of feeding place-based resistance to the clean energy transition? How does “pipeline populism” emerge from and transform contemporary environmentalism? These three books seek to answer these questions and more.

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In *Public Responses to Fossil Fuel Export*, edited by Hilary Boudet and Shawn Hazboun, the contributors explore public perceptions and responses to oil, fossil (natural) gas, and coal export projects. The chapters present public opinion survey results and case studies on fossil fuel export projects—including pipelines, railways, and export terminals—primarily from the United States, Australia, Canada, Norway, New Zealand, and Russia.

In *The Resistance Dilemma*, George Hoberg explores the “relative power” of opponents in contested energy infrastructure projects. He presents in-depth case studies of four proposed pipeline projects in Canada and the United States—Northern Gateway, Trans Mountain Expansion, Energy East, and the infamous Keystone XL (KXL)—as well as the Site C Dam, a “clean energy megaproject” in northeastern British Columbia.

In *Pipeline Populism*, Kai Bosworth seeks to understand how what he calls the “populist genre of environmental politics” (2) emerged through resistance to the KXL and Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) from 2009 to 2016. Rather than presenting these as case studies, Bosworth presents episodes of public participation organized around particular underlying emotions, what he calls “affective infrastructures,” that created a collective identity of “the people” involved in pipeline siting.

These three books have much to offer. In some ways, they can be seen as complementary, given that they have similar topics, timelines, and sometimes even overlapping cases, such as the KXL, which Bosworth and Hoberg both explore. And all three volumes highlight the limitations of current public engagement processes. But these works feature different disciplinary and theoretical approaches and methods—and as a result, their conclusions differ in important ways. In particular, the conclusions that Bosworth and Hoberg reach strikingly contrast. While Hoberg calls for “more innovative processes of regulatory review” (285), Bosworth calls for a “worldwide class revolution” (200). Yet both conclusions leave us wanting.

The starting point for Boudet and Hazboun is the literature on locally unwanted land uses and the environmental justice movement. They are interested in understanding what shapes community responses to export projects, and suggest four categories of factors: technology (namely, perceptions of risks and benefits), people (primarily sociodemographic factors), place (e.g., existing landscape and physical infrastructure), and process (e.g., decision-making and public engagement). The subsequent chapters provide context on the changing global energy system and frame fossil fuel export as a climate policy problem. The remaining chapters focus on sociodemographic characteristics (via surveys), while the cases illustrate how “place-based factors” influence local community perceptions. Some contributions insightfully connect to more structural dynamics, like the interplay between global and local scales. For example, the chapter by Emily Paige Bishop and Karena Shaw situates the case of the Pacific Northwest liquefied natural gas (LNG) export terminal proposal in northern British Columbia at the “intersection of global and local

forces" (179) and connects community responses with a history of resource extraction and failed decision-making processes.

Bosworth begins by describing (white) elitism in twentieth-century North American environmental movements. He then identifies an "upsurge in populist environmentalism"—what he calls the "new environmentalism" (11)—in reaction to failing global and US climate politics in the late 2000s. He defines populist environmentalism as a way to understand diverse groups that have come together as "the people" to defeat "the pipeline" (29). His richly conceptual intervention is ideology critique focused on "understanding the ideological and material conditions of possibility for political struggle" (xi). He traces populist resistance in the United States through affective infrastructures, identifying "how emotion emerges from political-economic contexts and material landscapes, non-deterministically conditioning political struggles" (38). He convincingly argues that while desires—in particular, "desires for land"—and interests can coincide, interests alone cannot explain resistance to KXL and DAPL. He concludes by reflecting on the implications and limits of populist environmentalism for "achieving transformative justice through social revolution" (29).

Hoberg first outlines what he calls the "oil sands policy regime" in Canada and argues that the industry–governance alliance created a policy monopoly that sowed the roots of antipipeline resistance. His framework explains the relative power of pipeline opponents; he suggests their power is based on, first, the salience of place-based concentrated risks and benefits; second, whether opposition groups have access to institutional veto points; third, whether the project can take advantage of existing infrastructure; and fourth, the geographical separation of risks and benefits. He ambitiously applies this framework to oil sands pipelines in North America and the Site C Dam in British Columbia before turning to ask how decision-making processes can overcome place-based resistance to renewable energy infrastructure.

The limits of public engagement processes are central to pipeline politics—and, as Hoberg demonstrates, energy infrastructure development more generally. While Hoberg emphasizes the need for sustainable energy policy decision-making criteria, Bosworth argues that a deeper transformation is needed, one that acknowledges the influence of colonialism and capitalism on liberal democratic processes. Though these processes may neutralize dissent, foster distrust and ambiguity, or amplify resistance, there is a range of political responses these volumes help us understand. A lack of meaningful public participation creates distrust and can amplify resistance, a theme that runs through several cases in the Boudet and Hazboun volume.

Bosworth instead puzzles through *why* people engage in technocratic review processes not designed to incorporate feedback meaningfully. He identifies a "resigned pragmatism" from participants—particularly organizers and activists—in public meetings at the federal and state levels for KXL. Using ethnographic methods, Bosworth describes a "collective ritual of fatigue and

disaffection" (98), finding that participants treated the processes pragmatically, forging a collective identity among those impacted by siting. Although this ritual does not materially affect the outcome of the review process, it opens space for new collective identities and strategies. For example, Bosworth argues that Indigenous leaders "sought to relocate popular sovereignty as an element within Indigenous sovereignty" (93). This experience, he suggests, opened alternative political strategies, namely, that the DAPL blockade on the Standing Rock Reservation—which erupted somewhat surprisingly in spring 2016—was partially a result.

Hoberg's work directs our attention further to how regulatory processes either constrain or amplify resistance. He writes, "Historically our institutions have not been effective at resolving the tensions between local desires to minimize impacts and the broader public interest in establishing necessary infrastructure" (286). While Hoberg acknowledges the "national interest" or "nation-building" rhetoric often invoked by settler governments to justify fossil fuel pipelines on Indigenous lands, his assessment, however, does not fully recognize that current pipeline siting processes—in Canada and beyond—reflect colonial structures. For example, as Clifford Gordon Atleo (Niis Na'yaa/Kam'ayaam/Chachim'multhnii) and colleagues argue (in Boudet and Hazboun), the constraints on Indigenous sovereignty in Canada have severely limited the options that First Nations have when confronted with pipeline projects. For this reason, Hoberg's prognosis for "criteria for sustainable energy policy decision-making" (277) to overcome place-based resistance to renewable energy infrastructure is likely insufficient.

Bosworth locates the problem more deeply and argues, "The idea that more or better designed participatory mechanisms will produce a better result is, populists demonstrate, something of a losing battle so long as histories of colonialism and the influence of capitalism structure such events" (121). He instead argues for alternative practices of public participation "that take democracy as neither ideal nor historical but speculatively and practically reinvigorated through an internal relationship to Indigenous sovereignty" (116). He stops short of articulating what this might look like, however.

An important contribution of Hoberg's work is showing the links between pipeline opposition and climate policy. In this, he responds to a call by Piggot and Erickson (in Boudet and Hazboun) for more research on how public mobilization on fossil fuels reshapes climate policy. Hoberg argues that antipipeline coalitions have "unquestionably" (200) motivated governments to adopt more ambitious climate policies—and he traces the impact on policy outcomes in both the Alberta and federal governments. Resistance to fossil fuel infrastructure is arguably more significant in countries, like Canada, that export most of their fossil fuel production and are thus not held responsible for downstream greenhouse gas emissions (Harrison and Bang 2022).

The argument in the second half of the book—when Hoberg moves from oil sands pipelines to renewable energy projects—is less well developed. He notes that place-based resistance predates pipeline resistance popularized by

KXL but also argues that it risks “legitimizing place-based resistance” (241) against low-carbon energy infrastructure. Most concretely, he shows that many of the actors that opposed oil sands pipelines in British Columbia also opposed the mega-hydroelectric Site C dam. Much of this opposition was led by First Nations rooted in risks to rights and responsibilities, and Hoberg notes that some environmental groups opposed the dam in solidarity with directly affected First Nations. Opposition to megaprojects, including megadams, is unsurprising, given their damaging social and environmental impacts, which Hoberg acknowledges (see also Temper et al. 2020). And this resistance can also be seen as a precursor to pipeline resistance. For example, in the United States, Indigenous resistance to hydrodams in the twentieth century is part of “the long tradition of Indigenous resistance” to fight against DAPL (Estes 2019). Thus, from this lens, hydrodam proposals are not “new” low-carbon energy infrastructure but another project of colonial extraction.

Hoberg then provides several vignettes of wind and solar projects as well as transmission lines in the United States (California and the New England states) and Canada (Ontario and Quebec) based primarily on an analysis of academic literature and government documents. He shows that these projects are likely to attract opposition and argues that we lack institutional processes to address these concerns effectively. Hoberg also suggests that pipeline activism has strengthened or legitimized opposition to these projects though he provides little direct evidence here. Most directly, Hoberg suggests that Indigenous and local governments have legitimized the idea of “veto power” (267) through antipipeline organizing, though the complex ways in which authority is exercised and contested require further unpacking.

Bosworth also applies a critical lens to the antipipeline movement, though rooted in a critique of populist environmentalism. He concludes that liberal populist environmentalism limits “possibilities for a revolutionary socialist transformation necessary to adequately confront the climate crisis” (49). He acknowledges that the DAPL blockade represented, or was perhaps the result of, land defense as decolonization and that it provided a glimpse into anticolonialist and anticapitalist organizing. Still, he calls for a worldwide class revolution, which is hard to see as an extension of his argument. As others have written, confronting colonialism and capitalism requires somewhat different tacks (Coulthard 2014). Bosworth’s invitation for critical self-reflection for climate justice movements is important. However, what constitutes transformative change is an open political question. We might also think about whether resistance can provide new pathways to transform energy decision-making (e.g., Gobby et al. 2022).

It is also important to consider how we study these issues. While Boudet and Hazboun present a broad typology, their work highlights the importance of consistently applying a theoretical framework or adapting or refining it across different energy and geographic contexts. A further extension of this research could involve a mixed methods approach, combining trends from survey data

with in-depth cases to develop our understanding of the causal mechanisms at work. The analytical framework that Hoberg presents has significant explanatory power to understand the power of organized project opponents. Still, his argumentation would benefit from more engagement with more critical literature to understand calls for transformative change (Temper et al. 2020). Bosworth's attention to collective identity, emotion, and ideology points us in new directions, and future work could unpack the often coevolutionary dynamics between ideologies and social networks (Piereder et al. 2022). But as Bosworth reminds us, we must be rooted in an understanding of historical, geopolitical, and economic context.

More generally, we must draw on insights from the full range of literature devoted to these issues—including sociotechnical dynamics of energy transitions, contentious politics, political economy, public policy, and more critical approaches in geography and related fields—to enrich our analysis (cf. Sovacool et al. 2022). Moving across this literature can, for example, help us better understand the efficacy of particular tactics, the relationship between 'insider' (institutional) and 'outsider' (extra-institutional) strategies and engagement, and scalar and countermovement dynamics. We also need a deeper understanding of the efficacy of particular tactics or combinations of tactics and the relationships between them. The books featured a wide range of strategies or modes of engagement, including public participation, protest, litigation, and direct action. Future work should unpack the conditions when more disruptive tactics are successful and the challenges and trade-offs involved. While Boudet and Hazboun give us a starting point to compare fossil fuel infrastructure projects of different kinds, we should also systematically compare these to low-carbon energy projects (cf. Temper et al. 2020). And last, we must critically assess how to reconcile regulatory processes and demands for meaningful engagement to support environmentally and socially just energy transitions.

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