Historicizing Global Environmental Politics

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Abstract

This article makes the case for a deeper integration of historical perspectives into the study of global environmental politics (GEP). A review of the *Global Environmental Politics* journal's first twenty-five years reveals how, despite its multidisciplinary ethos, history remains marginal to the research agenda that characterizes its output. The article identifies three uses of historical perspectives that can enrich GEP scholarship. First, historical methods help establish more reliable knowledge of the past and provide historical perspective to contemporary debates on how to tackle environmental problems. Second, historical approaches promote greater reflexivity in the use of social scientific frameworks, for example, when it comes to historical periodization and identifying relevant political agency. Third, history highlights the inherent temporality of our knowledge of the past and our social scientific theories. The article concludes with a call for greater engagement with environmental history to broaden GEP's theoretical horizon and presents historicization as essential to fostering a more self-reflective, critical, and temporally grounded understanding of global environmental politics.

Keywords: Environmental history, global environmental politics, historical methods, periodization, reflexivity, temporality

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Global environmental politics[2] (GEP) is a well-established field that draws on several disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Since its inception in the 1970s, GEP has evolved into a mature scholarly enterprise, with a growing number of textbooks, handbooks, and journals promoting GEP research and teaching. There are good reasons to view it as a subdiscipline of international relations (IR) (O'Neill et al. 2013, 443; Zürn 1998). After all, the journal *Global Environmental Politics* (*GEP*), widely considered to be the leading journal in the field, was conceived at the 1999 International Studies Association (ISA) meeting, and the Environmental Studies Section of the ISA serves as the main institutional home for the scholarly community. Still, GEP research is informed by a large diversity of disciplinary perspectives, theoretical orientations, and methodological approaches. Indeed, the current editorial guidelines of *GEP* actively encourage a multidisciplinary approach: "Contributions come from many disciplines, including political science, IR, sociology, history, human geography, anthropology, public policy, science and technology studies, and environmental ethics, law, and economics."[3]

Of all the disciplines that make up GEP's intellectual landscape, history has played a surprisingly marginal role in the evolution of the field. Notwithstanding the fact that many publications in the *GEP* journal and similar outlets deal with historical cases, history as a discipline, historical methods, and the self-reflective perspective that historical studies advance are curiously absent from most of the scholarship that the *GEP* journal has published in its first twenty-five years. One obvious reason for this is the field's predominant focus on "real time research" (Neville and Hoffmann 2018, 182), a legitimate concern with the many pressing environmental problems, from climate change to pollution and biodiversity loss, that add up to what some observers describe as a planetary crisis. The urgency of global environmental threats is reflected in many GEP scholars' activist ethos and normative commitment to improving the state of the global environment, or what former *GEP* editors describe as the journal's "earlier goals of problem-focused, policy-oriented, activism-linked research" (Dauvergne and Clapp 2016, 3).

[2] I refer to the study of global environmental politics as GEP, its subject as international or global environmental politics, and the journal *Global Environmental Politics* as the *GEP* journal (in italics).
[3] Available at: https://direct.mit.edu/glep/pages/editorial-info, last accessed September 21, 2025.

Understandable and justified as it may be, this presentist focus of GEP research raises important questions about the field's (inter-)disciplinary self-awareness and the need for critical reflection on its spatial and temporal dimensions. As I argue in this article, the predominant focus on the "here and now" and "what ought to be done" tends to downplay the importance of understanding the deeper history of global environmental efforts. It risks obscuring the diverse origins of global environmental concern and may end up ignoring how the past continues to shape the present and future of global environmental action. It also curtails the development of GEP's scholarly project by marginalizing historical approaches and thereby limiting its methodological apparatus.

The purpose of this article is to take stock of history's role in the *GEP* journal's first twenty-five years and to counter GEP's presentist tendency and marginalization of historical perspectives. It is intended to be an invitation to engage in a debate on the role that history can and should play in the study of global environmental politics. As a first step in this direction, this article outlines the different uses of history that GEP scholars can tap into and the critical historical sensibility that closer engagement with historical approaches might yield. The article is structured in the following way. The next section reviews the limited role that history has played in the GEP journal's output. The subsequent section identifies and discusses three uses of history—methodology, reflexivity, and historicity—that can enrich research in GEP. The concluding section summarizes the argument and highlights the contribution of history to contemporary environmental debates and practices.

History on the Margins

History has always been one of the main disciplines that GEP scholars have considered to be integral to the multidisciplinary landscape of their research. The *GEP* journal played a critical role in creating and shaping this field and has encouraged contributions from different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, including history. This view is shared by those who have taken stock of GEP's evolution as a discipline (Cass 2014, 17; Dauvergne 2012, 3–4).

As fields of study grow and consolidate into disciplines or subdisciplines, they usually develop greater collective self-awareness and reflexivity. This concerns the theories, concepts, and methods that researchers apply but also the very subject matter they are

dealing with. Like all disciplines, multidisciplinary fields of study, which are mainly defined by a shared interest in a subject, need to establish the spatial and temporal boundaries of their scholarly focus. This involves gaining clarity on the geographical scope and scale of the phenomena under consideration and developing a shared understanding of the historical origins of the field and its subject, including the key historical markers that define distinctive periods in the evolution of the subject. For this reason, historical self-reflection and periodization become critical steps toward a better self-understanding of a maturing (sub-)discipline.

History thus plays a double role in our scholarly enterprise. At one level, it serves as one of the many disciplinary perspectives that inform our analytical approaches. It comes with its own methodological and epistemological dispositions but also provides empirical data that feed other disciplinary perspectives and allow for the testing of competing theoretical propositions. We might refer to this as "doing history," using and engaging in historical research, and in this sense, history has always been present in GEP research. At another level, history promotes disciplinary self-reflection and awareness. Taking history seriously leads us to a more reflective approach that situates GEP and its subject firmly within a constantly shifting historical context. In this mode, which we might describe as "thinking historically," we seek to gain historical reflexivity in our scholarly practice. This perspective helps us to move beyond the mere mining of historical data to reflect on how researchers construct and interpret the past and how these interpretations influence our understanding of present and future global environmental politics.

How has history—understood as a disciplinary perspective in its own right and as a source of critical self-reflection for other disciplines—fared in the *GEP* journal? When it comes to "doing history," there is no shortage of scholarship published in the journal's first twenty-four volumes (from 2001 to 2024) that engages with historical data and cases. This is unsurprising, given that it is common in the social sciences to treat history as "a repository of historical data from which lessons can be learned" (Glencross 2015, 414). In the case of quantitative GEP approaches, this usually involves the creation and/or use of databases going back multiple years (Vadrot et al. 2024) or even several decades (Mitchell et al. 2020; Morin et al. 2018). Qualitative research similarly covers historical periods stretching back many years or decades, with historical data providing cases for comparative approaches

(Steinberg 2015) or furnishing historical process tracing (Vanhala 2017). In other studies, references to historical data simply serve the purpose of illustrating analytical or theoretical arguments.

But what of genuine historical research that explores the full range of historical sources, primary and secondary, to establish historical facts and provide novel interpretations of established historical accounts? Most papers published in the *GEP* journal deal with events that usually don't reach back more than ten or twenty years. Given restrictions on the release of official documents to the public, which can range from twenty years for the United Kingdom's National Archives up to fifty years for certain US congressional records, it is not surprising that the use of official documents or records in GEP research is usually limited to those that don't fall under any archival access restrictions. Interviews with actors at the national or international level are a popular tool for establishing firsthand accounts of political processes, and the *GEP* journal regularly publishes research that depends to a large extent on interview-based empirical evidence and participant observation (recent examples include Kingsbury 2024; Marquardt et al. 2024; Stevenson 2024). However, very few publications go deeper into archival records. Those that do tend to focus on governments from the Global North, at the cost of nonstate actors and governments from the Global South, and many also treat archival data as additional rather than central pieces of evidence (e.g., Aklin and Mildenberger 2020). One notable exception is Whetung's (2019) analysis of the creation of the Trent Severn Waterway in the context of colonial-era territorial dispossession in early nineteenth-century Canada. To be sure, self-consciously deep historical research in GEP has been published elsewhere, often in book form (Ivanova 2021; Manulak 2022). It can be argued that books provide researchers with the required space for a comprehensive exploration of the historical record, though the proliferation of environmental history journals suggests that such historical research can flourish in shorter formats too.

It is also noteworthy that scholarship published in the *GEP* journal has largely failed to take account of the growing field of environmental history, which has developed its own subdisciplinary identity with a proliferation of textbooks (Simmons 2008), handbooks (Isenberg 2014), and journals (*Environmental History*, *Environment and History*, *International Review of Environmental History*). The growing overlap between

environmental and international history has led to a flourishing research literature on the early history of global environmental politics, from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries (Borowy 2019; Dorsey 2013; Flippen 2008; Kaiser and Meyer 2017; Macekura 2015; Ross 2017; Wöbse 2008). Few, if any, of these publications appear to be on the horizon of those that have reviewed the evolution of GEP scholarship. To be sure, the *GEP* journal occasionally commissioned reviews of environmental history books (e.g., in *2*[3], *17*[1], *19*[3], *21*[3], *24*[1]), and in the early years of the journal, two articles raised the need for a fuller engagement with environmental history and the history of empire. Lipschutz (2001) asked what role environmental history could play in enhancing our "understanding of the political economy and sociology of human-nature relationships," while Dalby (2004, 2) drew attention to the long-standing entanglement between empire and ecology, arguing that "both Empire [a global system of extraction and control], and the violent power of empire, are necessary contextual components of contemporary investigations of global environmental politics." Yet, apart from these isolated forays into environmental and international history, scholarship published in the *GEP* journal has largely eschewed closer engagement with the rich seam of historical research into the early history of global environmental politics.

What lies behind this apparent lack of interest in environmental history, including the literature on early forms of global environmental politics? For one, much GEP research is characterized by a distinctly presentist interest (Falkner 2024). The vast majority of GEP scholarship deals only with the most recent history. Events and issues preceding the 1972 Stockholm Conference hardly ever feature in GEP research. Indeed, only two articles published in the *GEP* journal between 2001 and 2024 reach into the pre-1972 history at some length (Epstein 2006; Falkner 2024). Deep historical research on the origins of global environmentalism or pre-1972 forms of environmental diplomacy is almost entirely absent from the journal.

That the *GEP* journal initially encouraged a presentist focus can only be one factor behind this form of historical neglect. To be sure, its early editorial guidelines stated that "while articles must focus on *contemporary* [emphasis added] political and policy issues, authors and readers will presumably have a range of disciplinary backgrounds." It is therefore reasonable to assume that anyone working on historically oriented topics that are not directly connected with current environmental issues would have felt inclined to submit

their work to other journals. However, the fact that the word 'contemporary' was later dropped from the instructions to contributors (Dauvergne and Clapp 2016, 2) did not appear to encourage more historical scholarship to find its way into the pages of the journal. With GEP and environmental history going their own way and developing their own distinctive disciplinary identities and publication outlets, a dialogue between the two fields was unlikely to occur without any deliberate efforts to bridge the divide.

Two further reasons behind the presentist focus of GEP can be gleaned from Dauvergne and Clapp's (2016) analysis of the *GEP* journal's publication trends in its first fifteen years. The authors, both former editors of the journal, point to two important developments that are likely to have discouraged scholars from venturing into the early history of GEP. One is the strong focus on formal global governance arrangements, mainly in the intergovernmental realm, most of which were created after the 1972 Stockholm Conference. The other is the increasingly dominant focus on climate change, which only became an international policy issue in the late 1970s and has only been governed mainly since the early 1990s, through the institutional architecture of the UNFCCC (Dauvergne and Clapp 2016, 4–7). In light of these two trends, it is not surprising that the pre-1970s history of global environmental politics, with its focus on animal protection, fisheries, and marine pollution, has played a comparatively marginal role in twenty-first-century GEP scholarship.

What, then, would be the benefit of a greater engagement of historical approaches in GEP research? The following section identifies three principal uses of history in the study of global environmental politics.

Historicizing GEP: Methodology, Reflexivity, Historicity

Just as is the case in other social science and humanities disciplines, GEP scholars are actively engaged in "doing history," even if on a somewhat narrow basis and without the longer historical gaze that is typical of the study of global environmental history. By contrast, "thinking historically" is far less widespread in GEP than it is in other disciplines, such as IR (Glencross 2015; Hobson and Lawson 2008). Thinking historically can take on different meanings: from reflections on historiography, that is, the writing of history and the methods it relies on, to countering the general ahistoricism of some social science disciplines and promoting greater historical reflexivity on the subject of GEP research to developing a

historical consciousness, in terms of an appreciation of the nature of temporality—"how past, present and future are connected" (Glencross 2015, 416)—and the historical context in which disciplinary concepts and approaches are formed. In this section, I briefly explore these three meanings and illustrate their contribution to GEP scholarship.

Historical Methods

Methodological questions generally don't attract the same attention in the GEP literature as compared to political science or IR, and the methods that scholars use "are often underspecified," as O'Neill et al. (2013, 441) note in their review of global environmental governance research. But concern for methodological rigor is on the rise (Dauvergne and Clapp 2016, 5), and most surveys of the literature now document a growing sophistication in the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as mixed-method approaches, as is also evident from publications in the *GEP* journal. That said, history, although often listed as one of the main disciplinary perspectives on GEP, tends to get short shrift in methodology-focused discussions. This may reflect long-standing differences between history and the social sciences, in terms of how much emphasis they each place on methodological issues and what methods they employ. With GEP research increasingly leaning toward scientism, and many social scientists viewing historical research as mostly descriptive and devoid of explicit theoretical grounding (Levy 1997), it is perhaps unsurprising that history does not feature more prominently as a methodological approach in GEP.

Historical methods play at best a marginal role in GEP debates on methodology, usually in the context of historical process analysis. In their review of the quantitative and qualitative approaches used by GEP scholars, Hochstetler and Laituri (2006, 94) mention archival research as part of critical qualitative methods but don't discuss the role of historiography as such. Sprinz and Wolinsky-Nahmias (2004) also focus on quantitative and qualitative approaches, as well as formal methods. They frequently mention historical cases and explanations, contrasting the historian's emphasis on singular cases with social scientists' interest in generalizable findings and causality, with process tracing as the clearest example of methodological overlap between historians and case study researchers

(38). O'Neill et al. (2013) similarly restrict discussions of historical methods to questions of causal historical process tracing.

Not least because of the widespread desire to learn from history, historical methods deserve closer attention in GEP research. Their main purpose is to establish reliable knowledge of the past, by promoting the proper identification and interpretation of relevant historical events. History also reminds us to view individual events not as isolated and exchangeable empirical data points, but as phenomena that are meaningful only in specific historical contexts. Social scientists all too easily take historical facts as given, without employing the historian's sensibility that alerts us to questions about their temporality, specificity, and periodicity.

History provides researchers of all backgrounds with a set of methodological principles and tools. They concern both data collection and data analysis, that is, the definition and description, but also interpretation, of past events, persons, or institutions, with the relevant information often found in archival records. The key point here is that historians have developed a body of knowledge that promotes a (self-)critical approach to these tasks in the historical research process, which usually precedes the application of social scientific theories to empirical data. Historians are taught to be reflective of the observer's interest and positionality in identifying and defining a subject; to identify appropriate evidence from historical sources, which includes critical reflection on the validity of sources (source criticism); and to contextualize events historically when drawing inferences from temporal patterns (Sager and Rosser 2015). In their desire to subject empirical data to theory-driven hypothesis testing in order to establish causal relationships, social scientists all too easily ignore these initial steps of critical historiography.

Historical methods are most widely used and debated in those social science approaches that are interested in establishing historical processes and trends, usually in the context of identifying causal relationships across time. This is the case with the comparative-historical approach (Lange 2012) and historical institutionalism, which is focused on "politics in time" and the long-term effects that historical choices have on future events (Pierson 2004). Both approaches have not featured prominently in the pages of the GEP journal so far but are slowly gaining ground in GEP research (Bloomfield and Schleifer 2017; Hovi et al. 2003; Manulak 2022). With the growing use of process tracing in global and

comparative environmental politics research, questions of how to conduct fine-grained historical analysis and develop historical narratives ought to gain greater attention (Vanhala 2017). Moreover, the scientific complexity and inherent uncertainty of global environmental issues make it necessary to adopt historical approaches that are sensitive to temporal uniqueness and discontinuity in the evolution of environmental responses (O'Neill et al. 2013). GEP researchers thus have good reasons to enrich their social scientific approaches with the methodological insights that underpin their historical analyses and narratives.

Historical Reflexivity

Adopting a historical perspective goes beyond merely conducting historical research and following historical methodological precepts. It is also about developing a more reflective and critical approach to the subject under investigation and the theoretical frameworks that inform social scientific analysis. Historical reflexivity invites a more questioning mindset when it comes to the established analytical tools that GEP scholars employ, from key concepts to problem definitions and historical periodization.

To illustrate how historical reflexivity can contribute to the intellectual development of GEP scholarship, I explore the role that historical periods, critical turning points, and benchmark dates play in structuring and shaping the field's analytical approaches. The question of periodization has gained considerable attention in recent IR debates, thanks not least to the "(re)turn to history" (Hobson and Lawson 2008, 415) that has opened up new avenues for reflective theorizing beyond the ahistorical positivism that dominated IR during the Cold War. As the editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* explain,

> IR rests on a number of problematic breaks and periodisations in the narratives it tells about itself, and one of the crucial contributions of HIR [historical international relations] is not only to debunk these myths but also, with it, to provide the tools for novel conceptualisation. (Carvalho et al. 2021, 10)

Various scholars have challenged the established benchmark dates of the Westphalian international order (1648, 1815, 1918, 1945) by prioritizing alternative logics of global historical evolution, focused on the origins of capitalism (Teschke 2003), the history of racism and the global color line (Shilliam 2008), or the global transformation of the

nineteenth century (Buzan and Lawson 2015). How does periodization in GEP work? Does it largely apply established models in IR, or does it follow a different historical logic? What are the right benchmark dates in the evolution of global environmental politics, and what do they tell us about the field's implicit assumptions about agency and structural forces?

When it comes to dating the origins of global environmental politics, most scholars seem to be in agreement that the "environmental revolution" (Nicholson 1972) of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and particularly the first UN environment conference in Stockholm in June 1972, are the critical turning point when governments began to build an institutional architecture for international environmental governance (Dauvergne 2012, 7; Holdgate 1999, 101; Radkau 2014). The 1970s is also the period when IR scholars for the first time developed a sustained interest in global environmental issues (Cass 2014, 19). Other major benchmark dates widely referred to are the 1992 Rio Summit, which launched two major framework conventions (on climate change and biodiversity), and, as far as international climate politics is concerned, the 2015 Paris Agreement, which initiated a profound shift from internationally negotiated emission reductions toward nationally determined emission pledges.

If the 1972 Stockholm conference marks the beginning of modern international environmental diplomacy under the auspices of the UN, what about international environmental initiatives, conferences, and treaties that preceded Stockholm? A few scholars have hinted at the need to take the pre-1972 period more seriously (Stevis 2010, 4–5), though most GEP textbooks fail to cover and periodize the prehistory of international environmental debates and initiatives going back to the late nineteenth century. What are we to make of the various international conferences that took place in the quarter century after the end of the Second World War and came to define the emerging focus on global environmental issues, from UNESCO's Intergovernmental Conference for Rational Use and Conservation of the Biosphere in 1968 to the UN Economic Commission for Europe Conference on Problems Related to Environment in 1971? What about the League of Nations' contribution to the development of international environmental policy, from the 1931 Convention on the Regulation of Whaling to progressive legal concepts such as "common heritage of mankind" (Aloni 2021, chap. 2; Wöbse 2008, 2012)?

We can go back further and locate the first efforts to create an international agenda and organization for environmental protection to US President Theodore Roosevelt's 1909 North American Conservation Conference and the 1913 Berne conference, which led to the creation of the Consultative Commission for the International Protection of Nature. None of these initiatives had an immediate impact on international cooperation, but both coincided with a growing interest among leading industrialized countries in creating instruments for transboundary environmental protection, such as the Convention for the Protection of Birds Useful to Agriculture (1902) in Europe, the Migratory Birds Treaty (1916) in North America, and the North Pacific Fur Seal Convention (1911) between the United States, Canada, Russia, and Japan (on the early history of international environmental policy before 1972, see Falkner 2021, chap. 4).

At a minimum, such temporal extensions of our historical perspective ought to bring into sharper focus how post-1972 efforts at international environmental institution-building were rooted in a peculiar early to mid-twentieth-century intellectual milieu that combined liberal internationalism with technocratic modes of governance and a cosmopolitan ethos (Selcer 2018)—values and identities that are increasingly out of sync with contemporary trends in postliberal international politics (Abrahamsen et al. 2024).

Moreover, GEP periodization has followed a state-centric perspective, focused on the development of intergovernmental norms, treaties, and organizations as significant markers or turning points. There are good reasons for adopting this perspective, given the catalytic role of major international summits and treaty negotiations in global environmental governance. However, as critics of state-centrism have long argued, such a periodization privileges the agency of states over that of other actors that may, or may not, be more consequential for the future of global environmental sustainability. Indeed, the *GEP* journal is explicitly agnostic on this issue, stating its intention to publish papers on topics that "include, but are not limited to, states and non-state actors in environmental governance, multilateral institutions and agreements, innovative governance arrangements, trade, global finance, corporations and markets, environmental (in)security, science and technology, and transnational and grassroots movements."[4]

[4] Available at: https://direct.mit.edu/glep/pages/editorial-info, last accessed September 21, 2025.

What would periodization in GEP look like if we were to focus on nonstate actors and transnational initiatives instead of intergovernmental relations? What if we were to adopt a wider conception of global environmental politics that is concerned with the emergence and growth of multicentric environmental governance? What if nonstate actors—scientists and their international networks, environmental campaigners and transnational environmental organizations, and global norms and institutions promoted and created by nonstate actors—were at the center of scholarly attention?

In such a multicentric perspective on global environmental politics, UN conferences might still feature as important forums for nonstate actor networking and organization, and intergovernmental bodies might be relevant as orchestrators of global governance. However, the periodization of GEP would differ markedly from the established historical narrative. For one, it might need to shift the focus to the growth of scientific and conservation organizations in the second half of the nineteenth century, which shaped the then-emerging transnational environmental consciousness. It would also need to consider the creation of the first transnational campaign groups from the late nineteenth century onward. Whether the key turning points in the emergence of a green world society were the nature protection groups that sprang up within colonial contexts (e.g., Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire, 1903) or in Europe (e.g., International Council for Bird Protection, 1922; International Office for the Protection of Nature, 1934) remains a matter of debate. The founding of the International Union for the Protection of Nature in 1948 (IUPN changed its name in 1956 to International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, IUCN) certainly represents a step change in the organization of transnational environmental action and expertise. The same can be said for the shift in the environmental movement from its earlier focus on nature conservation toward global issues of harmful technology and industrial pollution, as is evident from the modern environmental campaign groups that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s (e.g., Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace).

We can also ask what periodization would look like if we were to focus on the emergence of private authority and private governance in GEP. Some scholars concentrate on the 1990s as the critical period when a variety of nonstate actors began to form transnational initiatives that set private norms and standards in the environmental field (e.g., Forest Stewardship Council; see Gulbrandsen 2010). Others, however, suggest a much

longer history of private sector engagement in international environmental governance (Huf et al. 2022) and nonstate types of governance, tracing private governance mechanisms and delegation of governance authority to private actors back to the nineteenth century (Green 2013).

Periodization of global environmental politics thus matters, for historical accuracy but, more importantly, for GEP scholars' understanding of what constitutes relevant political agency in contemporary environmental politics. Treating major UN conferences as the key turning points serves to reify both UN-level policymaking and state-centric politics when in fact this should be a matter for empirical debate. Thus the question of how to periodize the history of GEP is more than a pragmatic choice; it involves analytical decisions about contrasting understandings of agency and power in a global context. Adopting a historically reflexive approach would help uncover the longer history of international and transnational efforts to respond to environmental challenges and build global governance capacity. It might also open a window on alternative readings of the main phases and turning points that transcend the state-centric GEP tradition. It is not my intention to settle this question; rather, I mean to open it up for wider discussion and encourage further reflections on how to periodize global environmental politics. After all, as Guillaume (2021, 563) reminds us, benchmark dates and historical periods "should be the source of scholarly justification, discussion, contestation and debate."

Historicity

Beyond enriching GEP's methodological range and promoting greater reflexivity with regard to the historical narratives and concepts that structure the analysis, taking history seriously should also remind scholars of the inherent temporality of our knowledge of the past. This temporality of knowledge is a central feature of what is known as *historicity*, a term that often merely describes a general disposition to apply a historical perspective (historical thinking) but is used more specifically in the philosophy of history as denoting the "historical nature of human understanding" (Klausen 2020, 4). Schlichte and Stetter (2023, 6) develop a more nuanced understanding of historicity and distinguish six modes that include "(1) the role of history in shaping reality, (2) the centrality of complex temporalities, (3) the paramount importance of the temporality of observers, (4) the necessity to interpret contexts, (5) the

significance of sedimented forms of power and domination and (6) change through non-linear pathways." For the purposes of this discussion, I focus on the implications of historicity for GEP's theoretical and analytical foundations.

Adopting a historicity lens—about both the reality we seek to capture and the position of the observer herself—leads us to accept the temporal specificity of the disciplinary subject as well as the temporal positionality of the research we conduct. It serves as a counterpoint to the widespread ahistorical nature of much social science analysis, which treats history as a repository of universally applicable facts that generates data for the testing of quasi-eternal theoretical propositions. It challenges the notion that the concepts and categories that we employ are timeless and unchanging. My argument is not that GEP research is ahistorical per se but that the historicity of our theoretical and conceptual inheritance deserves greater attention in disciplinary debates.

How might greater attention to the historicity of GEP affect our understanding of the field and its core assumptions? Let me illustrate this with two examples concerning the central concepts of "the environment/nature" and "environmentalism."

There can hardly be a more foundational concept for the study of global environmental politics than "the environment" or "nature." Despite its ubiquity in modern political discourse, the environment and nature are neither self-evident nor unproblematic concepts. Both are usually seen in opposition to humans—the nonhuman world—which is intimately tied to and shaped by human societies. Some question this binary distinction and prefer a more inclusive concept of the natural world as encompassing both nonhuman and human existence. Either way, how we think about the environment/nature and its relationship with humans has important consequences for the practical and analytical approaches we adopt in response to environmental problems. It directly affects our notions of environmental sustainability, perceived conflicts between environmental health and human well-being, and the ultimate aim of environmental policy (restoring nature? balancing the needs of humanity and nature?) (for an early discussion, see Lipschutz 2001; Redclift and Benton 1994).

Moreover, as the environmental history literature has shown, existing notions of environment/nature and social constructions of the nature-humanity relationship are historically contingent (Meyer 2017). In other words, the *E* in "GEP" is not an atemporal

constant but is subject to change over time. Warde (2018) traces early forms of "environmental sustainability" to the sixteenth century, while Warde et al. (2018) document the changing meanings of the modern concern with the environment from fears of resource exhaustion in the immediate post–Second World War era to the emergence of an international, then global, and now planetary ecological consciousness. The "environment" may be an ideational creation of the post-1945 era, but "nature protection" and "conservation" have a much longer historical lineage, reaching back into the nineteenth century and beyond. Grappling with this longer history of environmental knowledge and concern reveals, for example, how notions of wilderness and primeval nature have found their way into the contemporary era in debates about the protection of endangered species and natural habitats. At the same time, research in environmental history has repeatedly challenged ideas of "untouched nature" and "original landscapes" that are to be protected against human interference. Indeed, humanity's profound and protracted influence on Earth's geology, climate, and ecosystems is now coming to the fore in the debate on the Anthropocene (e.g., Biermann and Lövbrand 2019; Dryzek and Pickering 2018). Such repeated reconceptualization of what it means to protect the environment involves important questions of epistemic competence and authority, shifting ethical horizons, but also changing power dynamics, in GEP.

By the same token, our understanding of the nature and roots of environmentalism, environmental thinking, and environmental action also needs to be seen in their ever-changing historical context. This concerns the *P* in "GEP," the historical situatedness of what it means to act in the interest of environmental protection. Again, environmental history provides valuable insights into the diverse roots of environmental thought and action and the long shadow that earlier manifestations of environmentalism cast over contemporary environmental politics. Colonialism's legacy in global environmental debates and practices provides a case in point. One of environmental history's important insights has been to rethink the temporal horizon within which early forms of ecological knowledge and environmental practices have arisen. In particular, environmental historians have played a key role in decentering the standard narrative of environmentalism's origins in the nineteenth-century conservation movements of North America and Europe. Leading environmental historians have written extensively about the creation of ecological

knowledge and environmental management approaches as part of a bureaucratic discourse that was at the service of European colonial states struggling to come to terms with the unfamiliar ecological conditions in tropical regions (Grove 1995; Ross 2017) and ecology's close connections with imperial aspirations rooted in nationalism, expansionism, and racism (Anker 2002). Historicizing environmentalism provides an important counterpoint to the widespread Eurocentrism that pervades discussions of global environmentalism's origins and helps foreground the diverse roots of global environmentalism, including those that originate in colonial and anticolonial experiences. In similar fashion, scholars of precolonial environmental management and indigenous conceptions of land and place have helped to challenge Western-centric interpretations of human–environment relationships (Luby 2020; Tough 1996).

By locating early forms of ecology and environmental management within the political and economic necessities of colonial empires from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, environmental history points to the intricate connection between environmental science and global systems of domination. The long-term shadow that the colonial roots of environmentalism have cast over today's environmental ideas and practices has been discussed elsewhere in the context of debates on environmental justice in a postcolonial world (Curtin 2005; Ferdinand 2022), but it deserves more systematic attention in GEP scholarship. This ought to involve critical reflection on the political-economic context in which environmental ideas have emerged and evolved over the last three centuries, the uneven process of how global environmental problems are defined and prioritized in international politics, and the continuation of patterns of unequal resource extraction and pollution that characterize today's global economy. This is not to suggest that GEP scholars are not doing this already—in fact, many are engaged in such debates—but to point to the deeper historical roots of some of these debates. In this way, thinking historically contributes to unpacking the historicity of the core assumptions that make up GEP's theoretical landscape and opens the path for conceptual reform and innovation.

Conclusions

I have argued in this article that historicizing GEP is a necessary corrective to the presentist tendency of a field that was born out of an activist interest in promoting global

environmental sustainability. By integrating historical methods and perspectives, GEP scholars can develop a more nuanced understanding of the temporal dimensions of global environmental politics and governance, recognizing how past events, ideas, and structures continue to shape contemporary debates and policies.

To be sure, this is not about questioning or negating the practical imperative of enhancing humanity's capacity to act on global environmental threats. Current discussions about the interlocking ecological emergencies of climate change and biodiversity loss provide ample justification for an activist scholarly ethos. But detaching GEP research from historical awareness and knowledge is shortsighted and potentially counterproductive. Indeed, history provides valuable insights into relevant historical parallels and cases that offer lessons for decision-makers. Adopting a historical sensibility also helps to identify contested and misguided forms of historical memory that inform contemporary policy debates and narratives. In other words, history makes us draw on a deeper reservoir of relevant historical experiences while teaching us to reflect more critically on the uses—and misuses—of history in contemporary policymaking.

The call for "more history" is also about greater disciplinary self-awareness. It seeks to promote a more critical and reflective understanding of the field's scholarly identity, its origins and roots, and its relationship to the many disciplinary perspectives that inform its intellectual enterprise. Engaging history in GEP scholarship not only expands the field's temporal perspective but also promotes greater reflexivity in how we set research agendas and define the field's theoretical and conceptual landscape. It involves both a deeper immersion into historical research ("doing history") and more critical reflection on the historicity of scholarly concepts and debates as well as practices of GEP ("thinking historically").

One example of how both these modes of historical research can enhance the study of GEP is the question of periodization. To date, the subdiscipline lacks a critical understanding of how and why it has arrived at certain historical benchmark dates (e.g., 1972, 1992) that tend to reify a state-centric perspective on international environmental policymaking while shortening the field's historical memory. Furthermore, extending the historical gaze beyond the modern era of GEP would help bring to light earlier forms of environmental awareness and practice. It would also direct our attention to the long-

standing interaction between ecological knowledge, environmental protection, and systems of political-economic control, from colonial rule to postcolonial power relations.

Exploring history's long shadow opens up new avenues for GEP research, particularly in relation to power dynamics, imperial legacies, and the intersection of environmental governance with broader sociopolitical structures. The field must reckon with its Eurocentric biases and critically examine how historical patterns inform global environmental efforts today. By incorporating insights from historiography and environmental history, GEP scholars can contribute to a more reflective and self-aware discipline—one that engages historical knowledge when dealing with urgent environmental challenges but also critically reflects on the uses of such knowledge in contemporary policymaking.

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