

How Does the Form of Violence Shape the Form of Resistance: Tuvalu, A Case Study

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXpeO5BgAOM&t=1s>

What happens to a nation without a land? Where will Tuvalu call home if its lands disappear?¹ Through COP26, COP27, and COP28, Tuvalu has leveraged visual and digital media to showcase groundbreaking resistance strategies, most notably the Future Now project, which envisions the creation of a digital nation. This essay argues that the form of violence determines the form of resistance, as seen in Tuvalu's adaptation to structural and slow violence. Drawing on Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence, Kevin J. O'Brien's view of climate change as a structural problem, and Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence, the analysis explores how Tuvalu reclaims agency through digitization. Ultimately, this essay situates Tuvalu's efforts within the broader struggle for dignity and humanity amidst the existential threats of climate change.

The conditions of 'resistance' and 'struggle', used interchangeably in this essay, have been purposefully chosen following a close examination of the violence this struggle for preservation refuses to conform to. This necessitates a careful consideration of both definition and form. Three figures provide that consideration: Johan Galtung, a foundational figure in the field of peace studies and the architect of the concept of structural violence; Kevin J. O'Brien, who acts as a bridge between the other two key figures; and Rob Nixon, who foregrounds questions of time, movement, and change, however gradual, with his notion of slow violence.²

Hence, violence, as defined by Galtung, is 'the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual'.³ Galtung clarifies: 'thus, the potential level of realization is that which is possible with a given level of insight and resources'. Indirect violence would come to signify the withholding of means of realisation, whereas direct violence would be its destruction. Indirect violence comes from the social structure itself, and is, therefore, structural.⁴ It is always present 'insofar as insight and resources are channelled away from constructive efforts to bring the actual closer to the potential'.⁵

In his typology of direct and structural violence, Galtung recognises the need to include 'ecological balance' as a basic need, if not a *sine qua non*. Structurally, this encompasses a more insidious form of violence, one 'not intended to destroy nature but nevertheless doing so'. The human degradation and environmental transformation resulting from the pollution and

¹ Tuvalu, *Tuvalu.tv* <https://www.tuvalu.tv> [accessed 2 December 2024].

² Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), ebook, p. 11.

³ Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6.3 (1969), 167–191 (p. 168).

⁴ Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization* (Oslo: PRIO, 1996), ebook, p. 2.

⁵ Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', p. 169.

depletion attributed to modern industrial activity are often not visible to the perpetrators, owing to its structural nature and the direction it takes, cascading from top to bottom.⁶

As Galtung notes, ‘a violent structure leaves marks not only on the human body but also on the mind and the spirit’,⁷ because it operates through four types of violence that align with four realms of power: cultural, economic, military, and political.⁸ In this way, Galtung has conceptualised violence as a multifaceted entity that, structurally, pervades society. While he includes ecological balance in his framework, he does not develop it further—which leaves the issue of climate change unaddressed, likely because the theory was advanced over forty years ago. This limits the theory's applicability to the modern environmental context and necessitates further evolution, where its static connotations will prove problematic.⁹

Kevin J. O’Brien seems content to work within Galtung’s framework, placing climate change as a form of structural violence¹⁰ without expanding upon its classification, as his focus is on the systemic and ethical implications of it—which may explain why he fails to recognize how this form of violence has formally changed.

Rob Nixon's articulation of slow violence is consistent with O’Brien’s classification and proves integral to trace the form of violence at the heart of this essay. Slow violence refers to ‘a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight’.¹¹ It is not just attritional, but also exponential, acting as a major threat multiplier—fuelling proliferating conflicts in situations where conditions for sustaining life become increasingly but gradually degraded.¹²

Several examples illustrate time’s decoupling force—climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, acidifying oceans—that separates the violence from its original causes.¹³ Slow violence brings to light more complex descriptive categories of violence, where time itself becomes an actor. This is apparent due to the accelerated changes occurring at two scalar extremes: in the life-sustaining circuits of planetary biophysics and in the wired brain’s neural circuitry.¹⁴ This concept does respond to recent, radical changes in our geopolitical perception and the changing technological experience of time,¹⁵ as was intended, but he seems to mistakenly attribute agency to time by framing it as an actor. Time, however, lacks inherent agency and would be better understood as a variable—one that, with all its implications, can be manipulated or weaponized to exacerbate structural violence.

Although one can contemplate a working definition and a coherent and cohesive form of the violence of climate change within a theoretical framework, it defies a strict definition due to

⁶ Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*, ebook, p. 199.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

⁹ Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, ebook, p. 11.

¹⁰ Kevin J. O’Brien, *The Violence of Climate Change: Lessons of Resistance from Nonviolent Activists* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), ebook, p. 1.

¹¹ Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, ebook, p. 2.

¹² Ibid., p. 3.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 2, 11.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

its fluid nature. Shaped by numerous variables, it manifests differently in each context. Thus, understanding its complexity requires a case study approach to capture its varied expressions and impacts. Tuvalu, one of the most vulnerable nations to rising sea levels and environmental degradation, serves as a compelling example.

A sense of urgency is present: the projections are consistent in intensity and frequency with global patterns of warming, and the climate change-driven impacts—most notably increasing temperatures and rising sea levels—are amplified, actively threatening the islands' ecosystems and the livelihoods of its people.^{16 17 18 19} In the worst-case scenario, 95 percent of the land is projected to be flooded by routine high tides by 2100.²⁰

The exponential progression and transformation of violence entails closer examination. The adaptation needs to climate change—coastal protection, agriculture, and water management—²¹ represent a symptom, rather than a solution, to the structural violence Tuvalu's society is entrenched in, and becomes a major threat multiplier for poverty, gender-based violence and ableism.^{22 23} One can observe a shift in the nature of violence where climate change amplifies the undermining of the means of realisation while simultaneously destroying the land itself. The pace at which it does so surpasses degradation, and due to its imminence, becomes a variable for this violence.

It follows that, due to the structural form of this violence, other variables will inevitably emerge when observing major structures of power in International Relations: post-colonial interests and climate negligence, in relation to the Paris Agreement, not only exacerbate vulnerabilities but also generate conflict. These variables arise from the multitude of countries involved, creating large-scale structural violence, where their inherent instability complicates the task of

¹⁶ Pacific Climate Change Science Program, *Current and Future Climate of Tuvalu* (2011) https://www.pacificclimatechangescience.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/4_PACCSAP-Tuvalu-10pp_WEB.pdf [accessed 2 December 2024].

¹⁷ World Bank, *Climate Risk Country Profile: Tuvalu* (2020) https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/country-profiles/15824-WB_Tuvalu%20Country%20Profile-WEB.pdf [accessed 2 December 2024].

¹⁸ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 'Chapter 15: Small Islands', in *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*, ed. by H.-O. Pörtner and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 2043–2121 <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/chapter-15/> [accessed 2 December 2024].

¹⁹ World Bank, *Climate Change Knowledge Portal: Tuvalu Climate Data Projections* (2024) <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/tuvalu/climate-data-projections> [accessed 2 December 2024].

²⁰ Arthur Webb and others, 'Notes from Tuvalu: Leading the Way in Adapting to Sea-Level Rise', *United Nations Development Programme Blog*, 19 July 2023 <https://www.undp.org/blog/notes-tuvalu-leading-way-adapting-sea-level-rise> [accessed 2 December 2024].

²¹ Government of Tuvalu, *National Adaptation Programme of Action* (2007) <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/napa/tuv01.pdf> [accessed 2 December 2024].

²² World Bank, *Climate Knowledge Portal: Tuvalu - Vulnerability* <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/tuvalu/vulnerability> [accessed 2 December 2024].

²³ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *National Report Tuvalu 2018* (2018) https://www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/National%20report%20Tuvalu_2018_0.pdf [accessed 2 December 2024].

analysing this violence effectively. Given this analysis, it becomes evident that an existential conflict exists for nations like Tuvalu—whose influence is marginal in climate negotiations.

Having established the violent dimensions of climate change concerning Tuvalu—not merely as an existential threat but also as a form of conflict—it is now possible to explore Gene Sharp's premise that conflicts involving the fundamental principles of a society, such as independence, self-respect, or the capacity to determine its future, cannot yield to compromise and can only be resolved through struggle.²⁴

Tuvalu's struggle evolves from passive resistance to an active struggle at COP27 with Simon Kofe, the then minister for justice, communication and foreign affairs, and his launch of the programme Future Now (Te Ataeao Nei), that aims to ensure Tuvalu's sovereignty in perpetuity—reclaiming agency in the worst-case scenario of complete territorial loss. COP27, held in November 2022 in Sharm-El-Sheikh, Egypt, served as an ideal pulpit to advocate the concept of the first digital nation.²⁵

The struggle at its core is rooted in the aim to maintain and protect state sovereignty, language, knowledge and culture—both materially and virtually—in the face of existential climate-related loss.²⁶ It does so through Indigenous Tuvaluan concepts, like *fenua*, which embodies the relational wholeness of spirituality, culture, people, and territory.²⁷ Within this approach, digital adaptation wouldn't be a symptom of the structural violence, because it doesn't hold the implication of letting go of those connections, but rather seeking a way for them to remain intact.

The use of visual media to deliver the speech at COP27 and the updates to the Future Now project appear as deliberate strategies. Mark Hansen revisits the dynamics of technology, digitization, and the body, arguing that digitisation engages bodily affect—transforming the unframed, disembodied, and formless into concrete, embodied information imbued with human meaning.²⁸ Using a digital medium aligns logically with the goals of a digital project.

According to Fanon, for a colonized people, the most essential value is first and foremost the land, which will bring them bread and above all, dignity.²⁹ Moreover, Paulo Freire, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, articulates the idea of the struggle for freedom being a labour of love.³⁰ From existential preservation to liberation, the tenets for struggle are not so different. Nor is Audre Lorde's framing of self-preservation as an act of political warfare³¹ inconsistent with what such a form of resistance implies within the framework of international relations.

²⁴ Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973), ebook, p. 3.

²⁵ Delf Rothe, Ingrid Boas, Carol Farbotko, and Taukiei Kitara, 'Digital Tuvalu: State Sovereignty in a World of Climate Loss', *International Affairs*, 100.4 (2023), 1491–1509 (pp. 1491–1492).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 1493.

²⁸ Patricia T. Clough, 'The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine and Bodies', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25.1 (2008), 1–22 (p. 5).

²⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), ebook, p. 73.

³⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Bloomsbury, 1972), Chapter 3.

³¹ Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1988), ebook, p. 93.

This essay has shown that the form of violence inherently shapes the form of struggle; however, the long-term impact of such resistance remains to be seen, and any assumptions at this stage would be unwarranted. To this point, it is clear that Tuvalu's struggle to preserve its sovereignty and culture against the structural violence of climate change demonstrates that resistance is, at its core, a struggle for dignity and humanity.

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