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Normalising corporate counterinsurgency: Engineering consent, managing resistance and greening destruction around the Hambach coal mine and beyond

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**Abstract**

The German Rhineland is home to the world’s largest opencast lignite coal mine and human-made hole – the Hambach mine. Over the last seven years, RWE, the mine operator, has faced an increase in militant resistance, culminating in the occupation of the Hambacher Forest and acts of civil disobedience and sabotage. The mine provides a European case study to examine the repressive techniques deployed by RWE to legitimise coal mining in the face of a determined opposition. Drawing on political ecology literature and work on corporate counter-movements, this paper peers into extractive industries and their corporate social responsibility (CSR) engagements through the lens of corporate counterinsurgency. We first provide some background to the mine and RWE’s unique position in the German political economy. After explaining the rise of resistance, the paper then discusses counterinsurgency in relation to CSR by outlining the different techniques used to win the ‘hearts’ and ‘minds’ of people around the mine. This includes securing the support of political leaders, lobbying, involvement in social events, infrastructure projects, astroturf groups and ecological restoration/offsetting work, which combine with overtly repressive techniques by public and private security forces that together attempt to legitimise the mine and stigmatise, intimidate and criminalise activists. This paper contends that counterinsurgency techniques are becoming normalised into the everyday operations of RWE, naturalising its image as ‘good corporate citizen’ and legitimising and invisibilising the violence towards (non)human nature inherent in the corporate-state-mining-complex, as mining is becoming part of the ‘green economy’ and made ‘sustainable’.

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1. Introduction

The German state of North Rhine Westphalia (NRW) is home to the largest lignite coal deposit (55 billion tons) in Europe. The Hambach mine—one of three lignite mines in the region and operated by RWE, Germany’s leading electricity provider—is the world’s largest opencast lignite mine (Schmitz, 2006) and Europe’s ‘biggest hole’ (Michel, 2005: 16). The Hambacher Forest, a highly biodiverse old-growth forest, is currently being cleared to give way to the expansion, or, in the words of RWE, the ‘migration’ of the Hambach mine (Fig. 1). The displacement and resettlements of homes, air pollution and environmental destruction necessary for the ‘migrating mine’ has triggered resistance, beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the present – with citizen initiatives, mass-protests and a forest occupation attempting to block the expansion of the mine. Environmental activists initiated a campaign against RWE’s three coal mines in the Rhineland, with annual climate camps and mass-civil disobedience since 2010. Others engage in human chains, demonstrations, art performances, nature walks and legal battles against RWE.

In April 2012, forest defenders occupied the neighbouring Hambacher forest to stop the migrating mine. In November, over a four-day period, they were forcefully removed by over 500 police officers in what is alleged to be one of the most expensive evictions in German police history according to interviewees. Following the eviction, a local resident bought land next to the forest to host a permanent protest camp. Shortly thereafter, the Hambacher Forest was reoccupied, and now serves as a permanent point of resistance...
against the mine. Forest defenders began living in tree houses to protect the forest, while working to stop the migrating mine, through road barricades, tree platforms, tree-spiking and the placement of ‘potential improvised explosive devices;’ sabotage of coal-transportation infrastructure (i.e. short circuiting power lines, burning of pumping stations, radio-masts and electrical transformers) and the ambushing of security-police patrols with stones, slingshots, fireworks and Molotov cocktails (Anonymous, 2016: 91). At present, the encampment has been evicted (and reoccupied) three times, with repeated reports of violent repression and even claims of attempted vehicle manslaughter by RWE security in January 2016 (Schönberg, 2016). Militant and peaceful protests actions have been met with increasing repression by security and police personnel. This violent repression, however, complements a diversity of indirect corporate strategies to secure acceptance of, and pacify resistance against the mine, including sustained ‘greening’ activities, public relations campaigns and corporate social responsibility measures that RWE has engaged in for decades.

Contributing to the growing political ecology literature of the Global North (e.g. Schröder et al., 2006), the Hambach mine conflict provides a European case study examining the repressive techniques and ‘corporate social technologies’ (Rogers, 2012: 284) undertaken by RWE to reshape the politics, social relations and conceptions of ‘nature’ within communities to maintain operational legitimacy in the face of ecological crises, anthropogenic climate change and determined opposition. Following the RAND Corporation’s National Security Division (Rosenau et al., 2009: 1), we conceptualise these techniques and technologies as ‘corporate counterinsurgency,’ defined as ‘firms’ efforts to mitigate violence and promote stability through social development and security measures to ‘win hearts and minds’ of local populations. We argue that these counterinsurgency techniques are composed of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ tactics (Dunlap & Fairhead, 2014; Williams, 2007/2004), which need to be analysed in conjunction, to illustrate how the former serve to invisibilise the latter. This approach allows us to approach the often invisibilised and normalised violence inherent in coal mining and industrial growth to further explore the conflictive political geography of the migrating mine (Benjaminsen et al., 2017).

Whereas conventional wisdom tends to point towards militarisation and ‘hard’ approaches, we recognise the proliferation and corporate adaptation of civil-military (counterinsurgency) techniques — integrating greening, social development and corporate communication with more repressive measures — in their respective contexts to respond to opposition. ’One of the defining features of contemporary [mining] capitalism,’ Stuart Kirsch (2010) has argued in his seminal work on ‘sustainable mining,’ ‘is the way corporations respond to their critics’ — co-opting and integrating their discourses without changing their operations. It is from this perspective of counterinsurgency that we analyse the operations of RWE around the Hambach Forest and beyond.

This paper proceeds, firstly, by introducing the employed conceptual and methodological approach, and by providing some background on RWE, the Hambach mine and their political activities — from EU lobbying to collaboration with municipal politicians. We then move to analyse the ‘engineering of consent’ through examining the multiple ‘soft’ counterinsurgency techniques that heavily rely on public relations (PR) strategies, ‘neoliberal social development’ and ‘greening.’ Subsequently, we examine the way nature restoration and offsetting legitimises RWE’s operations, and, in conjunction with other techniques, fashions RWE as a ‘good corporate citizen.’ This is followed by an analysis of RWE’s ‘harder’ counterinsurgency techniques which involve the criminalisation, repression and violence against forest defenders. We conclude that by entrenching state/corporate power and violence, an integrated approach involving hard and soft counterinsurgency techniques further intensifies the current trajectory of industrial progress responsible for biodiversity loss and climate crisis.

2. Counterinsurgency and extractivism: approaching the forest

Peering into extractive industries through the lens of
counterinsurgency, this paper seeks to bring together a variety of literature examining corporate counter-movements. While opposition to resource extraction operations has attracted considerable scholarly interest (Ballard and Banks, 2003; Bebbington et al., 2008; Borras et al., 2012; Gedicks, 1994; Hall et al., 2015), corporate counter-movements working to defuse resistance to extraction operations remain a neglected topic, despite becoming the focus of a growing body of literature in critical sociology (Austin, 2002; Lubbers, 1999, 2002, 2012; Rowell, 2007), organisational (Kraemer, Whiteman, & Banerjee, 2013) and communication studies (Bsumek et al., 2014). Complementing this research, we adopt the framework of ‘corporate counterinsurgency’ or counterinsurgency more broadly to assess corporate counter-movements, as they relate to joint public-private security operations akin to those employed by Rio Tinto in Bougainville (Lasslett, 2014), and, more recently, by Energy Transfer against the Standing Rock anti-pipeline encampment in the United States (US) (Brown, Parrish, & Speri, 2017). We contend that the practices used by security services to target anti-capitalist, anarchist and environmental social movements, branded by governments as ‘extremist’ and ‘terrorist’ (Europol, 2008, 2014, 2016), constitute counterinsurgency approaches in their respective political and social contexts.

This research on corporate counterinsurgency illustrates the techniques of domestic counterinsurgency operations to defuse protests and potential ‘insurgencies’ against ‘critical infrastructure’ (Europol, 2016: 8). Recognising techniques and strategies deployed against social movements—militant or otherwise—as counterinsurgency resituates the current state of affairs of ‘democratic’ politics, while also leading to a practical and analytical reassessment of corporate and governmental activities that aim to socially engineer political terrain to manufacture consent and normalise socially and ecologically destructive activities.

Counterinsurgency is defined by David Kilcullen (2006, pp. 29, 31) as ‘a competition with the insurgent for the right and ability to win the hearts, minds and acquiescence of the population,’ where ‘hearts’ are explained as ‘persuading people their best interests are served by your success’ and ‘minds,’ ‘convincing them that you can protect them, and that resisting you is pointless.’ Counterinsurgency is a type of war—‘low-intensity’ or ‘asymmetrical’ combat—and style of warfare that emphasises intelligence networks, psychological operations, media manipulation, security provision and social development that seeks to maintain governmental legitimacy (FM3-24, 2014). Emerging from the colonial wars, counterinsurgency theory has become increasingly popular, gaining widespread application within militaries (Owens, 2015), police departments (Williams, 2007/2004; Williams, Munger, & Messersmith-Clavin, 2013; Nomad, 2016), forest conservation (Lunstrum, 2014; Marijen & Verweijen, 2016; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2011; Verweijen & Marijen, 2016), and even marketing agencies (Copusky, 2011).

Counterinsurgency campaigns and techniques are also central to the operations of resource extraction companies, yet this component remains largely neglected in extraction scholarship. Highlighting the relationship between violence and extractive industries, Downey, Bonds, and Clark (2010) argue: ‘armed violence is a key driver of the global ecological crisis and that this is likely the case because other key drivers of natural resource exploitation, such as the IMF, World Bank, WTO, and global marketplace, cannot, on their own, guarantee core nation access to and control over vital natural resources.’ Behind this practice of armed violence lies counterinsurgency doctrine, which has been key to stabilizing extraction sites (Brown et al., 2017; Dunlap, 2017a; Dunlap & Fairhead, 2014; Rosenau et al., 2009). At the 2011 oil conference in Texas, Matt Carmichael, manager of external affairs for Anadarko Petroleum, recommended to Public Relations experts to ‘[d]ownload the US Army-slash-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual, calling opposition to hydraulic fracturing in the US ‘an insurgency’ (Javers, 2011). Echoing Carmichael, Matt Pittarella admits: ‘We have several former psy ops folks that work for us at Range [Resources] because they’re very comfortable in dealing with localized issues and local governments’ (Javers, 2011).

The latest US Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24 (2014: 1–2) explains: ‘When a population or groups in a population are willing to fight to change the condition to their favor, using both violent and nonviolent means to affect a change in the prevailing authority, they often initiate an insurgency. An insurgency is the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region.’ Security authorities, following Brigadier General Kitson’s (1971/2010) advice, have come to view opposition in different stages of proto-insurgent activity: the ‘preparatory period’ and ‘non-violence phase,’ which are viewed as precursors to an ‘insurgency’ that challenges the legitimacy and operations of governments and resource extraction companies (Dunlap, 2014; Dunlap & Fairhead, 2014). This leads authorities to respond with various pre-emptive and sustained efforts, mixing concession and coercion to defuse social movements and their consequent disruptions of business. It is from this perspective that we analyse the operations of RWE, looking at how so-called ‘insurgency’ is defined and how governments and companies collaborate to legitimise their operations and ‘pacify’ opposition.

Since at least 2002 the EU’s law enforcement agency, Europol, has been targeting left-wing, anarchist, animal rights, environmental and climate activists (Monroy, 2011). The Europol: Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (Europol, 2008, pp. 7, 2014: 36, 2016: 43) places protests, vandalism, ‘blockades and “lock-ons”’ against resource extraction companies and large-scale infrastructure projects like the ‘NoTAV’ movement1 and the Skouries mine2 under the label of ‘single-issue terrorism.’ This classification has justified surveillance and the use of undercover police and informants (Lubbers, 2012; Monroy, 2011; Williams et al., 2013). Importantly, surveillance of animal rights, environmental and no-border activists is done under the pretext of ‘information gathering and threat prevention’ (Monroy, 2011: 1) and goes hand in hand with the intensification of police logistics (e.g. transborder cooperation) and the tailoring of terrorist charges for social movements (Kitson, 2010; Monroy, 2011). We see a significant overlap here with counterinsurgency logics, in particular, how protest and dissident groups are discursively separated from ‘the population’ and labelled as ‘the enemy,’ and how this justifies the use of both coercive and non-coercive methods. Kristian Williams (2007) makes the distinction between ‘hard’ (direct) repressive counterinsurgency practices and ‘soft’ (indirect) counterinsurgency approaches consisting of investing resources and technologies into ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘troubled’ areas, often referred to as ‘civilian assistance’ and ‘community development.’ This includes aid to collaborating local elites, officials and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) to stabilise and mitigate conflict in areas of interest. Furthermore, Dunlap and Fairhead (2014) and McQueen (2015) link military practices to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs. Building on their work, this paper argues that RWE’s CSR, PR and ecological initiatives like offsetting and recultivation accomplish the same goals as ‘soft’ counterinsurgency strategies that seek to

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1 The NO TAV (No to the High-Speed Train) movement is based in the Susa Valley, Italy, and opposes the EU project that connects a new high-speed railway between Turin and Lyon, France. See http://www.notav.info/.

2 This is a high-grade gold-copper porphyry mine located in northern Greece and run by Eldorado Gold.

maintain legitimacy and ‘pacify’ opposition around the Hambach mine. These indirect approaches work in accordance with direct repressive techniques to suppress resistance and criminalise and isolate activists, while entrenching RWE’s political power and image as ‘good corporate citizen.’ The result is normalising and ‘rendering invisible’ the state-corporate violence against popular resistance, and the ‘slow violence’ inherent in ‘fossil capitalism’ – against the earth (Nixon, 2011), its inhabitants and especially those who are already marginalised, living in areas particularly affected by climate change, or close to mining sites.

Research was conducted around the Hambach mine between January 2016 and March 2017. This inquiry is based on participant observation, 15 semi-structured and countless informal interviews with individuals involved in the resistance against the mine, (former) RWE employees, public authorities and neighbouring residents.5 Interviews were complemented by an analysis of relevant policy documents, nongovernmental reports, media articles and RWE documents and website content, translated by Andrea Brock where needed. Participant observation included attending RWE’s guided tours through coal mines and recultivated/offset areas, the 2017 recultivation conference, other outreach events and visits to RWE information points. Lastly, to understand the social and ecological degradation caused by the mine, extended site visits were made – cycling and walking along the edges of the mine, through the (abandoned) villages, ancient forest and recultivation sites. This research examines the practices of the company, which means studying its actions – political reactions “from above” (Geenen & Verweijen, 2017: 2) – and relating these to established military and police doctrine to develop research into the political geography of environmental conflict.

3. The migrating mine

Excavation of the Hambach mine began in 1978 and is scheduled to be completed by 2045. The total mining area covers 85 km² or 8,500ha (RWE Power, 2014). The mine deposit holds some 2.5 billion tons of coal, with current annual extraction at 43 million tons (RWE Power, 2014), which involves the shifting of around six billion tons of coal and cubic metres of overburden a day (Schmitz, 2006). RWE is the single largest European emitter, than one million tons of coal and cubic metres of overburden a day.

Throughout its lifetime, the Hambach mine has been responsible for twelve percent of CO2 emissions in Germany (IWR, (Schmitz, 2006). RWE is the single largest European emitter, than one million tons of coal and cubic metres of overburden a day. By 2026, a total of 42,000 people will have lost their homes in the Rhinish coal region (dpa, 2016). Half of the landscape that once covered the mine area was forested and rich in biodiversity. Fifty percent of the formerly forested areas consisted of deciduous forests (up to 12,000 years old) ‘with the highest structural diversity and biodiversity composition in the region, and also likely to harbour species of special interest and concern’ (Imboden & Moczek, 2015: 15). The Hambacher Forest – historically managed as communal land – constitutes what German biologists call a Maiglücken-Stieleichen-Hainbuchenwald – a type of forest that is protected under Annex 1 of the EU Habitats Directive (Jansen, interview). It is home to the endangered middle-spotted woodpecker, protected under Annex 1 of the EU Birds Directive, as well as the Bechstein’s bat, agile frog, and hazel dormouse, among others.

For the clearing of the Hambacher Forest, the mining company is legally required under the German Nature Protection Law (Naturschutzgesetz) and the European Habitats Directive not only to recultivate the mining area, but to implement additional compensation measures, or offsets (Ausgleichsmaßnahmen). RWE’s compensation measures for the Bechstein’s bat include 700ha of ‘bat infrastructure’ to connect remaining fragments of old woodland surrounding the mine and a 64 million ‘green bridge’ over the nearby A61 highway to serve ‘as a crossing aid for the bats from Hambach Forest’ (RWE AG, 2015b). Aside from the so-called ‘bat-highways’, the Hambach mine biodiversity management plan includes the newly recultivated area Sophienhöhe, former agricultural land located just North of the mine. The Sophienhöhe is an artificial low mountain range, covering 13 km², with a height of 280 m and praised for its ecological success in recreating habitat for a number of (threatened) species – as well as, coincidentally, a convenient way to dispose of the initial 2.2 billion m³ overburden that were generated in the first six years of mining operation (Imboden & Moczek, 2015). This mountain of ‘overburden’ has been restored and reforested following reclamations, blending and depositing of soil. Despite its rich ecological diversity and newly created ecosystems – including local biodiversity hotspots and unique biotopes – it cannot compensate for the loss of the Hambacher Forest (Jansen, interview). According to Imboden and Moczek’s ecological assessments (2015: 18) “it might take 100 years for the new forests to equal the rich biodiversity of the ancient woodland, particularly the old growth oak stands.”

Today, recultivation work is undertaken by RWE’s recultivation research centre in collaboration with the Cologne Bureau for Faunistics and countless volunteers. The research centre is not only responsible for the planning and implementation of RWE’s recultivation work but appears to undertake PR and stakeholder outreach, promoting the company’s biodiversity management to external parties, student groups and politicians. In tours, brochures and promotional videos it is claimed that ‘the mine does not expand, it migrates.’ On their website, the recultivation research centre describes this process: ‘First came the diggers … then nature returns’ (Forschungsstelle Rekultivierung, 2016). Underlying the mine’s PR material is the reduction of ecosystem quality to that of quantity (Sullivan, 2009, 2010), transforming the natural environment into a series of numerical signifiers to facilitate the legitimisation of the mine as ‘temporary use of the land’ and the popular claim, displayed in RWE’s communication material, that the mine will leave no permanent impact, and indeed a ‘net gain of trees’.

4. RWE’s political power: lobbying and revolving doors

Lignite coal electricity generation was elevated to ‘strategic military status’ in Nazi Germany under the 1935 Law for Promoting the Energy Industry, adopted to strengthen wartime capabilities and enable the eviction of entire communities for coal excavation (Michel, 2005: 29). Despite pledges to remove all Nazi laws from the books, Michel (2005: 29) argues, ‘the spirit of these wartime expediencies prevails in many energy regulations to this day.’ The Federal Mining Act, revised in 1980, stipulates the ‘compulsory relinquishment of private property to mining companies […] by eminent domain whenever public welfare is served, particularly for providing the market with raw materials, securing employment in the mining industry, stabilizing regional economies, or promoting sensible and orderly mining procedures’ (Michel, 2005, pp. 41-2). Placing mining as a ‘national security interest’ and mandating the
'compulsory relinquishment' of land are reoccurring features of state-enforced resource extraction (Dunlap & Fairhead, 2014; Gedicks, 1994; Sullivan, 2013).

RWE is the largest German electricity provider and leading utility holding company (RWE AG, 2015a), which historically held monopoly control over the (West) German electricity grid (Spiegel, 1979). In July 2011, Jürgen Groißmann, then-CEO exclaimed: 'What is good for RWE, is good for the public coffers'6 (VKA-RWE, 2012) reflecting how corporations surreptitiously position their interest as the ‘higher good’ (Dugger, 1989). In Germany, the industry also invokes fears of blackouts and de-industrialisation that will lead to ‘primitivism’ (i.e. Focus, 2011; interviews). Yet the claim that RWE’s operations benefit the public coffers disregards the German environmental ministry’s findings that roughly one billion euro/year subsidies are provided to mitigate power production, in addition to the financial burden of environmental and health detriments of at least 3.5 billion euro/year (Lechtenböhmer, Kristof, & Irrek, 2004). Additionally, BUND estimates that up to 50 percent of resettlement costs in the Rhineland are born by the state and municipalities (Lechtenböhmer et al., 2004).

- Analysing the continuing political importance of mining in Germany, Michel (2005: 77) argues that: ‘The German lignite industry operates on the premise of overt political influence,’ a skill undoubtedly mastered by RWE. One research participant goes so far as to claim that RWE is ‘the single most influential corporation in the German political landscape.’ Already in 1979, the German news magazine Spiegel warned: ‘Unrivalled and barely manageable, RWE is ruling over one of the largest monopolies of the Western world’ (Spiegel, 1979). In the 1970s, municipalities held 60 percent of shareholder voting rights in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) and thus had a significant say in corporate decision making (Spiegel, 1979). The strength of municipality decision making has made them important collaborators to legitimising RWE activities in NRW. Currently, 32 municipalities, 20 cities, seven associations and firms—large banks, insurances and the NRW Chamber of Agriculture—are RWE shareholders. The high level of financial entanglement and shared interests has helped RWE enforce its objectives, exerting political influence even when these appear to contradict governmental/public interests (Gründerg, 2016; Hissel, 2015; Liedtke, 2006; Spiegel, 1979).

- Gerald Neubauer (2013) mapped the relationship between German politicians and the coal industry, exposing 17 high-level politicians spanning the political spectrum with close ties to RWE — as board chairs or board members — even in environmental ministries. Two leading politicians resigned in 2004 when it was exposed that they had been receiving payments from RWE of 60,000—81,000 Euro/year (Neuber, 2004) and one German Member of European Parliament, active in the Environment Committee, had to step down from RWE’s advisory council in 2015 (Bank, 2015). Currently, two of RWE’s board members hold seats in the German parliament or Landtag.

- Nationally, RWE has been at the forefront of lobbying efforts against the German energy transition (Energiewende) and for the extension of the operational lifespan of coalmines and nuclear power plants, together with the influential neoliberal ‘cross sector cross party NGO’ Initiative New Social Market Economy,7 in which it plays a leading role. RWE’s political influence testifies to an entrenched ‘private-public partnership’ with the German state, which, as we shall further describe below, deeply shapes the ‘managing of dissent’ and the ‘engineering’ of consent around the Hambach mine.

4.1. RWE in the Rhineland

There is a unique structural dependency of local municipalities in the Rhineland on RWE’s financial wellbeing. Just under twenty-five percent of RWE’s shares are owned by local authorities (VKA-RWE, 2012), which makes local authorities not only licensees, shareholders and clients, but also RWE constituencies, employees and tax collectors. Refusal to license operations or grant permits would thus negatively impact municipalities’ ability to finance their budgets. RWE has been driving the privatisation of public utility companies, acquiring between twenty and seventy-five percent of shares (Rügem er, 2006), and through its subsidiaries RWE is involved in municipal electricity, gas and water distribution networks and street lighting systems (RWE Group, 2015: 89). Furthermore, in 2004 it was exposed that RWE convenes so-called ‘regional advisory councils’ through which the company has been paying over 100 local politicians some 600,000 Euro/year (Spiegel Online, 2005). Financial payments by corporations to regional politicians — serving on boards of directors or (regional) advisory bodies — are explicitly legal under German law (Rügeme r, 1997), and have been criticised by a previous minister of labour as ‘legalised corruption’ (Spiegel, 1979).

- During our research in the Hambach area, we found ample evidence of corporate-political entanglements at the municipal level. ‘They are everywhere,’ explains one research participant, and continues that RWE did really well ‘to get people into all [the political] positions that matter […]. Wherever decisions are taken, you find people who work for RWE or have worked for RWE.’ Whether it’s the city council or the local church council, several interviewees report, RWE has managed to infiltrate almost all local decision-making bodies. This goes beyond astroturfing and proxy NGOs (discussed later), amounting to the appropriation of the structures of governance themselves. In the city council of Kerpen near the Hambach mine, a member of a local citizens’ initiative explains, thirteen of the former twenty-three members of the Social Democratic Party were current or former RWE employees. According to activists, the personal entanglement between RWE and local politics, as well as its omnipresence within local political and social institutions, makes opposition ‘much more difficult.’ Local churches for instance, although supportive of the resistance, do not publicly voice their support, as one research participant states: ‘[Y]ou will be held accountable for these decisions; ‘residents working for RWE will ‘watch you,’ noting who helps the ‘rowdies’ or ‘people from “the forest.”’ Similarly, a local activist explains that criticising resettlement in Manheim was difficult because: ‘RWE’s former executive chairman is married to Manheim’s mayor. His brother was chairman of the citizens’ council and contractor. He profited financially [from resettlement…]. It’s like a mafia.’

- The ‘public-private partnership,’ emblematic of neoliberal contracting (Hildyard, 2016), between the company and the German state can also be observed in the close relations between RWE and the police. The head of the local police responsible for controlling the August 2015 Ende Gelände mass direct action against the Hambach mine, for instance, was a member of RWE’s advisory board until two days before the protest action (CEO, 2015). The police have been criticised for using RWE vehicles to patrol the mine and transport arrestees (Blume, 2015; interviews)—testifying to a ‘private-public partnerships in the security realm’ (Hissel, 2015). Activists have also reported close police-RWE collaboration in operations in the Hambacher Forest. In addition, the NRW police force is controlled by the state’s parliamentary Interior Committee. One of its most active members is Gregor Colland, an MP doubling as RWE employee with an annual corporate salary of up to €120,000 — only slightly less than his government salary of €128,712 (Funken, 2016a). Not only is he a deputy member of the

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6. “Je besser es RWE geht, desto voller sind die Stadt säck“.  
environment and economic committees, with privileged access to information which could affect RWE (abgeordnetenwatch, 2016), but he is also responsible for internal security and police deployment – including major police operations in the Hambacher Forest. The merging of state and corporate (security) apparatuses signals a level of integrated cooperation that is typical to counterinsurgency operations.

5. CSR, PR and outreach: exploring RWE’s ‘soft’ counterinsurgency strategies

‘Hard’ approaches to counterinsurgency are costly both economically and reputationally. This necessitates developing approaches that pre-empt resistance and mitigate conflict to avoid costly disruptions, sabotage and police and/or military expenditures. Reliance on ‘soft’ approaches includes PR, CSR and greening initiatives that intertwine with ‘neoliberal social development’ and popular environmental concerns and regulations. Echoing the godfather of PR, Edward Bernays (1947), Kilcullen (2006: 33) stresses the importance in counterinsurgency operations of administering ‘a simple, unifying, easily-expressed story or explanation that organizes people’s experience and provides a framework for understanding events.’ Communication theorist Harold Lasswell (1934-5: 524), explains that ‘propaganda’ is ‘cheaper than violence, bribery and other possible control techniques,’ or, as Paul Virilio (1995: 14) writes, ‘[b]eating an enemy involves not so much capturing as captivating them.’ PR constitutes a struggle for the hearts and minds of people – whether to pledge loyalty to corporate brands or ‘engineer consent’ for megaprojects – which becomes visible in contestations over natural resources, whether traditional fossil fuels or renewable resources (Dunlap, 2017a, 2017b).

PR measures are often integrated into CSR initiatives that enable (mining) corporations to accumulate and exercise power (Rajak, 2011). These initiatives converge with ‘soft’ corporate counterinsurgency, as they culminate into a strategy that ‘obscures corporate-led environmental degradation, attempts to render resistance illegitimate, and strategically divides communities’ (Dunlap & Fairhead, 2014: 957). We develop this point further, by demonstrating that CSR is not only an indirect method of counterinsurgency, but a type of military ‘hold’ strategy designed around what is called ‘Integrated Monetary Shaping Operations’ (FM3-24: 10-11-14). Crucial to ‘hold’ strategies is the articulation of ‘information operation activities’ to build ‘bonds with the local population and in many cases change the attitudes of the people’ (FM3-24, 2014: 9-7). ‘Hold’ strategies also imply distributing money to ‘socially engineer’ the political terrain to garner legitimacy for governments, security forces and corporations, while simultaneously undermining oppositional forces (FM3-24, 2014). Corporate counterinsurgency ‘hold’ strategies rely heavily on integrated monetary shaping operations. Former World Bank consultant Gavin Hilson recommends a variety of strategies to mitigate resistance to extraction projects: the ‘implementation of re-skilling programs; ’ the ‘establishment of small and medium sized enterprises; ’ ‘Educational and Training Facilities; ’ and ‘infrastructure projects such as road and rail development, hospital and school construction, and housing development’ (Hilson & Murck, 2000: 230). While social development is usually associated with the Global South, rather than economically prosperous countries like Germany, similar strategies can be observed in the Rhineland.

Reflecting trends in nature conservation and payment for ecosystem services, we contend that the forms of development promoted by corporations in the framework of CSR, including recreational opportunities and eco-tourism development, have increasingly taken on a neoliberal streak — presented as ‘win-win’ solutions that promote corporate and community interests (Büscher, Sullivan, Neves, Igoe, & Brockington, 2012; Springer, 2016), anchored in ‘spectacle’ to normalise socially and environmentally destructive practices (Cavanagh & Benjaminsen, 2014; Igoe, Neves, & Brockington, 2010). Working with these ‘spectacles,’ ecotourism draws attention to how the ‘green economy’ has become another ingredient in producing corporate images that assist in ‘pacifying’ political opposition to resource extraction projects (Dunlap & Fairhead, 2014). The ‘win-win spectacle’ is manifest in the various eco-touristic, recreational, cultural and educational developments around the Hambach mine, based on a diversity of greening activities including nature restoration and infrastructural developments. These activities form part of the soft counterinsurgency strategies to win ‘hearts and minds’ of local residents, hikers, cyclists, nature lovers and mine tourists. Observing similar dynamics in relation to the US Navy, Bigger and Neimark (2017) highlight how ‘greening’ ultimately serves military objectives. The following outlines the various monetary shaping operations deployed to make the Hambach mine politically feasible in the face of ecological crises, climate change and a determined opposition.

5.1. Corporate communication and astroturfing: ‘engineering consent’?

Since the approval of the initial plan for the Hambach mine, RWE has invested heavily in PR work to delegitimise opposition groups and win the (‘asymmetric’) ‘PR war’ for the hearts and minds of the general public (McQueen, 2015: 104). In the early 1980s, RWE spent considerable financial resources to dispel public concerns about ‘irreparable ecological consequences’ that had been raised by government authorities and environmental groups (Spiegel, 1982). In 1980, the environmental ministry supressed a study warning of the disastrous ecological impacts of coal mining in the region (including biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation and desertification) that doubted RWE’s ability to recultivate the area (Spiegel, 1982). This highlights how corporate PR strategies do not only involve promotion but also work via censorship, which also affect the domain of ‘science.’

To improve its corporate communication and ‘manage’ opposition, RWE undertook a large-scale acceptance study, The Power of Participation, to explore how stakeholder engagement and dialogue can ‘avoid or reduce resistance’ against megaprojects, as ‘the future viability of our business also depends on it’ (RWE AG, 2012: 19, 6). In addition to such media and outreach campaigns, RWE built up their own channels to promote its image and message in schools, public events, museums, exhibitions, information centres and tourist sites. In their permanent exhibition in the 16th century castle Schloss Pfaffendorf, RWE host a museum about coal mining, with interactive exhibits and a big screen fifteen-minute video explaining coal mining technologies, safety precautions and their recultivation work. RWE rents out the castle for weddings, Christmas parties, corporate and other events, and hosts free concerts during the summer. Likewise, in the Innovative Information Centre Niederaußem the company distributes their research on CO2 ‘cleaning technologies’ and displays ‘tomorrow’s technologies’ in an interactive exhibition. Next to, or rather above the edge of the Garzweiler mine, RWE built a skyskape to provide ‘the perfect panorama of coal mining processes, dumping of overburden and power stations’ (RWE Generation, 2013: 28). This communicative social infrastructure supports RWE’s efforts to reach target audiences, promote desirable opinions, and sustain specific types of behaviour, which work towards ensuring a favourable public opinion to maintain political stability.

Another technique adopted by RWE to shape popular and
political perceptions is ‘astroturfing’, or the creation of proxy grass roots groups and campaigns to influence public opinion and lobby local decision makers for new legislation and regulations favourable to corporate interests (Austin, 2002; Bsumek et al., 2014; Kraemer et al., 2013; Peter, 2002; Williams et al., 2013: 214). Already in the 1990s, RWE funded initiatives to resist wind energy development, although, ironically, it now invests in wind energy through their subsidiary ‘Innogy’ (Peter, 2002). The company has continued to resort to astroturfing to safeguard their lignite mining activities, being for example involved in a supposedly independent citizens’ initiative to defend lignite coal in the Rhineland under the slogan: ‘Our revier – our future’ (Müller, 2016; Unser Revier, n.d.). The initiative claims to oppose the lobbying efforts of NGOs and ‘aggressive environmental groups’ (Unser Revier, n.d.), but it was quickly revealed that it has close ties to RWE. Additionally, RWE has been involved in setting up two Facebook groups in which mine supporters regularly call for violence and abuse against the forest defenders, an approach also used by oil companies in the US (Brown et al., 2017; Bsumek et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2013), as further discussed below.

5.2. Omnipresent sponsorship: buying consent?

RWE’s CSR may best be characterised by what one research participant called ‘omnipresent sponsorship.’ RWE is ‘everywhere,’ local activists explain, with its tentacles spread out ‘like an octopus,’ fusing itself into the cultural and economic life around the mines. The company has ‘infilitrated’ the social fabric of surrounding towns through sponsorship of local events and associations, seeking to gain legitimacy through the local authorities they sponsor. One channel of such infiltration is the corporate volunteering initiative, RWE Companius, which finances initiatives and gives paid leave to employees participating in regional projects (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2010)—over 1300 projects in 2015 (RWE Companius, 2016). Projects include caring for the elderly and raising awareness among RWE employees about child maltreatment to encourage donations. The company is explicit about its aims of these initiatives: increasing a positive perception of—and identification with—RWE (RWE Companius, 2016). The scheme is accompanied by ‘promotional material’ in the form of flyers, posters and information stalls in front of RWE canteens and inside children’s day care centres, which constitute an opportunity to spread its message outside its usual channels. What RWE does not promote publicly, however, is their membership in the Initiative New Social Market Economy (and other associations) that advocates for the same neoliberal austerity policies (cutting social spending, taxes and privatisations) that entrench people’s dependence on the private sector (Speth, 2004), which makes RWE’s charity work necessary in the first place.

RWE also sponsors events organized by police and fire departments (e.g. barbeques), bouncy castles, ‘mobile fun centres,’ school events, carnival associations, parades, traditional festivals (Schützenfeste), local football clubs and sports events for students. It donated 129 public bookshelves and finances a ‘baking cart’ that drives across the country handing out baked goods, recipes, RWE material, and electricity saving information. Every couple of months RWE offers tours through their mines, usually attended by hundreds of people, including visitors from neighbouring towns and countries. The events are promoted by local tourist associations and websites, while local groups, such as the Johanniter-Unfallhilfe and the Schützenverein, sell cake, sausages, coffee and beer to mine tourists. The company also organizes tours through their power stations and hires a nature guide to offer regular hikes through the recultivated Sophienhöhe (while a nature guide from the resistance takes people through the Hambacher Forest). These sponsorships, which, we believe, amount to Integrated Monetary Shaping Operations, position the company as ‘good corporate citizen’ in the region and lend it a high level of legitimacy despite the high social, financial and ecological impacts of the mine. As a corollary, the resistance movement is slowly delegitimised.

5.3. RWE in schools: generational engagement?

Much of RWE’s CSR and PR work takes place in and around schools. Since 1998, the RWE Foundation has supported disadvantaged children and provided educational/PR material, teaching supplies—such as role-playing games—and lunchboxes to first-graders, having distributed over 742,000 boxes since 2006 (Wahl, 2015). Additionally, RWE supports the popular (and prestigious) youth research initiatives Jugend forscht and Schüler experimentieren, while also offering ‘Learn & Fun’ school trips into its power plants and ‘girls’ days’ in its training centres (3male, n.d.). School projects are supported with up to €60,000 for educational games and student competitions (3male, n.d.), which, according to the company, bring in new, innovative ideas. This anchors positive associations with RWE among children. Furthermore, the company helps design school programs related to energy efficiency to create connotations with climate protection and ‘progressiveness’ (Kamella, 2013). In a similar vein, RWE sponsors the ‘Duisburg RWE Zoo School’ in the nearby zoo, where it offers ‘lively biology lessons’ by ‘zoo pedagogues’ to 10,000 students/year (Zoo Duisburg AG, 2016)—while destroying animal habitat in the Hambacher Forest. School initiatives also buy legitimacy and assuage resistance against the mine. According to activists, at the ‘peak of resistance against the mine’ in Buir, the company offered to build a new ‘mobile’ stage for the school auditorium ‘with sound system and everything—and the expectation was to bring us “back on track”—an attempt to mitigate local concerns with the mine. The West German Broadcasting (WDR) has reported agreements with two secondary schools in the mining area, where RWE agreed to offer school trips, internships and application trainings in return for publicity in school publications, outreach and sign-boards (Wahl, 2015). The aim is to raise awareness among students about the significance of the coal industry—and to establish the company as a caring neighbour and socially responsible corporation (in Wahl, 2015). In 2012, 250 RWE employees were active as ‘energy ambassadors’ providing information about RWE, coal power and other energy industries in German schools (RWE, 2012). Not surprisingly, in their teaching material, RWE promote the indispensability of coal electricity and highlight the efficiency and ecological sustainability of their power plants and significance as a local employer. The company even offers teaching material, including educational videos, on the Hambach mine and the recultivated/offset areas—once again attempting to brand coal mining as ecologically sustainable in their struggle for political legitimacy.

Taken together, RWE’s initiatives in schools resemble a counterinsurgency approach called ‘generational engagement,’ which is ‘built on the foundation of education, empowerment, and participation’ to integrate people of all ages, including youth, ‘to participate in legal methods of political discourse and dissent’ as opposed to questioning the dominant political and social orders (FM3-24, 2014: 10-2). We contend that, when applied in the framework of ‘corporate counterinsurgency’, generational engagement seeks to create a ‘corporate culture’ (Dugger, 1989) encouraging participation, loyalty and buffering against social conflict or opposition by inculcating in young people a pro-corporate/mining ideology.

5.4. New recreational infrastructure: neoliberal social development?

Pro-corporate ideologies are also fostered by investments into...
new recreational infrastructure, including a novel ‘speedway’ built on former coal train trails and a signposted network of cycling and hiking tours which showcase RWE’s recultivation work, coal mining and other ‘extractive attractions.’ On the _Straße der Energie_ (energy route), a ‘tourist route through the Rhininh lignite mining area’ (RWE, n.d.), the visitor can witness RWE’s mines, recultivation work, processing facilities and electricity production from lignite coal, wind and solar. These tours accompany numerous RWE publications outlining maps, regional information and trail suggestions, as well as general promotional material.

The most notable recreational infrastructure sponsored by RWE is _terra nova_ (New Earth). Co-financed by surrounding municipalities (Regionale, 2010), _terra nova_ is a restaurant/bar and information centre modelled after a beach resort—complete with sunbeds, playground and outdoor gym—that sits on a terrace overlooking the Hambach mine (Fig. 2). In addition, _terra nova_ hosts RWE’s recultivation centre, a ‘wedding-room’ and a football–golf course. The building can be rented for events and is promoted as a ‘meeting place’ to ‘bring people together.’ Jim Igoe et al. (2010) application of Guy Debord’s (1994/1967) ‘spectacle’ to ecotourism becomes insightful here, where the spectacle of ‘extractive attraction’ works to further normalise the mining processes that are being militantly resisted. In Uganda, Cavanagh and Benjaminsen (2014: 56) have shown, ‘spectacularization’ is fundamental in the production of carbon offsets that form a ‘process of interrelated accumulation and naturalization by dispossession.’ In the Rhineland, _terra nova_ attempts to do the same by solidifying a unifying message, justifying the operation and encouraging people to participate as spectators, while further commodifying and selling the mining experience. Said simply, _terra nova_ seeks not only to mobilise popular support but also to make profit in the process. Visitors from near and far, are invited to enjoy the view, drinks, food and games, and applaud the 200 plus-meter long diggers, the ‘largest mobile machines of the world’ (RWE Power, 2013a: 5), invoking fantasies of huge playgrounds where soil is shifted and men have God-like control over both machinery and nature.

Through this kind of spectacle, RWE’s _terra nova_ attempts to transform enormous machinery, holes and extractive routine into an acceptable practice by means of marketing and encouraging participation from locals and visitors as mining spectators. Now parties rage (occasionally) and beer glasses cling over electrical humming and grinding gears of mining operations, bundling the ‘ecotourism-extraction nexus,’ where extraction becomes integral to eco-touristic experiences (Büscher & Davido, 2013), into one operation—mining tourism. The diversity of recreational opportunities and ‘spectacular’ mining tourism infrastructure around the Hambach mine help to invisibilise the violence required by the mine. RWE’s projects help mediate and transcend the assumed contradiction between ecotourism and extractive industries by providing recreational services. _Sopinhöhe_ and the extensive network of cycling and hiking paths appease people’s love for forests, while _terra nova_ (and other recreational-educational sites) romanticises notions of coalmining, providing an outlet for fascination with huge machinery that epitomises industrial progress, modernity, and human mastery over nature. This accommodationist philosophy manufactures a ‘win-win’ for hikers, cyclists, conservationists and mechanical enthusiasts, establishing a self-reinforcing and inclusive approach that not only merges, but simultaneously articulates the ecotourism-extraction nexus.

The resort-style beach landscape is no coincidence. RWE’s long-term management plans indicate that, after the proposed mine closure in 2045, Europe’s ‘biggest hole’ is meant to become ‘Germany’s second largest lake by the end of the century. ‘It is supposed to look like a shoreline,’ explains RWE employee Guido Johnen (Wonnemann, 2013). This attempt to turn the present mine into a future lake attempts to do just as their slogan proclaims: ‘looking into the present and the future’, creating a ‘positive’ landscape, not looking backwards, because ‘looking backwards can be painful’ (Melzer, nd) — especially for those who experienced displacement because of the mine. The sunbeds and parasols, Melzer explains, ‘are invitations to wait for the water.’ RWE attempts to market the re-imagining of the future, constructing a win-win solution where coal mining leads to a better life and, importantly, ‘better nature’, with a new lake and commercialised recreational opportunities waiting at the end of the mining tunnel. These new infrastructures are intimately tied to RWE’s greening efforts and claims of ecological sustainability, representing the neoliberal belief in consensus and seductive win-win solutions, based on the compatibility of capitalist growth and ecological sustainability (Büscher et al., 2012) — also capturing the imaginations founded on the erasure of the interconnectedness of natures, spaces and previous inhabitants (human and nonhuman) and the projection of new, artificial and mediated relations. This erasure and reconstruction of interconnection is a discursive and practical act of violence, which is being invisibilised by RWE’s attempts to ‘green’ mining.

5.5. ‘Greening’ the mine?

In order to ‘green’ mining and capture imaginations, RWE have invested significant efforts in ‘greenwashing’ their operations and developing profiling itself as an environmentally responsible corporate citizen. This is reflected, for instance, in the prominent role of the green economy in PR campaigns. The campaign ‘_rorweg gehen_’, a wordplay that translates into ‘leading the way,’ has been trying to establish RWE as environmental leader, causing controversy in 2009 when their advertising clip featured significant investments into renewable energy, when at the time only 2.7 percent of their energy was based on renewables (Lobbycontrol, nd).

To ‘green’ their image, RWE also collaborates with conservation and environmental NGOs, internationally (through the ‘Bettercoal Initiative’), on company-level (with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, IUCN) as well as locally, through partnerships with nature volunteers and the Cologne Bureau for Faunistics. The company has enrolled two very prominent German environmentalists/academics from Germanwatch and the Wuppertal Institute on its Corporate Responsibility Stakeholder Council. In their leading role in the ‘Bettercoal Initiative,’ RWE claim to promote corporate sustainability in the international coal supply chain by auditing and stakeholder engagement. Research participants, however, criticise RWE for ‘outsourcing’ their responsibilities to assert attention from their destructive operations. In the run-up to the 2013 World Economic Forum in Davos, RWE announced its cooperation with IUCN ‘for the protection of biological diversity’ (RWE, 2012b). As part of the partnership, two academics undertook a study of RWE’s biodiversity management and offsets around the Hambach mine, recommending a more integrated biodiversity management approach (Imboden & Moczek, 2015). In particular, the report advocates a Payment for Ecosystem Services model, discussing the ways investment risks—diminishing raw materials, civil society ‘concerns’, capital access, regulatory risks, reputational harm through media and NGO campaigns— could be turned into profitable business opportunities (Imboden & Moczek, 2015). The report also recommends that if it is to ‘reduce the risk to its reputation, RWE should not only adopt a more strategic approach to its work on ecosystems, habitat and species but also pursue a more

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*8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8H8pxVFf50.*
strategic approach to communicating on these controversial issues and interacting with stakeholders (Imboden & Moczek, 2015: 31). Recommendations further include company-wide biodiversity objectives, the planting of more native trees, inquiry into additional measures to reduce the loss of the Hambacher Forest and ‘possible compensatory measures’ — despite recognition that offsetting measures ‘will never reach the biodiversity status of a mature forest’ (Imboden & Moczek, 2015, pp. 15–18). The partnership was widely criticised by German IUCN member organisations, and has thus not been renewed. This incident is but one illustration of the extent to which RWE’s nature conservation work helps divide-and-conquer the environmental community (cf. Brock, 2015) — by enrolling local volunteers and conservation organisations, collaborating in biodiversity data collection and inviting them to their restoration conference, where their work is showcased and praised. In return, we are told, many environmentalists abstain from criticising RWE’s coal mining operations, and the cutting of the Hambacher Forest.

The most important compensation measure — and heart of the biodiversity management plan of the Hambach mine introduced above — is the newly restored natural area and artificial low mountain range called Sophienhöhe adjacent to the mine. Some of the former agricultural (and now reforested) areas are designated for future timber harvesting (Schumacher et al., 2014: 28; interviews), while the area is also used for recreational purposes. The Sophienhöhe contains 150 km of hiking and cycling trails leading to visitor points on top of the hills and different ‘eye-catchers’ including a Celtic tree circle. RWE offers regular guided tours and free maps to visit the area. Some trails are equipped with info-boards with QR codes, for smart phone equipped visitors — allowing people to learn via LCD screen about ‘the new landscape and its flora and fauna’ (RWE Power, 2016). This information technology- approach mediates the ‘visitor’s’ relationship with their natural environment, but also with the company. Hiking paths through the Sophienhöhe are not only heavily signposted but delineated by bushes that keep the visitor on the path, resembling what Jeff Ferrell (2012: 1688) calls ‘spatial environment[s] saturated with contemporary ideologies of containment and exclusion.’ Policing takes place through signs, rules and ‘natural grids’, but also through visual clues that promote self-identification with the project and hiking regulations. Individual agency or exploration beyond the pre-planned trail is discouraged. Sophienhöhe thus becomes a highly regulated, predictable and enclosed environment — like city parks positioned to serve as PR.

6. Criminalisation, repression and violence: RWE’s ‘Harder’ counterinsurgency techniques

The variety of ‘soft’ counterinsurgency approaches, in which greening activities play an important role, help invisibilise the ‘harder’ repressive techniques. Overlapping with RWE’s divide-and-conquer strategies we observe strategies of stigmatisation and criminalisation of more ‘radical’ elements in the resistance movement, leading at once to the isolation and violent repression of environmental activists. In a newspaper interview, RWE CEO Peter Terium speaks of activists as ‘criminals’: ‘They have no ideology, they are sheer criminals and are only interested in excessive violence’ (Terium in Die Welt, 2016). Elsewhere, he describes the Hambacher Forest as ‘unbearable escalation’, speaking of ‘professional demonstrators’, coming to ‘riot’ (in Balzter & Meck, 2016). ‘They come from other countries’, he continues ‘some from Eastern Europe, some from a particular scene in England’, which plays into xenophobic sentiments and fears of East European mafias that often dominate German right-wing media. In the August 2013 edition of its neighbourhood magazine — coinciding with the annual anti-coal climate camp — RWE displayed the resistance movement as ’vandals’ and life threatening to workers’ (Fig. 3, RWE Power, 2013b: 2), positioning activists as ‘violent’ and ‘radical’ — whereas the company is engaged in ‘constructive dialogue’ (RWE Power, 2013b: 3).

‘Dear neighbours,’ asks the chairman of the RWE workers’ council on the next page, ‘how would you react if you were suddenly attacked with rocks at work?’ The police union spreads similar images of ‘violent protesters’, warning of a ‘spiral of violence’, while ignoring not only the (physical) violence exercised by police and security forces against activists, but also the structural violence inherent in coal mining.

While criminalising the more ‘radical elements’, the company
highlights its engagement with local initiatives opposing the Hambach mine. Yet opposition groups in the region contest the company’s narrative of ‘good relations’. As one member explains:

[RWE:] ‘the climate campers, they are rowdy, but the citizens’ initiatives […] we are in good dialogue with them’. But that’s not true. You can’t be in dialogue with RWE. Dialogue is impossible […] They tried to buy us as ‘mediators’ […] you have to be very careful.

Other interviewees recall how they were repeatedly asked to distance themselves from people engaging in ‘violent’ resistance. One person describes: ‘They criminalise and divide […] They tell us: “Distance yourself from “the forest” [defenders]. They are all criminals” […] and part of the press is complicit in this.’ This is a textbook tactic to divide social movements (Gelderloos, 2013) and exploit and create divisions between ‘the forest’ and other parts of the resistance movement. Nonetheless, individuals and groups continue to support and show solidarity with the more combative parts of the movement, despite ‘occasional disagreement about methods.’ Indeed, as one interviewee explains, the Hambacher Forest ‘wouldn’t be an “issue” without [their] illegal actions, without cables burning, without the occupation. They [the forest defenders] have been contributing so much [to the Hambach struggle].’

Members of citizens’ initiatives and ‘less radical’ groups have also been the target of defamation. People who ‘engage politically,’ one research participant explains, are frequently silenced through the city council, political intervention and other means, while stigmatised as ‘green wackos.’ Furthermore, protest ‘initiatives are being stigmatised and criminalised […] through skilled press work by different players, including politicians, trade unions, RWE and the police.’ The citizens’ initiative ‘Buirer for Buir’, for instance, was denounced by the federal minister of transport at the opening ceremony of the new highway as ‘liars’ who ‘manipulate people.’

6.1. Prosecution and intimidation

The resistance movement has frequently been subject to court cases and legal charges. In 2015 alone, RWE initiated legal action against 800 activists and journalists following violent repression of protest with pepper spray and batons that was openly criticised in the mass-media (Blume, 2015). Restraining orders and law suits are major tools of intimidation. Although most cases are quickly dropped, others are used to set an example, especially when activists refuse to identify themselves. Research participants report arbitrary police harassment of activists, which includes the confiscation of bicycles as ‘stolen’ if owners could not recite frame numbers, searching of cars with bumper stickers in opposition to the mine (Zimmermann, 2016), constant surveillance, stop-and-search at the local train station as well as checkpoints that work to create a ‘culture of fear.’ The Hambacher Forest occupation (and surrounding areas) has been under ‘long-term surveillance’, as authorised by the Aachen district court (Hambacher Forst, 2016c). Both police and mine security have a constant presence around the
occupation and use video cameras to document activists (WDR, 2016). According to forest defenders, drones and helicopters have also been used for surveillance purposes, and members of citizens’ initiatives have reported being followed by security services regularly. This creates a situation of permanent tension, intimidation and fear, to dissuade RWE opposition.

Beyond this culture of fear are concrete practices of threat and intimidation. Activists have confirmed reports of security guards ‘verbally engaging in rape fantasies as they intimidated ‘locked-on’ female activists while awaiting the police’ (EFL, 2015; interviews). The climate camp has also been subject to threats and verbal attacks by security guards, as well as threatening phone calls during the night (Wyputta, 2012). One anti-mine organiser received threats against them and their family, while the owner of the land hosting the Hambach encampment reported his garage being broken into and his car destroyed twice. Hambacher Forest activists report police threatening them to break their fingers and arms if they did not collaborate in their fingerprint collection (Hambacher Forst, 2016a).

Intimidation of protestors continues online. RWE employees created two Facebook groups, ‘For lignite coal and jobs’—against eco-extremists’ and ‘RWE-workers for fair reporting’, where coal proponents have lobbied andYu a threats to activists (Dörschner, 2016). These groups serve as a meeting point for RWE supporters, employees and climate change deniers, where they post verbal attacks against coal critics, denounce activists as ‘eco-terrorists’ and pose (death) threats. At the coal tour through the mine, we could hear similar statements ourselves, for example when the bus driver comments: ‘No digger should ever stop for those activists who chain themselves onto it.’ The death of eco-activists is—consciously or unconsciously—applauded by RWE personnel, volunteers and sympathetic politicians. As part of RWE’s stakeholder dialogue, a number of local politicians came to see the recultivation work, suggesting that ‘someone should come and beat them [the activists up,’ complaining about the police’s inability to evict the forest occupation and continuing that ‘in France, at least they are allowed to shoot.’ There is a culture and institutionalisation of hate for those concerned, protesting and acting to stop the mine.

The organisers of the annual Rhineland climate camps, according to interviews, were confront with repression from the beginning, only to intensify with the second camp in 2012. Research participants explained that farmers, (football) clubs and other residents were pressured not to provide land, water or any type of support for the camp. The local football club, for instance, depends on RWE for advertising and sponsorship and is thus vulnerable to these pressures, which we are told, ‘RWE exercises with all available means’. Farmers are in an equally precarious situation, one person explains: ‘If you’re a farmer and need to swap land in the future, you don’t want to antagonise RWE. Because then you’ll get a piece of land in the Eifel [60 km away], not here.’ Underneath the official promotional material and PR, RWE’s operations articulate a style of clientelistic realpolitik.

This realpolitik coincides with the intimidation and suppression of critical media reports. In April 2015, 6000 people formed a human chain (the ‘anti-coal-chain’) to protest coalmining in the Rhineland. When the Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, a large regional newspaper reported ‘too positively’ on the event the following Monday, one interviewee reports, RWE sent a delegation to the KSIA editorial office to ‘exert pressure’ on the chief editor—threatening with mass-cancellation of subscriptions. The following day, a double-page editorial was published in the super-regional edition of the paper, entitled ‘Always accompanied by fear’ (‘Die Angst führt mit’), implying that RWE employees are under constant danger of being attacked by ‘radical activists.’ Furthermore, people reported instances of attacks on, and evictions of media representatives from the forest (Hissel, 2015). In 2016, a sympathetic film maker was severely injured by police forces and hospitalised (Funkeln, 2016b).

6.2. Physical violence

As Eveline Lubbers (1999) has argued, speaking about police/corporate violence against activists in America: ‘violence is designed to silence.’ Three groups have engaged in direct violent action against protesters: workers, RWE security and police forces. While the opinion of RWE workers towards the opposition varies between individuals and throughout time, some forest defenders reported attempts of citizen arrests, intimidation and beatings, as well as the hosing down of activists with water in freezing temperatures when locked-on to machinery—a tactic flagrantly displayed in Stand Rock.

Secondly, RWE security (technically only supposed to use self-defence when under attack), have been documented hunting forest defenders and cutting tree house ropes (to make activists fall six metres to the ground), using pepper spray, wearing masks, throwing rocks, using vehicles to intimidate or attack people, slashing car tires in the encampment, as well as spitting on activists, and letting dogs loose to follow them. During lock-on actions, security personnel actively beat people to the point of breaking bones, teeth and other body parts, while sexually harassing female activists.

The police have conducted themselves similarly to RWE security. Forest defenders have reported serious injuries and abuse during and following arrest. This includes sprained wrists, haematoma, broken noses and fingers, lost teeth and refusal of medical treatment (Hambacher Forst, 2016b). Research participants added that police pepper sprayed and kicked people’s faces with their boots and beat them outside as well as inside police custody (Fig. 4). As mentioned earlier, the police are frequently surveying the area with check points and occasionally with helicopters, drones and monitoring cell phone communications—and forest defenders suspect eavesdropping activities at nearby police checkpoints. At times, the police have fully enclosed the camp, enforcing a strict stop-and-search policy that prevents the movements of forest defenders and consequently inhibiting their abilities to acquire food and water for the encampment.

In 2015, after escalation of a protest, one of RWE’s private employees admitted that ‘violence emanated from police and security forces’ and reported a ‘euphoric’ mood among security personnel, looking to pick fights (WDR, 2015). Compared to the political and structural violence taking place around resource extraction sites in Latin America, Asia and Africa, the violence seems mild. Nonetheless, the same model of extractive violence is present at a lower intensity, with preference towards psychological and police violence rather than heavily armed military and paramilitary operations. To illustrate the differences and parallels: whereas in the Rhineland, security personnel are reported to have threatened to use arms and legs if animals were killed, in France, at least they are allowed to use ‘tactically’ deployed in Stand Rock.

7. Conclusion

The paper demonstrates the variety of corporate counterinsurgency strategies used to ‘stabilise public opinion,’ ‘pacify’ opposition and de-legitimise actions taken against RWE’s migrating mine. This includes working intimately with national and local civil
servants (police, politicians and administrators), setting up volunteer programs, providing funding for schools, sponsoring research funds, hosting cultural events, creating astroturf groups, creating new infrastructure and re-making and/or marketing nature through nature recultivation work which goes beyond legislative requirements. These operations are complemented by RWE security, employees and police actions to repress the existing and recalcitrant social movement(s) forming against the mine and the consequent destruction of the Hambacher Forest and surrounding towns. These efforts to manage conflict and maintain legitimacy, both the goal of CSR and counterinsurgency, lead to harnessing and ‘socially engineering’ not only political geography but also political systems themselves. Following Foucault’s (1979/2008: 150) ‘neoliberal art of government’, we see neoliberalism as embedding counterinsurgency practices and/or mechanisms into everyday practice, using market-mechanisms to ‘roll-back’ social amenities and protections—to deprive people resources for civic participation and/or protest, while also imbuing dependency on the population to the operations of government and corporations (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Springer, 2016)—further entrenching and transforming state power. Simultaneously, market mechanisms are ‘rolling-out’ or intensifying state power, proliferating regulations and expanding the joint public-private venture of ‘social engineering’ the population.

The Rhinish counterinsurgency efforts are not ‘unique.’ The recent article series by Brown et al. (2017) in The Intercept analysing the leaked TigerSwan documents reveals the centrality of counterinsurgency for undermining the Standing Rock anti-pipeline social movement. The documents confirm integrated collaboration between company security, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), federal, state and local police agencies, revealing a series of tactics used by authorities against Standing Rock, which were also present in the Hambacher forest. These include aerial surveillance (helicopters, drones), radio eavesdropping, hacking domestic communications (cell phones, internet, etc.), social media, PR (‘social engagement plans’), undercover police and collaborating informants (Brown et al., 2017). The cases of Standing Rock and Hambacher Forest stress the importance of corporate counterinsurgency as a lens of analysis and critical scholarly engagement. Counterinsurgency reveals a continuity of repression and ‘social engineering’ that allows us to peer into the decisions of governments and resource extraction companies—‘political reactions “from above”’. Counterinsurgency is about ‘social engineering,’ securing—‘holding’—and creating conditions that allow the completion of particular objectives: coal extraction, shareholder revenue and the organisational existence of RWE, which is intimately tied with the imperatives of the German state and its political economy. To reach these goals, RWE and the German state not only have to deal with increasingly militant resistance, but also work with novel imaginaries and narratives to ‘re-shape the past and re-imagine the future,’ through processes of naturalization and normalization of coal and the (discursive) creation of a ‘better nature’—as well as the positioning of RWE as a good corporate citizen. These narratives and practices are embedded in wider processes of social control, exploitation, injustices and violence, as industrial capitalism and extractivism require the colonisation of hearts, minds, land and nature alike.

Colonising hearts, Kilcullen reminds us, involves ‘persuading people their best interests are served by your success’—as RWE does through discourses of energy security, the threat of black-out, employment needs and local energy provision as well as the alleged need to continue the current trajectory of development and financial growth. ‘Minds,’ meanwhile, refers to ‘convincing them that you can protect them, and that resisting you is pointless,’ which is done by dividing, ‘pacifying’ and repressing opposition. In addition to legitimising RWE’s coalmining activities, counterinsurgency practices serve to habituate people into enchanting (industrial) lifestyles with the promise of new freedoms and financial growth. ‘Minds,’ meanwhile, refers to ‘convincing them that you can protect them, and that resisting you is pointless,’ which is done by dividing, ‘pacifying’ and repressing opposition. In addition to legitimising RWE’s coalmining activities, counterinsurgency practices serve to habituate people into enchanting (industrial) lifestyles with the promise of new freedoms and experiences with new technologies, a ‘better nature’ and a ‘better future’, ignoring the plethora of social, financial and ecological signs that confirm this path as self-destructive, ecologically unsustainable and creating social instability and/or conflict. Consequently, human relationships to nature become mediated through (commercialised) touristic experiences and recreational opportunities, while the inherent systemic violence is normalised, proclaimed as the ‘higher good,’ and subsequently invisibilised.

The Straße der Energie (energy route), and Sophienhöhe merge mining (and biodiversity offsets) with a particular type of
ecotourism, and keeping in mind: terra nova and the larger context of resistance, these projects appear as a type of low-intensity ‘counterinsurgency ecotourism’ (Devine, 2014: 984), which combines the ecological violence of extractive industries with that of conservation and land control (Peluso & Lund, 2011; Sullivan, 2006). Following Mar晏en and Verweijen’s (2016: 276) ‘militarisation by consumption’, this represents a low-intensity and subtle articulation of ‘consumption by militarisation’ that encourages residents to consume drinks and food, spectacularised mining experiences and ‘new natures’, while simultaneously attempting to discredit resistance through indirectly persuading the hearts and minds of the general public. ‘Consumption by militarisation’ allows RWE to capture, degrade/transform ecosystems and then ‘out-source’ experiences of nature that the people from Biur, a village adjacent to the Hambacher Forest, could experience by simply leaving their front doors. In short, RWE is ‘grabbing green’ through constructing new natures (Corson, MacDonald, & Neimark, 2013) and playing a particular politics of accumulation by conservation (Bischler & Fletcher, 2015) or, more accurately, accumulation by restoration (Huff and Brock, forthcoming). Sophienhöhe transforms nature into a destination, separate from ordinary human life and - sold as a single serving experience between work weeks, while the earth is mined and old-growth forests are destroyed. Meanwhile, recultivation offsets help to construct corporate oxymorons of ‘sustainable coal’ or ‘green mining’ (Kirsch, 2010; see; Sullivan, 2013), fundamental to the company’s legitimacy, as it claims to ‘upgrade nature,’ to create a ‘better nature’ and a ‘better future’ through the use of green economic logic, novel spectacles and narratives. Offsetting here not only secures the continued accumulation by restoration, but also constitutes a managerial technique of resistance through indirectly persuading the hearts and minds of the general public.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank all research participants, Dinah Rajak and our three anonymous reviewers and the editor for their very thoughtful, useful and, at times, difficult comments. Alexander Dunlap would further like to thank the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam for their general support. This paper was financially supported by the ESRC (ES/S000173/1) and the German Studies Foundation. Research data is confidential and cannot be made public.

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