

Stephens-Griffin,, Nathan, Lampkin, Jack
ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5104-8758>, Wyatt, Tanya and Stephenson, Carol (2021) "It Often Feels Like You Are Talking to a Wall": Police and Private Security Responses to the Campaign to Protect Pont Valley Against Opencast Coal Extraction. *Critical Criminology*, 29. pp. 199-214.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10612-021-09571-3>

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“It Often Feels Like You Are Talking to a Wall”: Police and Private Security Responses to the Campaign to Protect Pont Valley Against Opencast Coal Extraction

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Accepted: 3 April 2021 / Published online: 18 May 2021
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Abstract

Conflict between police, private security and political protesters is a topic that has been researched widely in criminology and other disciplines (e.g., Choudry 2019; Gilmore et al. 2019; Goyes and South 2017; Jackson et al. 2018; Rigakos 2002; South 1988; Weiss 1978). Adopting a green criminological lens, this article seeks to contribute to this rich body of research by examining police and private security responses to campaigning against opencast (open-pit) coal mining in Pont Valley, County Durham, United Kingdom (UK). Based on qualitative interviews, the article examines activists’ perceptions of responses to their campaign. Our findings reveal that rather than acting as neutral arbiters, police colluded with private interests, overlooking the abusive behavior of private security and bailiffs, particularly during the eviction of a protest camp at the proposed mining site. Activists believed that their right to protest was not respected, that their safety was jeopardized, and that police had willfully ignored a wildlife crime perpetrated by the mining company in order to enable mining to go ahead. Our article argues that the Pont Valley case fits into a wider pattern of repression of environmentalism in the UK, supporting Gilmore and colleagues’ (2019) argument that a progressive transformation in policing has been overstated.

Introduction

Despite overwhelming scientific evidence of the urgency with which we must abandon fossil fuels to avoid ecological catastrophe, and despite the United Kingdom’s (UK) pledge to end coal power by 2024 (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy 2020; Vaughan 2018), coal mining continues in the UK. Banks Group Limited (hereafter “Banks”) started working on its Bradley opencast (open-pit) site in the “Pont Valley” area, between Dipton and Leadgate in County Durham, in May 2018, despite significant and sustained objections from the local community and environmental activists (Banks Group 2018; Engelbrecht 2018).

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Adopting a green criminological lens, this article examines the Campaign to Protect Pont Valley (CPPV), which formed to oppose the actions of Banks, and seeks to explore the impact of state and private policing on the campaign and the activists themselves. Based on qualitative interviews with activists, the research presents several key findings. This article begins by placing the CPPV in an appropriate historical context in relation to the history of opencast mining, before offering an overview of the key events. The article then presents a justification for the adoption of a green criminological lens, before examining other relevant theoretical and empirical literature upon which the study builds—for example, work on private security and policing protest. The article then gives a summary of the methodological approach.

The article is structured around three key themes: the treatment of activists; police ignoring a wildlife crime; and police ignoring complaints about security. The article argues that the CPPV fits into a wider picture of repression of environmentalism in the UK, supporting Gilmore and colleagues' (2019, 2020) argument that a politically progressive transformation in protest policing has been overstated. At a time when dependence on fossil fuels herald ecological catastrophe, police appear to have prioritized the interests of private profit over those of local communities, activists, and the environment. While this article centers on the experience and perception of protesters, and the views of the police, private security service and Banks are not examined here, a future article will adopt a wider focus, and will examine the positions of police, private security and Banks in more depth, as well as those of locals who supported the establishment of the opencast site.

Opencast Mining and the Pont Valley Campaign

Opencast (or open-pit) mining is a method of coal extraction whereby the “coal is extracted by removing the soil and rock materials (overburden)” to enable mining (Mukherjee and Pahari 2019: 2). By contrast, deep mining coal “is extracted by tunneling underground” in order to access coal resources that exist under the Earth's surface (Mukherjee and Pahari 2019: 2; see also Stretesky et al. 2014).

As opencast coal mining operations expanded in the UK in the 1950s, so did opposition to it. Activists united on the commonly held beliefs that opencast coal mines (unlike deep mining) would have a detrimental impact on the lives of local communities (Beynon et al. 2000). These concerns parallel the apprehensions of contemporary communities exposed to unconventional fracking operations in the UK, which are operated with the aim of extracting gas from deeply formed impermeable shale formations, but require considerable surface disturbance (Lampkin 2018; Lampkin and Wyatt 2020).

It is arguable that this feeling of being ignored by the state, and the lack of attention paid to community views and objections, has exacerbated assemblages of environmental protest in the UK in relation to opencast coal mining. Brown and Speigal (2017: 102) sought to test this by seeking to “identify how contemporary resistance to coal is manifested and entangled with broader configurations of economic and political power.” They investigated and compared resistance to coal in two different areas with opencast extraction sites—Ffos-y-Fran in South Wales (including the proposed Nant Llseg extension plans), and the IndoMet project in Central Kalimantan (Indonesia). They found that Ffos-y-Fran, the UK's largest operational coalmine, had “become a symbolic target for climate activists exasperated with the slow pace of decarbonization” (Brown and Speigal 2017: 105). Despite a long-history of mining in South Wales and in the immediate localities around Ffos-y-Fran

and nearby Merthyr Tydfil, Brown and Speigal (2017) argue that wealth generated from the mines has not stayed in the area: some segments of this district of Merthyr are among the most economically deprived areas of South Wales. As a result, the mining site was perceived by many local people and activists as another short-term "quick-quid" industry.

There have been longstanding efforts to mine for coal in Pont Valley: in 1986, the Durham County Council rejected a formal planning application from the National Coal Board—at that point still a nationalized entity (Laville 2018). Further applications, rejections and appeals continued in the intervening decades until 2015, when an appeal against a 2011 rejection resulted in the private company, UK Coal, gaining permission to mine (Laville 2018). UK Coal went bankrupt in 2017, but the planning license was taken over by Banks, who decided to proceed with the project.

The CPPV was established to stop opencast coal mining in the valley (Protect Pont Valley 2018). In 2018, an 86,806-signature petition demanding the revocation of the license was submitted to then-Home Secretary, Sajid Javid (Coal Action Network 2018a). Javid, and subsequent Home Secretaries, have thus far refused to revoke the license.

There have been several notable events in the campaign and, in the interests of brevity, we cannot provide an in-depth discussion of all of them, but of particular significance is the discovery of great crested newts (see "Police Ignoring Wildlife Crime" section below), the establishment of the activist protest camp, and the camp's subsequent eviction. In 2018, activists initiated a civil case alleging that Banks had perpetrated a wildlife crime in the establishment of the mine on ground known to be a natural habitat of the great crested newt—an animal protected under European Union legislation (Hope 2018; UK Coal 2014). As of March 2020, the case is starting over after judicial review found that the lower courts had made errors in judgment in not allowing a different court case against Banks to go ahead due to a technicality.

Following the failure of petitions and other methods of opposition, on Friday, March 2, 2018, a protest camp was established at the intended opencast site (Coal Action Network 2018b). Composed of local residents and people from farther away, the camp was established on the A692 (bi-directional roadway), near the junction with the A693, thereby ensuring that it had a degree of local visibility. The camp aimed to protect the valley, support the community campaign against the mine, and work to stop fossil fuel extraction. Activists spoke to ecologists when planning and constructing the camp to ensure that it would not harm the local ecology (e.g., the great crested newts, nesting birds). It received limited coverage in the media (Engelbrecht 2018), until the point at which the activists were evicted by force.

The protest camp lasted fifty days, through snowfall and a wave of sub-zero temperatures dubbed the "Beast From the East," before the activists were evicted by force on April 19 and 20, 2018 (Coal Action Network 2018b). The timing of the eviction was significant because Banks had to "commence winning and working of minerals" on the site before June 3, 2018—the date by which planning permission would expire (The Planning Inspectorate 2015). The eviction lasted three days (the site was monitored on April 21, 2018) and received coverage in the local news publication, *The Chronicle* (Eden and Collings 2018), and rolling coverage throughout the day in *The Northern Echo* (2018). Protesters had resisted eviction with a variety of tactics including multiple "lock-ons,"¹ deploying a metal tripod as a blockade, attaching themselves to wheelie bins full of concrete, and

¹ A "lock-on" is a tactic whereby activists lock themselves together or to an object (such as machinery or a gate) in order to make it harder for them to be removed.

climbing trees (Eden and Collings 2018). The Network for Police Monitoring reported on activists' condemnation of police and bailiffs for unnecessary violence and sexist and abusive behavior during the evictions (NetPol 2018). Several campaigners were arrested in the course of the eviction (NetPol 2018). Criminal prosecutions followed and activists argued in court that they were trying to prevent a wildlife crime. Although the activists were found not guilty of aggravated trespass on these grounds, they were given restraining orders preventing them from going near the site (BBC 2018; Breen 2018). This "bailing away" of activists represents a significant example of tacit and indirect criminalization of further activism by those individuals by the court.

Despite Banks' successful establishment of the site, protest and direct action continues, most notably in response to Banks' application to expand further. In February 2020, Extinction Rebellion activists blockaded and later broke into the site temporarily halting mining as part of a 3-day action (Havery 2020; Ng 2020).

Theorizing Environmental Protest

This article examines the events surrounding the CPPV through a green criminological lens. Green criminologists seek to identify crime and harm against the environment and state responses thereto (Brisman et al. 2018; Nurse 2013; Walters et al. 2013). The justification for this approach is threefold. First, as we discuss below, a key element of the CPPV was a specific desire to prevent a wildlife crime from being perpetrated by Banks. The centrality of this wildlife crime to the case demands a lens that foregrounds such forms of crime and harm. Second, green criminology and ecological campaigns often work in tandem towards the shared goal of identifying and addressing environmental crime and harm. A green criminological examination of the policing of protest at Pont Valley allows us to give specific attention to ecological dimensions of harm, as well as harm to protesters and the community, which might not be possible through a social movement sociological lens. Third, green criminology uncovers power relationships between actors (White 2013), revealing the collusion of states and corporations in committing environmental harm, including wildlife crimes.

White (2013) and Hasler and colleagues (2020) argue that the role of activists has been crucial to protecting the environment as this provides the groundswell of external pressure necessary to bring about legislative/regulatory action and criminalization of environmentally harmful practices. Such external pressure is not always successful in achieving the desired legislative change, however. Green criminologists have been influential in highlighting the (often bloody) power struggles between the state and activists (see, e.g., Goyes 2016). In the Amazon rainforest, for example, Boekhout van Solinge and Kuijpers (2013: 199) note how "in Brazil's Pará state alone, 772 human rights and forest activists were murdered between 1971 and 2004," and they describe the extent of human conflict over land, natural resources and biodiversity in the region. Similarly, McClanahan (2014) discusses the privatization of the Cochabamba water system of Bolivia in 1998. In this instance, public opposition to private water contracts grew rapidly and when "Bolivian authorities refused to back down, protestors took to the streets and were met with repressive violence from the state military, leaving dozens wounded and one 17-year-old protestor dead" (McClanahan 2014: 403–404). These examples demonstrate that political economy plays a tremendous role in relations between the state and environmental activists. Hasler and colleagues (2020)

highlight the alarming number of environmentalists killed in recent years while opposing corporations and/or the state—197 in 2017, according to Watts (2018).

In addition to violence, there have been efforts to delegitimize activists with labels like “eco-terrorist” and to employ counter-terrorism means in order to police environmentalists, thereby heightening the danger faced by activists. The use of terms like “terrorist” and “extremist” to delegitimize environmental and animal rights causes has been discussed widely (Choudry 2019; Lovitz 2010; Potter 2011). Brock and Dunlap (2018) consider this labeling of environmentalists in relation to wider corporate counter-insurgency strategies, intended to legitimize fossil fuel extraction, and stigmatize, intimidate, and criminalize activists. This strategy made news headlines in the UK when a leaked document produced by the Counter Terrorism Policing South East (CTPSE) listed Extinction Rebellion alongside neo-Nazi and jihadist groups as potential terrorists (Grierson and Dodd 2020).

The UK has seen significant environmental campaigning against the expansion of the unconventional shale gas industry (Gilmore et al. 2016, 2020; Short and Szolucha 2019). Unlike the Brazilian and Bolivian examples, discussed above, anti-fracking activism in the UK has been comparatively successful: after intense environmental resistance, a second ban on fracking was implemented by the government in November 2019. While such activism was met with fierce state responses (Gilmore et al. 2016), environmental activists were successful in ensuring a series of legislative changes that resulted in restrictions to what fracking companies can and cannot do when it comes to pollution, waste disposal and anthropogenically induced seismicity, such as the Infrastructure Act 2015 (see Lampkin and Wyatt 2020). What green criminology foregrounds in all of these examples is the power relationships that exist between the state and environmental defenders that are underpinned by the anthropocentrism of the capitalist political economy. The importance and role of power is taken from green criminology’s critical roots (Agnew 2020; Brisman and South 2013; Lynch 1990; Lynch and Stretesky 2014; White 2013).

Critical criminology places crime and crime control in the context of economic, political, and social power dynamics in society, with a particular sensitivity to the material conditions of capitalism (Hall et al. 1978; Scraton 1987; Taylor et al. 1973). As such, it is important to understand the Pont Valley case in terms of the state’s longstanding historical use of police and private security to disrupt, repress and undermine political opposition in Western capitalist liberal democracies and elsewhere (see, e.g., Choudry 2019; Goyes and South 2017; Rigakos 2002; South 1988; Weiss 1978). Ellefsen’s (2016) examination of strategic shifts on the part of protesters and private and public security rests on an analysis of “push–pull” relational dynamics. The perception of the seriousness of threat offered to the established order and power stakeholders by protesters leads quickly to a heightening/intensification of action on the part of what he refers to as “plural policing”—the alliance of private security and public services. Recent research has demonstrated the police’s tendency to prioritize the interests of fossil fuel companies over the rights of protesters in the UK. For example, Jackson and colleagues (2018) conducted fieldwork with activists and police officers at the Barton Moss fracking site and found that, in practice, uniformed police’s purported commitment to a human rights approach to protest facilitation was contingent on the focus and form of political activism. Police distinguished between what was “acceptable” and “unacceptable” and decided who has rights based on these categories. Drawing on empirical data on protesters’ experiences of arrest and the criminal justice process, Gilmore (2019) argues that claims of a politically progressive transformation in protest policing since the 1984–1985 miners’ strike in Britain have been overstated. Furthermore, the wider ecological context of these political dynamics should also be acknowledged.

Robbins' (2019: 3) work on political ecology reveals "the political forces at work in environmental access, management, and transformation ... politics is inevitably ecological and that ecology is inherently political." Political ecologists "accept the idea that costs and benefits associated with environmental change are for the most part distributed among actors unequally" (Bryant and Bailey (1997: 28–29), quoted in Robbins (2019: 16)). Fossil fuel extraction is, therefore, inseparable from existing social and economic power dynamics and has significant political implications in relation to social inequalities.

Methods

The goal of our research was to examine whether and how state and/or private responses to activism have impacted the CPPV. In doing so, we aimed to provide a criminological account of the relationship between activism, the mining company, and the state. Our approach was inductive, but indicative research questions included: How has public/private policing impacted activists? How do activists feel that state and private policing has impacted the success and trajectory of the campaign? Which events/experiences have been significant in relation to the campaign?

This article draws on data from qualitative semi-structured interviews with twelve activists who were involved in the campaign. The sample included a combination of residents and those from outside North East England, experienced activists, and those for whom this was their first experience of protest policing. The research used purposive snowball sampling to enlist participants. All interview participants gave informed consent prior to participating. Interviews lasted around one hour and focused on generating in-depth accounts of participants' perspectives and experiences in relation to the CPPV. Interviews were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes across the interviews. The project received ethical approval before data collection commenced.

Findings and Discussion

Three key themes were identified in relation to the impact of policing and security at Pont Valley: treatment of activists; police ignoring a wildlife crime; and police ignoring complaints about Banks' private security. Each is discussed below.

Treatment of Activists

The dominant theme to emerge from the qualitative interviews concerned activists' treatment by police, including Protest Liaison Officers (or "PLOs") and private security. Key among these were perceptions of a lack of respect for activists' rights, including their right to protest. These findings are not new or unique but support a large body of literature which has demonstrated this to be the case in similar contexts in the UK (see, e.g., Brock and Dunlap 2018; Gilmore 2019; Gilmore et al. 2019, 2020; Jackson et al. 2018) and elsewhere (see, e.g., Brock and Dunlap 2018; Goyes and South 2017; Hasler et al. 2020). This was keenly felt by participants. Bonnie² drew a direct parallel to the miners' strike of

² All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

1984–1985 when describing the way the police treated the activists: "I think they thought it was the miners' strike. Like, it was 1984."

Kim emphasized her frustration at being treated as though she were potentially violent: "you know, we're not domestic terrorists or anything. We're not doing anything violent or harmful: we're just standing up for what we believe is our right."

Greer, an activist who was present at the eviction, felt the police engaged in arbitrary arrests, and described the experience of arrest for breaching the peace:

I was just walking on the pavement close to the mine, there was quite a lot of police force. ... I went to the demo and then when I went a bit away from the demo because I wanted to go back home, the police just arrested me.... They arrested me for suspicion of breaching the peace. Breaching the peace is... threatening to commit a violent act, which I was not doing. They kept me at the police station although they had my name and everything. They kept me there for 51 hours because they said I was in danger of breaching the peace if they released me. ... It was totally wrong.

Greer observed another activist being arrested by the police without reasonable grounds and argued that the police seemed to target those who were not local to the area, and whose appearance was stereotypically that of an activist.

One person was just sitting with some locals but he had dreadlocks and was a bit young, close to the future mine and the police arrived and arrested him for suspicion of criminal damage. He had a [bike] lock on him and because they found the bike lock, they arrested him for a day I think. I don't think he got charged. [If] the lock had been on an elderly, a local, the person would not have been arrested.

Kim concurred, arguing that she had witnessed the police subjecting an activist to arbitrary arrest:

I had taken her a bean wrap and she'd taken one bite of the bean wrap and [the officer] went, "I'll have her" and for absolutely no reason. ... She was doing no more than just standing on the road, so she was sectioned away.

Emma described a similar incident: "We had people who were arrested because they were walking down the street, because they looked like they might be protesters, because they didn't fit a stereotypical 'northern' look."

For Michael, the experience fundamentally changed his view of the police. He described his efforts to engage with police as falling on deaf ears:

This is my first time ever having interaction with the police really. And it is very frustrating ... the policing has never felt like it has been done in a compassionate way or a way that is listening to you and taking you sincerely. ... With the police it's just like they're always treating you with suspicion. ... It often feels like you are talking to a wall. ... Speaking to robots.

The extent of the police's hostility to CPPV was revealed when the police tried to stop activists from hosting an open-mic night at a local licensed venue. The venue had become a space for activists to socialize, sing and drink together. When police learned this, they threatened the venue's alcohol license and warned them against the open-mic night. Undeterred, the venue responded by allowing the activists to proceed. Isaac argued:

They were kind of bending the rules, and bending over backwards to allow us to use their space, even though the police had ... threatened them and said they

would come and shut it down if we were doing anything illegal. So that showed quite a nice amount of support from them, they were willing to still have us in their community, even though they were getting police visits.

Activists felt that the actions of police demonstrated a disregard for their safety during the protests. One example of this was the way police dealt with “lock-ons,” which Emma felt placed her at risk:

What they did was they picked us up, without any boards, without any support on the lock-on mechanism. ... Because they didn't have boards, we weren't supported properly; they were carrying us at different speeds, which, considering we were linked ... was making our arms bend in not-great ways. There was no injury necessarily, but there easily could have been and I don't think it was properly risk assessed. ... They didn't have any mechanisms to deal with direct action.

This was also evident in participants' accounts of how police dealt with protesters in tunnels. As previous research into the anti-road movements in the UK has highlighted, tunneling is a long-established tactic to deter site clearances (Plows et al. 2004; Wall 1999). Julie described what she saw as police “incompetence”:

I was being as cautious as I could be about having lots of big humans stood around a tunnel, that's got one small human underground in it and kind of trying to explain to them the safety implications of that, and saying look I'm the heaviest person that's on site, and I'm not that heavy and these tunnels haven't collapsed with me standing over them, but the twenty of you that are stood over this tunnel, you could cause a collapse, and their response was to threaten me with arrest... Later in the day, around the same issue of the tunnels, they were bringing big trucks and I think small tracked vehicles over the tunnels and on the road that was close to the tunnels ... and I was being told by some of the senior police officers that I was allowed to warn vehicle users that they may collapse the tunnels and then at some point got shoved out of the road when I tried... like I was literally just told it was okay to do that by one cop then another cop threw me out of the road and threatened me with arrest. Unsurprisingly it was completely inconsistent. I was trying to manage the safety of the situation and being prevented from doing so by the police. ... When things calmed down a bit more I was threatened with arrest multiple times.

Isaac, one of the activists in the tunnels, described his experience:

They kept driving diggers or machinery or something, I could only hear noises of vehicles driving really close to the tunnel edge and obviously it wasn't the most secure tunnel, it was quite nerve wracking feeling the vibrations in the earth, and not knowing how close they were. And at one point they kept walking scaffolding towards the tripod, and the quickest path was directly over the tunnel bit... it felt fairly secure but not enough that they could do what they liked, and it wouldn't collapse. The point where I decided to leave and get arrested was at like 1am, because I woke up with a mound of dirt on my lap where part of the tunnel had collapsed and so I decided it wasn't safe anymore to be in there ... and got out at that point, it was all a bit scary.

Julie described several other incidents where she felt activists' safety was jeopardized by Banks' security during the eviction, under the ambivalent observation of the police:

The police allowed various things to happen on that day that they themselves didn't necessarily do, but that they shouldn't have allowed the company to do, for example, taking one person out of a lock on and then attaching the lock on to a vehicle and then the vehicle dragging the lock-on with the person still attached. ... Taking away the blankets and shelters from people, and leaving people with nothing as it got dark, and stopping people from bringing food or water.

Stephen, a freelance environmentalist filmmaker who was making a documentary, argued that the police frustrated his filming of evictions claiming that his (legitimate) press card was a fake, while refusing to call the hotline to verify it.

They went to quite some lengths to try and disrupt me filming, keep me out of the area ... basically they didn't believe that I was a journalist because I was seen as too close to the protesters. ... It very much felt that they totally disregarded my work, my professionalism. ... During the eviction of the camp I was largely away behind police lines where other journalists who had the same card as me, but working for a local newspaper or local TV were allowed past police lines to get a bit closer to where people were being arrested, as you'd expect the media to have those rights. ... I guess it really outraged me to be honest, I felt very much singled out because of my stance.

Stephen later complained to the police but no action was taken by the police. He later discovered that the police, who approve or deny applications for press cards, had revoked his card, which had serious long-term implications for his reputation, professional standing, and ability to earn a living.

Police Ignoring Wildlife Crime

Participants felt that the police were more interested in policing activist behavior than they were the behavior of Banks, despite the fact that the mining company was breaking the law. This aligns with Jackson and colleagues' (2018) research on anti-fracking protest, which found that police prioritized the interests of fracking companies over protesters. At Pont Valley, activists felt that the police did not take claims of Banks' alleged wildlife crime seriously. Julie described her experience after discovering a legally-protected great crested newt species on the site:

I started to try and report the wildlife crime to the police to say there's ... a wildlife crime is about to take place. ... Police seemed to be pre-briefed about that and they weren't prepared to take a statement from me. ... The police were telling me that they would not take my statement and I tried to ring the non-emergency police number and the emergency number ... to try and report the wildlife crime that was about to take place to prevent it from happening and ... the call handlers treated me badly. ... The call handlers didn't know what wildlife crimes were. ... They said a wildlife crime officer would get in touch with me and I didn't get a call. When I called again I was told there was no wildlife crime officer in Durham Police which was the reason for my second call and the call handler basically told me to go away and hung up.

The unwillingness of the police to engage with activist complaints fed a sense of injustice. Stephen claimed:

I guess it's not enforcing their own laws through their own duty because of like, who is deemed to be on the wrong side of the law and who is deemed to have reported the

crime etc. Like, they would come out in full force to evict the camp but when there's any question that maybe Banks group are doing something unlawful. ... That's something that they can't even entertain the fact that there's some truth in that. So I'd say the police were kind of very dismissive, not very willing to engage with any protesters about potential wildlife crimes etc.

During the prosecution of those arrested in the eviction, Julie argued that the police had lied about the evidence. She claimed the police refused to examine the photographs' metadata in order to confirm its veracity. In court, the judge called a short recess to allow an examination of the original photograph. The activists were subsequently found not guilty of aggravated trespass on the grounds that they were attempting to stop a wildlife crime. The police's refusal to investigate the wildlife crime, however, amounted to a significant intervention in Banks' favor, ensuring the company could begin soil-stripping ahead of its deadline of June 3, 2018. As mentioned above, the activists have brought a civil case against the company for the wildlife crime and the case is on-going.

Police Ignoring Complaints About Security

In comparison to protesters, private security companies inhabit a privileged position vis-à-vis the police because private security represent property owners and act as their agents (Hasler et al. 2020; South 1988). Our research confirmed this prioritizing of private interests. Indeed, the police's apparent prioritizing of private interests over those of protesters was further evidenced in the cooperative relationship between police and private security.

Patricia felt that police ignored harmful behavior of private security at the site during the eviction process in order to put the interests of Banks above those of the protesters:

I think the police during the evictions were completely out of their depth, they didn't respect anything, they definitely allowed the security guards to get away with stuff that no civilian should be allowed to get away with and they're a bunch of thugs. There's no doubt about that whatsoever, they proved it over and over again, they intimidated us on the street, they've intimidated us walking around there on footpaths. ... So, I don't think the police in that instance were actually doing their job, which was to keep the peace.

When activists reported incidents or alleged intimidation by private security to the police, they found them unwilling to investigate serious allegations. Kim describes her lack of success phoning the police:

They've logged it, or they've given you a crime number, but the incident ... where the security man threatened to set the dog on me while I was on the public footpath, which was nowhere near the boundary of Banks' site. ... I tried phoning at the time, but I couldn't get through and I spent some time afterwards phoning and eventually ... I got through to Durham. ... And Durham's Constabulary's reaction was ... they didn't believe me; I had to assert myself that this is what had happened and then they went off to check something and they came back and it just went absolutely nowhere. Oh, they said, "Well, you could ring the security company." Well, it's the security company that I'm complaining about. They're the ones that I'm feeling threatened and intimidated by. ... It was almost like this call handler was trying to find reasons to explain or excuse the fact that a private security man was trying to set a dog on a member of the public.

There were also issues around privacy and surveillance. Greer was alarmed when private security started addressing activists by name—which they had deliberately not used at the site, and which they had provided to police only when required by law to do so. For Greer, this suggested collusion; police had shared their private information with private security without permission. Similarly, Emma felt the police acted in the interests of Banks, and dismissed legitimate concerns of activists:

It very much felt like they were not on our side, they were not even being impartial... I feel like they ... were following the line of the law and people were trespassing, but there was no listening to reason or argument for why that was happening, and actually the court case that happened in August where everybody was found not-guilty because they were trying to prevent a wildlife crime from being committed, suggests that maybe they should have listened to the reasoning behind it. But they were absolutely just not interested in it, they knew that that was Banks Groups' land, and that we shouldn't be on it, and therefore it was in their interest to make us leave and to arrest the people who were stopping that from happening.

Greer described being sat on by police at the site, despite not resisting arrest and having recently sustained a head injury from a security guard:

The security person just grabbed me and smashed me quite violently to the ground so I hit my head. Then the police arrived and they ... sat on me, although I was not resisting anything. ... They did not really take into account the fact that I had hurt my head and it took a long time before I could see a doctor at the police station.

Kim argued, "[Private security] were just really encouraging hostility and violence." This becomes more apparent when accounts of abusive language are explored further. For instance, Greer explained:

I was just in front of the gate walking maybe a bit too slowly and one of the security, the one with the dog, said something like, "Get out of my gate or my dog is gonna bite your fucking pussy" which I reported to the police and then nothing came out of that.

Abusive language was frequently gendered, sometimes sexual in nature, and often directed against women and non-binary people by male private security workers. Activists claimed police did not act on this abusive and threatening behavior. Kim offers another example:

We were near the secondary gate and the police had given that designated post a protest site where the little orange tent was, and there was a couple of young women there and this ginger-bearded security guy said something along the lines about, "I'd give her one" and I confronted him through the fence and said, "What did you just say? Who are you talking about?" He says, "Her, with the glasses and I'd give her one."

Isaac described overhearing private conversations between the bailiffs during the eviction, which further underlined the violent language, homophobia and gendered hostility aimed towards activists:

Because I was in the tunnels, they forgot quite often that I was there, and so they would talk around me, and so I heard a lot of what they were saying to each other, and like some of the stuff they were saying was how annoying we were and how much they wished they could use napalm on us and like all of this really like horrible

stuff.... And when two of the people from one lock-on got arrested, they were joking about them being ‘dykes’ and being a lesbian couple, and just using all this like horrible language.

The gendered dynamics of the abuse offers an interesting example of the way in which ecological conflict can link to and exacerbate tensions between social groups (e.g. ethnicity, gender, social class) (Robbins 2019). Adding to the accounts of disrespect and abuse of activists, Michael described some spiteful non-consensual physical contact perpetrated by a private security guard while he was engaged in a lock-on.

I was lying on the ground with my butt facing the site, and one of the security guys from the other side of the fence just kept shoving his foot up my asshole, which I really didn’t like, and couldn’t get him to stop it. ... They are allowed to use reasonable force to move you or whatever, but that was beyond reasonable force that was just violating me and shoving their foot up my butt.

The pattern that emerged from activists’ accounts consisted of: police not seeing or reacting to the harassment or possibly even criminal behavior from bailiffs and private security; police directly or indirectly endangering the safety of activists at the site; police not responding to reports from the activists that they were victims of harassment and intimidation; police not taking reports of a wildlife crime seriously; and police violating the rights and privacy of the activists through arbitrary arrest and by sharing their personal information with private security. This relationship between the police and private interests is one between powerful actors that has been witnessed in similar contexts, for example, recent protests against fracking in the UK (see Brock 2020; Gilmore et al. 2019, 2020; Jackson et al. 2018) and protests against opencast coal mining in Germany (see Brock and Dunlap 2018). As stated above, a similar dynamic existed between police and private security in the fracking protests in the UK. Thus, police colluding with private security to maintain the status quo is just an expression of police acting as an arm of the capitalist state, as has been widely documented elsewhere (see, e.g., Choudry 2019; Goyes and South 2017; Rigakos 2002; South 1988; Weiss 1978).

Viewing the CPPV through a green criminological lens highlights a number of aspects of the incident that might otherwise remain unexamined. The first is the occurrence of both environmental crime and environmental harm. In this case, the environmental crime is a wildlife crime, where Banks has likely destroyed the habitat of a protected species. The broader environmental harm is the “ordinary act” of ecocide (Agnew 2020) apparent in opencast mining that has degraded the local habitats and ecology of this community. Whereas such issues are gaining more prominence, in general, environmental crimes and harms still remain at the margins, though they are worthy of analysis. Another aspect made visible from a green criminological examination is the response to environmental crime. Much green criminological scholarship seeks to offer solutions or actions to counter environmental harm. Likewise, ecological campaigns take action to stop environmental harm. As with many ecological campaigns, the CPPV can be viewed as working in tandem with green criminology towards identifying and addressing environmental crime and harm. Possibly the core aspect that is brought to the foreground with a green criminological analysis is the power relationships of the different actors at Pont Valley. The possible cooperation between the state (police) and the corporation against the seemingly peaceful protest for the environment provides further evidence of the state supporting private interests over others.

Pont Valley may be a small incident in the larger scheme of things, but it likely provides a glimpse of what is to come. Environmental awareness and the active support and protest for it is probably going to increase as the consequences of climate change become more apparent. The experiences of the CPPV (and other) protesters may help to prepare future activists for the resistance that they might receive. The CPPV is also useful in underlining the political role of the police in suppressing protest and protecting the interests of fossil capitalism (Brock and Dunlap 2018).

Conclusion

Overwhelmingly, participants in this study felt that, as opposed to acting as neutral arbiters in the protests, police had worked with Banks and their security personnel against the activists. The decision taken by Durham Constabulary not to take seriously activists' complaints of a potential wildlife crime occurring on the site, ultimately amounted to a significant intervention in the interests of the mining company. Had the police investigated and acted upon these complaints—which would later be vindicated through a not-guilty verdict of the activists in court—Banks might not have been able to begin work ahead of its June 2018 deadline, and planning permission would have lapsed. The prioritizing of Banks' interests over those of protesters and of the environment supports the argument that claims of a political progressive transformation in policing have been overstated (Gilmore 2019; Gilmore et al. 2019, 2020). We found little evidence of a purported shift towards "dialogue policing" and, instead, we encountered a story of determined activists whose rights and safety were curtailed by police. Activists were hardened by the experiences, and often simply not at all surprised by police conduct.

This was not a straightforward expression of police brutality, but a form of contingent policing that willfully ignored certain behavior, and then responded to other behavior with full force. According to activists, police repeatedly prioritized and foregrounded the interests and profits of the mining company at the expense of their rights. For activists, the response of the police reveals an ongoing commitment to the protection of private property, which has resulted in the criminalization of those that challenge the logic that private interests legitimize environmental damage. The handling of the CPPV fits into a wider picture of repression of environmentalism in the UK (Gilmore et al. 2016, 2019, 2020; Schlembach 2018), and represents a significant recent instance of the state's historical repression of threats to capital in Western liberal democracies (Choudry 2019; Hart et al. 2020).

It is scientifically and politically irrefutable that the greatest threat facing the future of humanity is climate change, caused, in large part, by an ongoing reliance on fossil fuels. Participants in this project, however, felt that police officers collaborated with Banks and their security to ensure the successful extraction of coal and the degradation of those who seek to protect global and local wellbeing of the environment. That is evidenced through activists' stories of police sharing data with private security guards, arbitrary arrests and harassment, the police's unwillingness to explore complaints made by protesters against private security forces, and perhaps, most significantly, not acting on reports of a wildlife crime, thus removing the last legal and regulatory obstacle in the way of Banks' attempts to establish the mine before its deadline. From a political ecological and green criminological perspective, the police appear to be actively complicit in harm perpetrated against the environment and in the impending ecological catastrophe resulting from our continued reliance on fossil fuels—the harm of which has been and will continue to be distributed unevenly

(Robbins 2019). Activists' right to protest, established under the 1998 Human Rights Act, and the protection afforded to great crested newts under British and European law, each appear to have been dismissed by police at Pont Valley, with disastrous consequences for the environment.

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