

Negotiations of Justice in the Anthropocene: Mining Conflicts, Unacknowledged Loss and Responsibility for Absent Others

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Abstract: Starting from the premise that modern legal institutions are increasingly challenged by the temporal and spatial implications of Anthropocene phenomena, this article shows how various civil-society actors struggle for a more just approach to coal-exit policies in the Rhineland's brown coal mining region. Contrary to general criticisms arguing that the Anthropocene narrative inherently disregards a differentiated perspective on issues of justice, I follow approaches that engage with the concept's generative tensions and situate it ethnographically. The article goes on to suggest that growing awareness of the entanglements of industrial infrastructures with planetary crises has led to local protests against mining coinciding with an engagement for future planetary habitability. Whereas mining-induced losses were previously written off as a necessary sacrifice for growth and progress, I discuss how the affected inhabitants reframe them in this emerging context as injustices on a planetary scale. Motivated by a responsibility towards non-human others and coming generations, these coal-critical actors contest official transition measures that center on 'green growth' and instead call for situated policies that account for matters of concern related to accelerated planetary change. The article concludes by arguing that the pursuit of justice in the Anthropocene is fundamentally characterized by a responsibility towards absent others, spatially and temporally.

[Anthropocene, (planetary) justice, mining conflicts, coal exit, civil-society, responsibility]

Introduction

It is early 2021, still a few months before devastating floods caused many deaths in the Ahr valley, brought large-scale damage to parts of the Erft region and the Rhineland, and reheated the cyclically waxing and waning media debate about climate change impacts in Germany. Of course, the coronavirus pandemic has been ongoing for about a year now, sparking some discussion about the links between accelerating anthropogenic habitat and biodiversity loss and the risks of zoonotic pandemics. Generally, however, this is being anticipated as a crisis that will be overcome by a mixture of patience and medical engineering. At that time, I am participating in a voluntary group of active citizens ('Aktive') at the Hambach open-pit mine in the Rhineland's brown coal region, who are protesting against mining impacts and demand a greater recognition of planetary climate change, biodiversity loss and other problems related to the Anthropocene in regional politics. We are mostly meeting in virtual calls or com-

municating via email, owing to public health restrictions or voluntary precautions. The group is all that remains of a larger self-organized network of coal-critical civil-society actors who had gathered in the mining region around the installation of the so-called *Kohlekommission* ('Coal Commission') which was in session from summer 2018 until early 2019.¹ This commission was itself inaugurated by the federal government to deliberate over possible coal-exit paths and the accompanying frameworks for structural transition (*Strukturwandel*) from an economy based on fossil fuels to renewable energy generation in Germany's brown coal regions, after the country ratified the Paris Agreement and set out its national emission goals.

As we ruminate on possible ideas for regeneration of the damaged landscape at the mines, a curious message is spreading on social media and in the news, profoundly tied to the group's own concerns: in what is dubbed a ground-breaking decision, the German constitutional court judged partly in favour of a joint lawsuit initiated by climate activists and environmental associations targeting the recently adopted national climate protection law ('Klimaschutzgesetz'). The court did indeed not support the general claim that the German government would fail to meet its constitutionally stipulated responsibility for climate mitigation in absolute terms. However, the judges did reason that the complainants' fundamental rights were being violated because the quantities of emissions permitted by the bill until 2030 will substantially reduce the remaining CO₂ budget after that date, thereby endangering virtually all of the claimants' rights to freedom protected by the constitution. On the one hand, the court's reasoning did acknowledge that CO₂-related uses of freedom will most likely have to be completely abolished if 'climate neutrality' is to be reached eventually. But its decision only obliged lawmakers to revise existing legislation in a way that ensures a more just distribution of the burden of climate protection between generations on the basis of 'intertemporal' fundamental rights of freedom ('intertemporale Freiheitssicherung').² The constitutional court's reasoning thus not only concedes the deep conjuncture between liberal democratic freedoms and fossil-fuel use that political theorist Timothy Mitchell (2009) has so vividly identified: it also addresses the threats to those freedoms posed by climate change, famously alluded to by postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009). This ruling by Germany's highest federal court of justice is therefore remarkable in that it declares climate protection a matter of constitutional priority and qualifies the conventional concept of freedom in light of intergenerational justice concerns as they relate to anthropogenic climate change. Some of my interlocutors indeed consider it a partial success that climate protection oriented to the current state of research and international agreements has become a litigious matter nationally, and most appreciate that the climate legislation in place has to be adjusted accordingly. Yet, many are rather cautious about what impact these abstract formulations will actually have on the day-

1 <https://revierperspektiven-rheinland.de/koordinierungskreis/>

2 <https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2021/bvg21-031.html>

to-day activities of anti-coal activism and their joint engagement in environmental and social concerns.

The fact that the past and present freedoms claimed by certain parts of humanity are impinging on future planetary habitability is one of the most general discoveries to have been woven into the space-time configuration referred to as the Anthropocene (cf. Chakrabarty 2021). In this context, the remarkable decision by the constitutional court illustrates how the established procedures of legal institutions – the principal vehicles for pursuing justice in liberal democracies – are being substantially challenged by the temporal and spatial scales of Anthropocene phenomena, as questions of future burden-sharing become urgent matters in the here and now. Departing from this point, I will explore critical civil-society actors' extra-legal and legal struggles for a more just approach towards the energy transition that not only includes industrial workers' interests but also anthropogenic concerns beyond CO₂-reduction, as well as the perspectives of local communities regarding their region's future. First, the article briefly summarizes the history of brown coal extraction in the Rhineland and introduces the current situation. Then, it offers a reflection on positionality in contested fields of transformation research, followed by a section that discusses the literature on extractivism and questions of justice in the Anthropocene. The next two sections trace recent developments in the local resistance to the mining industry in the context of anthropogenic climate change and the impending exit from coal. The penultimate section describes the critical engagement of self-organized civil-society actors oriented on the ideal of a 'sustainable transition'. Motivated by a responsibility towards non-human others and the coming generations, these coal-critical actors contest official transition measures that center on ideologies of 'green growth'. Instead, they call for situated policies that account for matters of concern related to accelerated planetary change. The article then concludes by arguing that the pursuit of justice in the Anthropocene is fundamentally characterized by a responsibility towards absent others, spatially and temporally.

Brown Coal Extraction in Germany's Rhineland Region

The Rhineland's mining district (*Rheinisches Revier*³) is a relatively rural area, which lies between the urban centres of Cologne, Aachen and Mönchengladbach, thus bordering on Germany's largest metropolitan area, the Rhine-Ruhr region. Historically this peri-urban area is characterized by agricultural land-use, large stretches of woodland and a comparatively low population density. It also has a long history of lignite or brown coal extraction, a soft, combustible rock geologically formed from compressed peat with a relatively low energy value and therefore a high environmental impact when

3 Curiously, this mining-centred denomination was not widely used in public discourse to refer to the area before political plans to phase out the coal industry became more concrete.

burned. The vast seams of brown coal currently exploited by some of the world's largest excavators in depths of up to 400 meters below the surface formed in the lower Rhine bay more than 10 million years ago. While small-scale extraction of deposits located closer to the surface existed before that, the Rhineland's modern brown coal industry developed around the end of the 19th century in the context of Germany's accelerating industrialization. At first, brown coal was mainly used for the production of heating briquettes and then increasingly in generating electricity in newly constructed power plants (Jansen 2017).

As a domestic energy source, brown coal played a vital role in Nazi-Germany's war economy and its concomitant policy of energy autarky. After World War II and the country's partition, brown coal extraction in the Rhineland was further intensified to supply West Germany's growing population and expanding economy with heat and electricity. Unlike domestic black coal that could not compete with cheaper black coal on the liberalizing world market, brown coal is not traded internationally because transport costs would quickly exceed the resource's energy value. For this reason it became an important building block for national energy security (*Energiesicherheit*) as a 'cheap' and reliable energy source (Kierdorf 2018). With the postwar modernization of the brown coal industry and the development of large-scale surface mines (*Großtagebaue*), the negative environmental and social impacts of resource extraction increased significantly. To date, more than 40,000 people in the Rhineland have had to relocate for mine expansion, scores of villages have been devastated, and fertile farmland and large forest areas destroyed.⁴

In the wake of the 1970s' oil shock and the growing need for a domestic energy supply, brown coal extraction received a further push, which resulted in the development of the currently still operating large-scale surface mines *Hambach*, *Garzweiler* and *Inden*. Local resistance to mining mostly came from the *Hambachgruppe*, a group of young scholars from the Technical University of Aachen that formed in the late 1970s and was active throughout the 1980s (cf. *Hambachgruppe* 1985). Otherwise, opponents of brown coal extraction were for the most part politically sidelined, their concerns never achieving widespread public support in the mining region, let alone in the rest of the country. After Germany's reunification, rationalization measures led to a stark decrease in employment in the brown coal industry over the following decade. This is why it can be argued – and I have often heard this argument from opponents of mining during my research – that the 'structural transition' has already largely been accomplished in the Rhineland's mining region, at least when it comes to the brown coal industry as a factor in regional employment (cf. Oei et al. 2020).

As the extractive industry partly forfeited its prominent position in the region's economy, opposition to mining in the Rhineland received a vital impulse from the growing climate movement after 2010. Besides climate camps and spectacular protest

⁴ Cf. <https://www.bund-nrw.de/themen/braunkohle/hintergruende-und-publikationen/verheizte-heimat/>

actions conducted at the mines, the most important development in this context was the occupation of the forest at the Hambach mine. In 2012 a small group of younger activists from outside of the region built treehouses and other protest infrastructure in the remaining patch of a formerly continuous forest area that had been cleared for brown coal extraction (cf. Krøijer 2020). Their goal was to protect it from further mine expansions and to protest against the global environmental impacts of the brown coal industry.⁵ Even though the activists were regularly evicted by police to enable planned expansions, their presence reinvigorated local resistance to the extractive industry, brought unprecedented media attention to the mining region and contributed to the public problematization of brown coal as a domestic driver of anthropogenic climate change. The rising awareness of the links between fossil-fuel use and planetary transformation in German politics culminated in the federal government's decision to phase out the brown coal industry as a national contribution to the *Paris Agreement's* climate goals ratified in 2016.

In 2018, the year I started my dissertation research, the federal government eventually inaugurated a commission with the mandate to negotiate a wide public consensus over the timeframe and conditions of exiting from coal. This so-called Coal Commission⁶ consisted of politicians, industry and union functionaries, scientists and representatives of environmental associations, as well as one citizen to represent the mining region in the west and one for the mining regions in the east of Germany. In the case of the Rhineland's mining region the person invited to represent affected citizens was a longstanding opponent of the coal industry and a member of the most vocal citizens' initiative against mining. Her appointment to the commission was a huge success for the regional anti-coal movement and sparked the formation of a self-organized network of locally active opponents of mining. During the period the coal-exit commission was in session in Berlin from the summer of 2018 until early 2019, this local 'coordination circle' (*zivilgesellschaftlicher Koordinierungskreis*) regularly assembled in a Protestant community centre in a village close to the Hambach mine. The group of usually twenty to forty participants was made up of mining-affected citizens, activists from the forest occupation, members of protest groups and anti-mining initiatives, members of environmental organizations, church groups and local representatives from the Left and Green Party, among other local stakeholders. While most of the regular participants were already connected to the fields of environmental protection, sustainable energy, or anti-coal activism prior to the commission's commencement, quite a few

5 In 2018, three of the Rhineland's brown coal-fired power plants were in the top five of the EU's largest single emitters of CO₂. Cf. <https://www.energiezukunft.eu/klimawandel/von-den-10-groessten-klimasuendern-kommen-7-aus-deutschland/>

6 The official name was *Kommission 'Wachstum, Strukturwandel und Beschäftigung'*, or 'Commission for Growth, Structural Transition and Employment', signaling the commission's economic bias (cf. KWSB 2019).

took this officially inaugurated localization of global climate politics as an opportunity to become more involved.

After conducting a number of more formal interviews with key members, I joined the circle's meetings in the autumn of 2018, when the conflict around the contested Hambach forest was escalating. At that time, coal-critical actors and environmentalists demanded the forest be protected and further mine expansions halted, at least for as long as the commission was debating a framework for exiting coal. On the other hand, the energy company operating the Rhineland's brown coal mines and power plants insisted on its right to exploit the coal deposits under the remaining forest, which incited large-scale protests and caused the biggest police operation ever conducted in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.⁷ During most of the meetings I attended, the local commission representative informed the participants about recent commission proceedings and asked for pressing issues to be brought up in negotiations with the commission. After that, the participants typically exchanged information about recent events surrounding the conflict around mining, coordinated protest activities, and discussed further steps to influence coal-exit policies from a local perspective. With the support of environmental organizations and larger protest networks, and backed by general public opinion, the locally active coal-critical actors ultimately achieved their goal of stopping the Hambach mine when the coal-exit commission officially suggested protecting the remaining forest at the edge of the mine in its final report, and both state and federal governments announced they would comply with this recommendation (Grothus and Setton 2020).

'Passively' Engaged Transformation Research

Being from the Rhineland's brown coal region myself,⁸ I still somewhat hazily remember how my mother, who worked in one of the *Umsiedlungsdörfer* ('relocation villages'), told me about mining-induced displacements and the demolition of whole landscapes for brown coal extraction around the time of my elementary school. Looking back, this is one of my first memories of injustice beyond my immediate individual involvement, as even my childhood self could not fathom how the state coerces its citizens to leave their homes for a mining company to dig coal out of the ground. More than two decades later, I returned to this constellation of problem as a doctoral researcher interested in local negotiations over exiting coal and climate change. Before my dissertation project, I was not involved in opposition to mining in the Rhineland

7 Cf. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/hambacher-forst-gruene-werfen-nrw-landesregierung-taeschung-der-oeffentlichkeit-vor-a-bec05674-fb0a-4fc8-99ba-7013c714edfb>

8 Until its recent shutdown, my hometown hosted the largest facility for the production of heating briquettes in western Germany.

and only followed the conflict sporadically on the news. But to gain access to the activities of coal-critical civil-society actors it has been advantageous and sometimes downright necessary to maintain a certain distance from the mining industry. This has led me to adopt an approach oriented towards ‘interface ethnography’ (Ortner 2010), where I mainly focus on public communication strategies or interactions with mining opponents with regard to industry actors. My own research experience thus borders on activist ethnography without being fully committed to it, as I am consciously making efforts to establish at least some level of reflexive distance from my engaged access to the field.

Although I share most concerns and agree with many of my interlocutors’ opinions on the topics of exiting coal, transition policies and eco-social politics, this distancing results in a kind of ‘passive’ engagement in which I do contribute to the group’s activities, but for the most part only if explicitly approached or to maintain rapport. The situational dynamics can sometimes mean deeper engagement such as co-writing an alternative concept for the agroecological development of post-mining landscapes and even jointly presenting it to officials of the state ministry for the environment or functionaries of the locally active mining company. Given my status as a doctoral researcher with limited resources who is not part of a larger institutional research project, I can often only contribute minimally to my interlocutors’ activities, not least because they are already well connected with various actors in the fields of NGOs, politics and science. Common assumptions about the relatively privileged and powerful position of ethnographers in researching mining-affected communities (cf. Bainton and Skrzypek 2022), which primarily developed in the context of research in the Global South, are therefore less applicable to my own ethnographic experience. So when we are not working to acquire knowledge about a mining-related issue together, I mostly learn from my interlocutors about the history, politics and impacts of the lignite mining complex. In that regard, my research experience comes closer to the educational approach outlined by Mario Krämer in this special issue. In practice, however, this interest in learning about mining-related issues from their perspective while participating in activities critical of the coal industry at times causes awkward positioning vis-à-vis my interlocutors, who typically have a clear mission and standpoint regarding perceived injustices.

In reflecting on doing research in the contested field of structural transition, social and political scientists Herberg and colleagues have coined the term ‘committed transformation research’ (*engagierte Transformationsforschung*). Instead of taking a perspective from ‘nowhere’, they argue, committed researchers are searching for a vantage point in the middle of the transformation process (Herberg et al. 2021:25). Granted that this situatedness is one of the basic principles of ethnographic research, their term nonetheless illuminates my own approach and stresses that even less ethnographically oriented social sciences recognize the impossibility of establishing an ‘objective’ distance in complex negotiation processes associated with planetary change. In this context of unavoidable personal implications, Kim Fortun formulates a justice-oriented

direction for a committed anthropology in the Anthropocene, which identifies ethnographic research with the critical practices of engaged actors:

We [here: anthropologists] work from soiled grounds, in an atmosphere thick with the byproducts of fossil-fuel-intensive political and economic systems. Our anthropologies to come must work to dislodge the future these systems so forcefully anteriorize. (Fortun 2014:324)

Matters of Justice and Anthropocene Concerns

While mining conflicts and environmental justice are central topics in the anthropology of resource extraction, conventionally the field has focused more on the colonial legacies of extractivism (cf. Acuña 2015; Appel 2019; Ferguson 1999; Kirsch 2014; Li 2015; Pijpers and Eriksen 2018) than on Europe's centres of resource accumulation. However, with the ongoing acceleration of planetary crises, it is becoming clear that even the traditional beneficiaries of *ecologically unequal exchange* (Hornborg 2009) are increasingly affected by the ruinous effects of extractivist activities, which calls for a more symmetrical study of mining impacts. Accordingly, the research interest in brown coal mining in Germany is growing in the recent context of the impending phasing out of coal and policies for the structural transition. Whereas the Rhineland's mining region has been at the centre of the current wave of climate protests and resistance to mining, anthropological research has so far tended to focus instead on the two remaining brown coal regions in the former GDR or East Germany (cf. Everts et al. 2023; Müller 2019; Müller 2021). To mitigate possible social issues related to plans to phase out coal, the concept of a 'just transition' is increasingly being applied in both policy and research. However, as my ethnographic research with opponents of mining suggests, in practice the concept is primarily geared towards the interests of industrial workers and often tends to eclipse broader issues of environmental justice, which are becoming more and more urgent in the Anthropocene.

Contrary to the perspective taken in this article, anthropologists and other social scientists have criticized the Anthropocene concept for various reasons, often connected to issues of (environmental) justice. For example, two of the most prominent critics, Alf Hornborg and Andreas Malm, argue that the 'dominant Anthropocene narrative' is overwhelmingly informed by natural-science perspectives and is therefore ahistorical and socio-economically undifferentiated. By positing the whole of humanity as a species actor responsible for accelerated environmental change, the concept not only veils the 'sociogenic' nature of problems related to the Anthropocene – their historical rootedness in capitalist formations of ecologically unequal exchange – but also overlooks the vastly unequal distribution of vulnerabilities with potentially disastrous depoliticizing effects (Malm and Hornborg 2014). While Hornborg and Malm, coming

from a Marxist perspective, do not at all take exception to the central focus on humans, several other critics like Donna Haraway have taken the Anthropocene concept to task exactly for its anthropocentrism, supposedly inscribed into its very name (Haraway et al. 2016). Such criticisms have spurred the suggestion of a variety of alternative concepts from the humanities and social sciences, aimed at decentring or entirely replacing the Anthropocene concept, including the *Capitalocene*, *Plantationocene*, *Technocene* or Haraway's own *Chthulucene* (Antweiler 2022).

On the other hand, in a short piece on 'The Anthropocene and Environmental Justice', the environmental humanities scholar Rob Nixon urges social scientists not to shun the concept completely and risk letting technocrats or economic interest groups define the public meaning of the Anthropocene. Instead, he suggests taking up the particular challenges Anthropocene thinking poses to customary approaches to justice, despite all conceptual reservations. Nixon thus urges humanities scholars to work as 'stratigraphers' who combine geohistorical perspectives with analyses of social stratification and 'tease out the complex connections between rising atmospheric CO₂ levels, the rising oceans, and rising levels of inequality, connections that are not reducible to a centralized species story' (Nixon 2016:31).

In a recent contribution to *Anthropology Today*, Manuela Tassan argues in a similar direction. She briefly retraces the environmental justice movement's genealogy and shows how its early focus on *environmental racism* crucially amended then popular ideas of the *global risk society*. However, Tassan argues that the 'movement mainly offered a "technicist" anthropocentric reading of the "environment"' as background to human action, thus being more concerned with issues of distributive equity than with an expansion of justice to the non-human or the environment itself (Tassan 2022:13). In light of the material-symbolic unsettling of the nature-culture dichotomy that the Anthropocene constitutes (cf. Latour 2014), Tassan suggests decentralizing the 'anthropocentric view of the environment without losing sight of social equity issues'. She therefore even goes beyond Nixon and reformulates environmental justice in the Anthropocene as a 'multispecies issue' (Tassan 2022:14–15). Far from viewing it as intrinsically anthropocentric, she thus seems to employ the Anthropocene – in the words of Liana Chua and Hannah Fair – as a 'lens onto the world' that raises questions about how categories such as 'human' or 'non-human', 'nature' or 'culture' are presently being transformed (Chua and Fair 2019:13).

In their widely received plea to 'retool' the discipline of anthropology for the challenges of the Anthropocene, Anna Tsing, Andrew Mathews and Nils Bubandt have already pushed in the same direction of simultaneously accounting for multispecies relations, histories of inequality and geological scales in ethnographic research (Tsing et al. 2019). The authors suggest directing ethnographic attention to the emergence of *Anthropocene Patches* to capture the entanglements, tensions and contradictions between particular sites and the universal 'geostory' of the Anthropocene. While Tsing et al. understand patches as empirically accessible patterns of multispecies relations, they are also supposed to be 'sites for knowing intersectional inequalities among humans' and

thus offer the possibility of a situated, justice-sensitive approach to the temporal and spatial complexities of the Anthropocene (Tsing et al. 2019:S194).

Despite some influential criticisms, there therefore seems to be no inherent reason for the Anthropocene concept not to permit acknowledging differences in the distribution of risk or vulnerability. What it does elucidate, however, is that there will ultimately be no possibility of avoiding its impacts, for the Anthropocene is coterminous with the continuing breakdown of mechanisms that externalize the negative effects of industrial modernity into other times and places. As industrial progress and the unequal accumulation of wealth depends on this destructive process of externalization, the Anthropocene is fundamentally marked by the undeniable return of previously externalized elements,⁹ whether in the form of impending climate catastrophe, an increasing number of marginalized people demanding their fair share of wealth and safety, or even the coronavirus pandemic (cf. Lessenich 2018). According to such considerations, questions of (human) justice are not necessarily discounted by the scales associated with the Anthropocene and might even become more urgent if articulated with planetary conditions with situated attentiveness. Since Anthropocene conditions warrant a political recentring on the more-than-human meshwork of live-ability, social justice struggles, and a less anthropocentric perception of environmental issues can potentially reinforce each other instead of being mutually exclusive.

Nonetheless, tensions between systemic perspectives and concrete matters remain in this context that cannot easily be unravelled on either side of the knot, as Andrew Mathews implies in emphasizing temporal matters:

There is, however, a structural tension between the urgencies of focusing on a particular mine, dam, or toxic waste site and a *longue durée* anthropological analysis of the processes that have produced environmental degradation and social deprivation. [...] This tension between long-term change and the urgencies of policy or politics is both productive and problematic. (Mathews 2020:76)

In attending to such tensions, this contribution follows Donna Haraway's now classical injunction to 'stay with the trouble' in the sense of ethnographically exploring how different actors navigate possible contradictions between urgent matters and planetary concerns (Haraway 2016). Accordingly, I understand my field-site at the Hambach mine as an 'Anthropocene patch' (Tsing et al. 2019), where planetary issues are negotiated in conjunction with social injustices, destructive extraction and environmental care.

⁹ Thus, in a vital modification of Chakrabarty (2009: 221), there will most likely be 'lifeboats [...] for the rich' in the Anthropocene, yet these will not allow them to evade precarities quite in the same way as in regard to earlier upheavals of economic globalization.

Expanding the Backyard: Dealing with Injustices beyond Official Institutions

Adhering to the views of coal-critical locals undoubtedly privileges a partial perspective of the universalizing geostory of the Anthropocene. Yet, such a situated approach can complicate narratives of change on a planetary scale and account for how concerns related to the Anthropocene make a difference in matters of the everyday. Even though my interlocutors do not actively utilize the Anthropocene concept, the realization that they are living in a time of inextricable anthropogenic poly-crises of planetary scale is one of the fundamental insights motivating their engagement. During a debate about possible next steps in the face of global impacts of extractivist destruction, one senior participant of the ‘coordination circle’ boiled it down as follows:

I do not think we always realize how dramatic the situation is. [...] The damage is already enormous, but politicians are looking the other way – all the alarm bells should be ringing!¹⁰

While some of the core members of the local anti-mining network feel connected to the climate justice movement, the group usually does not frame its actions in terms of a fight *for justice*, but more *against* locally experienced *injustices* related to mining activities. As Sandra Brunnegger notes, justice, especially outside juridical contexts, tends to remain tacit, while injustices are often vividly felt and clearly expressed (Brunnegger 2019). On a practical level, therefore, justice can be understood in terms of what is lacking in a specific context to achieve a desired state of things. It serves as an under-determined guiding principle that allows ‘concerned agents’ (Wolf and Zenker, this issue) to denounce certain matters as unjust and thus differentiates current conditions from possible, more desirable futures. Justice, it can thus be said, operates as a force of the otherwise which extends the call for responsibility to formerly unacknowledged concerns.

In Germany, the extraction and burning of brown coal for energy generation is still officially defined as an indispensable contribution to the national common good (*Allgemeinwohl*). This legal-political definition of brown coal mining and burning as serving the general public interest establishes a formal state of exception in the country’s brown coal regions that enables most of the injustices experienced by the affected inhabitants to occur relatively unchallenged. For decades now, this legal exception has allowed mining law to trump civil rights, authorizing the expropriation and displacement of local inhabitants and the destruction of landscapes for the sake of expanding vast open-pit mines. Needless to say, the destruction of the familiar landscape and the loss of their homes are incontrovertibly unjust for the human as well as non-human populations

10 Original conversations held in German. All translations by the author.

in the Rhineland's 'energy sacrifice zone' (Lerner 2010). Yet, the local extraction of lignite was largely inscribed into a national narrative of progress, first with imperialist underpinnings, then, after the founding of the Federal Republic, with welfare-state characteristics and later on, following reunification, with stronger neoliberal tendencies basically equating social progress with economic growth (Herberg et al. 2021).

Guaranteeing the domestic supply of cheap energy, brown coal generally functioned as a material and symbolic resource for national prosperity and the promise of a better future, or at least the continuation of current socioeconomic conditions for the majority of the population. This dominant narrative of industrial progress construed unequal environmental burdens as a necessary sacrifice for economic growth rather than injustice. It also sustained a far-reaching ideology of the reversibility of the negative effects of mining. In line with this ideology, displaced persons were financially compensated, demolished villages rebuilt in other places and destroyed (agricultural) landscapes 'recultivated'. Thus, according to the locally active energy corporation, mining-induced losses were not only fully offset by such measures of compensation, but resource extraction ultimately led into a better future, with more modern communities and 'prettier' landscapes (Brock 2023).

This hegemonic alignment of coal-mining with the general public interest or national common good eventually resulted in an ambivalent relationship between critical civil-society actors and state institutions in the Rhineland's brown coal region. After all, positioning oneself against the coal industry ultimately means acting against the state's interest. Moreover, the factually implemented state of exception which assigns special privileges to mining structurally calls for an expansion of engagement beyond legal procedures and representative politics to achieve the public acknowledgement of marginalized concerns, as the following example of a local initiative against mining impacts illustrates.

One of my first contacts in the field of mining conflicts and coal-exit policies was Thomas,¹¹ who lives in a village close to the Hambach mine. He usually co-hosts the sessions of the informal circle of coal-critical citizens together with the local representative in the coal-exit commission, and he has developed into one of the leading voices of the local anti-coal movement over the past years. In one of our first meetings at the contested Hambach forest, he told me how the local commission member, himself and other villagers founded a citizen's initiative (*Bürgerinitiative*) years ago which acted as the nucleus for the larger civil-society platform formed during commission negotiations. Originally, their aim was to prevent the relocation of the nearby highway closer to their homes by protesting about the unjust burden of an anticipated loss of quality of life (*Lebensqualität*). The state and local administration deemed this large-scale infrastructural intervention necessary for the mining company to expand the Hambach mine, one of Germany's largest single sources for CO₂ emissions, further and allow a smooth

11 All the names in this article have been changed by the author.

continuation of extractive activities. To stop this destructive project, the members of the initiative made efforts to educate the public about possible noise and air pollution resulting from the highway's relocation and tried to convince politicians to support their concerns. They also supported a joint lawsuit by environmentalist associations to halt the mining-induced relocation, which was ultimately rejected by the Federal Administrative Court in Leipzig. One member of the initiative described the course of the trial to me as an experience that has severely shaken his confidence in democratic procedures, since independent legal experts assured him, Thomas, and their fellow claimants of at least a partial success after the main session. He went on to criticize the fact that, instead of independent assessments, the court relied heavily on data provided by the energy company for its decision. He also told me that he later learned from 'informed circles' that the lawsuit was ultimately only narrowly rejected:

We thought that there had to be another massive exertion of influence [after the court session], there is really no other way to explain it – but that is idle talk, that is speculation [...]

Until the appointment of 'one of their own' to the coal-exit commission, this experience of defeat was followed by numerous other setbacks in their involvement against the injustices resulting from what many involved actors perceive as worryingly close ties between state institutions and the energy industry. But even though the actors associated with the initiative are predominantly middle-class, white German citizens, who can habitually expect the justice system to work in their favour and politicians to represent a great deal of their concerns, such experiences of 'betrayal' did not lead them to indulge in demobilizing cynicism or to resort to a 'politics of resentment' (cf. Krämer, this issue). Instead, they doubled down on their call for more democracy and stronger participation in matters of industrial politics, as Thomas explained to me:

That [court decision] was devastating for us, and then we immediately sat down together and said, What do we do now? [...] And for me it was clear: Now more than ever, now we have to organize with everything we've got against the real issue behind it, because if they treat us the same way when it comes to mining, what else will be in store for us?... Then we asked ourselves the question for whom we are doing this – because when we turn against RWE [the energy corporation responsible for mining in the area], it was clear that there are some who support us openly here in the village, some who support us covertly because they agree with us but do not want to show themselves, but we also have many against us! Then I said at some point 'I'm doing this for me, for my own personal attitudes and for our children', and that was actually, from that moment on, the second wave of our initiative. It soon became clear that we will conduct it this way and position ourselves quite openly against fossil fuels and against RWE.

This first-hand experience of injustice related to the court as a public judicial institution which they expected to protect their rights as citizens made the members of

the initiative come to the resolution that they should rely less on legal procedures or representative politics. Rather, they decided to resort to autonomous engagement and actively search for allies in environmentalism and social movements going forward. As the initiative's original motivation placed a stronger emphasis on preventing the loss of quality of life in their immediate 'backyard', transitioning to focus more directly on matters of mining and the burning of fossil fuels made them gradually expand their scope towards broader injustices related to the coal industry.¹²

As they were still struggling to gain support for their concerns in the villages around the mines, many coal-critical civil-society actors¹³ welcomed the first forest occupation in 2012 by younger activists from outside the region as a breath of fresh air, which, moreover, brought about increasing media attention to the issues surrounding brown coal mining. Together with public debates about the causal relationship between the domestic coal industry and anthropogenic climate change gaining momentum over the years, the activists' translocal perspective and radical devotion¹⁴ further inspired members of the initiative and other mining opponents to connect local mining impacts more concretely to processes of accelerated planetary change.

Shifting 'Public Interest' from Below: Articulating Locally Experienced Injustices to Planetary Damage

Whereas the inauguration of the coal-exit commission was generally embraced as a political confirmation of the end of the hegemony of brown coal extraction in the region, even during and after the commission, opponents of mining had to sustain numerous injustices related to the industry's privileged position. In the autumn of 2018 for example, various civil-society actors, politicians and media personalities publicly demanded a moratorium for the clearing of the forest at the Hambach mine while the commission

12 As an effort to forge international connections with other climate and environmental activists, for example, they even hosted the 'Pacific Climate Warriors', a grassroots movement for climate justice from the Pacific island states during the international climate policy negotiations at COP 23 in Bonn.

13 Coal-critical residents often refer to themselves as *Zivilgesellschaft* or *zivilgesellschaftliche Akteure* to give further legitimacy to their non-institutionalized, 'informal' engagement in relation to politicians, corporate actors or unions and to differentiate their positioning as actively engaged local citizens from more radical activists, as well as more professional NGOs or environmental associations active in the field.

14 Despite feeling a general indebtedness to the forest squatters' devoted struggle, the civil-society actors do not always agree with their interpretation of 'civil disobedience' and regularly feel the need to distance themselves publicly from some of their more radical activities. This is especially the case when industrial actors or conservative politicians and media accuse the local residents of supporting alleged acts of 'climate terrorism', conducted by radical activists.

was negotiating a national coal-exit path and while a lawsuit to recognize the highly biodiverse old-growth forest as a protected area was still pending. In spite of this, the conservative-led state government of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) escalated the conflict in concert with the mining company by conducting the largest police operation the state has ever seen with the aim of removing the forest occupation. During the operation, which lasted several days, many protesters and police were injured, large parts of the forest severely damaged, and one person fell off the bridge of a treehouse in the turmoil and died. Shortly after this tragic incident, the Higher Administrative Court in Münster finally enacted a stop on clearing the forest while the lawsuit to protect the forest ecosystem was still pending. In 2021, the Administrative Court in Cologne even declared the entire police operation illegal, deeming the government's reasoning for evicting the activists from their treehouses because of fire-safety regulations as a pretext to enable RWE to utilize the territory for extraction.¹⁵ For many of my interlocutors, such publicly recognized occurrences are only the tip of the iceberg showing how the state's institutions act as proxy for the mining company. This is why some of them have come to speak of 'NRWE' in this context to signify the indistinguishability between administration and energy corporation regarding issues related to coal-mining in the state of NRW.

In early 2019 the coal-exit commission presented the final compromise negotiated by its members, the so-called *Kohlekompromiss*. This document served as the basis for Germany's climate protection law that was later declared insufficient by the constitutional court. Even though it was already obvious at the time that the planned exit path for the domestic coal industry in the compromise was not in line with national climate-protection goals, the Rhineland's local representative and other coal-critical commission members ultimately supported the negotiated outcome to break the logjam of German climate policy. Taken together, these examples show that in recent years many of the coal-critical actors' worries have proved to be at least partially valid. While some of their demands have ultimately been met by the courts, this often happens only after the mining company and the government have created ineluctable material facts such as the destruction of protest infrastructure or even entire landscape patches (Lussem 2021). So although the increasingly undeniable links between climate change and burning fossil fuels have tended to tip legal judgements more in favour of coal-critical voices, the judicial system generally figures as a slow force in urgent matters of *planetary justice* (cf. Johnson and Sigona 2022). While this habitually delayed recognition of concerns related to the brown coal industry which my interlocutors regularly experience is certainly also rooted in institutional procedures that are not explicitly part of my research, in countless instances legal institutions still effectively sanction injustices by allowing the avoidance of responsibility for Anthropocene phenomena to continue.

15 More recently, however, in June 2023, the Higher Administrative Court of NRW revised this decision and ultimately declared the operation legal. Cf. http://www.justiz.nrw.de/nrwe/ovgs/ovg_nrw/j2023/7_A_2635_21_Urteil_20230616.html

My coal-critical interlocutors therefore vehemently criticize the state's contradictory position in coal-exit politics, which on the one hand acknowledges the coal industry's opposition to the general public interest of ensuring a live-able future for all, while on the other hand still allowing it to operate within a legal state of exception based on the national common good of 'energy security' (*Versorgungssicherheit*).

These localized negotiations are currently contributing to the wider redefinition of the domestic coal industry as an actor that might have supported economic growth and prosperity historically, but only at the incalculable cost of threatening a liveable future on a planetary scale. This ongoing redefinition also entails the erosion of the ideology of the general reversibility of mining-induced damage. Instead of being 'necessary sacrifices' for the common good of energy security and associated promises of prosperity (cf. Bovensiepen 2018), losses related to coal-mining and burning then become entangled with irreversible damage on a planetary scale, leading to a potentially catastrophic future. Whereas the mining company still adheres to the logic of offsetting damage locally in the future by investing in the construction of new villages and practices of landscape recultivation, coal-critical actors increasingly argue that such matters cannot be accounted for locally anymore since local resource extraction is inextricably linked to accelerated planetary change. In this way, referring to Anthropocene phenomena enables the affected residents to frame local damage as a matter of planetary justice and to challenge the idea that industrial actors could settle their debt once and for all and absolve themselves of all future responsibility by simply fulfilling their contractual obligations to complete post-mining restoration (cf. Lussem, forthcoming).

Critical civil-society actors in the Rhineland's brown coal region thus aim to redefine the general public interest or *Allgemeinwohl* to be guided not only by the blinkered promise of national prosperity, but also by other scales, actors and entities implicated in matters associated with the Anthropocene (cf. Barad 2019). As I garnered mostly from social media research and participation in public discussion forums, however, many people who profit from the coal industry's activities in the region perceive current phaseout plans as a grave injustice to them too. Members of the industrial union IGBCE (*Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau, Chemie, Energie*), for example, often argue that Germany's contribution to global CO₂-emissions is minimal, whereas countries such as China, Russia or Indonesia keep increasing their exploitation of fossil fuels. While these actors usually do not deny the general necessity to transition to a carbon-neutral economy, they often champion a 'not now, not here' approach and insist on their entitlement to 'have stable jobs and make good money', as one union spokesperson phrased it during a public debate. Sometimes criticizing anti-coal activists for misusing environmental problems such as climate change to push their own particularistic agendas, these industrial workers and local proponents of mining partly disavow the urgency my interlocutors ascribe to Anthropocene concerns and actively insist on their individual freedom to avoid responsibility for entanglements beyond their immediate lifeworld instead.

Situated Engagement: Dissensus and Transformations Towards a More Just Order for the Anthropocene

Aside from supporting the local commission member's work, the self-organized coordination circle was established to act as a grassroots organization in matters of structural transition policies after the end of the commission. As impending coal-exit and related processes of socioeconomic transition promised to break up the perceived nexus of state and industry to a degree, this also meant the outlook for more democratic participation in regional future-making brightened for many of my interlocutors. Against official plans for a transition oriented towards securing jobs and energy supplies under the aegis of 'green (industrial) growth', the group developed its own guidelines for an eco-socially sustainable development. Focusing on ending the destructive exploitation of the environment and stopping dispossession for corporate profit, their engagement is connected to aspirations to regain political agency in the search for a 'good life' beyond the imperatives of economic growth. An integral part of this is the stated desire to 're-connect' with a home region many felt alienated from because of drastic environmental transformation and a related lack of possibilities for democratic participation (*Mitbestimmung*). Striving for stronger participation in a region dominated by industrial interests, at first many of the civil-society actors appreciated the public opportunities to participate in development policies which state government and communal administrations offered following the official inauguration of the structural transition process (Kamlage et al. 2021).

Soon however, most of them grew increasingly frustrated because the very limited and highly pre-formatted occasions provided by the responsible development agency gave little room for articulating real dissensus in fundamental questions regarding the future relationship between economic growth and ecological survival (cf. Eriksen & Schober 2018). Furthermore, the official planning agency responsible for coordinating structural transition measures in the region cooperates closely with the mining company. This led some of my interlocutors to worry that the participation process might not only distract them from more impactful engagement on their own terms: they also suspected that their criticisms could at worst be co-opted to legitimize transition policies that do not break with hegemonic industrialism (cf. Fortun 2014). Thus, after a brief period of rapprochement, the group decided to assert a more critical stance publicly and to refocus its engagement outside officially prescribed institutions, to actively shape the structural transition process in a socially and ecologically just direction. However, when the commission ended, this self-organized network of active citizens lost some of its momentum and struggled to develop a unifying structure and common *modus operandi*. The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic further complicated the process of reorganization so that only a fraction of the larger group is currently still active (Lussem 2020).

Besides Thomas, the leading figure in this new constellation was Britta, a retired biologist and teacher, former local politician and well connected, active environmentalist. She often described the grassroots initiative as a 'delicate gem' (*Schätzchen*) since it assembled so many different perspectives and provided an opportunity to engage collectively with 'matters of concern' (Latour 2004) outside the more rigid structures of political parties or environmental associations. However, for lack of a more institutionalized structure, it was also a rather precarious organization. Even though the size of the group considerably decreased over time, the remaining members still value the autonomous form of organizing as an opportunity to transcend the classic divisions between nature conservation, climate protection and (environmental) justice issues and actively engage with planetary problems from a localized perspective.

Emphasizing the inescapable continuation of current injustices into the future, critically engaged residents explicitly defy the official rhetoric of 'new beginnings' after coal (Anders and Zenker 2014). In this context, those who have been negatively affected by mining impacts often consider it somewhat cynical that 'just transition' discourses centre around the concerns of industrial workers, who are comparatively sought after on the labour market and relatively privileged economically.¹⁶ Yet, this has not led my interlocutors to resent workers employed in the coal industry totally. On the contrary, Thomas, for example, openly criticizes the mining company for allegedly funnelling state subsidies to shareholders, rather than publicly committing itself to securing the future of its employees, an injustice he sees as further fuelling social conflicts in the region. So, instead of a 'just transition' that only assumes the responsibility for a narrowly defined group of affected actors, they argue for a 'sustainable transition' (*nachhaltiger Strukturwandel*¹⁷), understood as a more encompassing eco-social *transformation*. This objective goes against official planning ideologies of 'new beginnings' for the area as a 'green' industrial model region after coal to encompass also more than human issues such as landscape integrity and the interests of future generations and geographically distant populations. Taking up the opportunity to actively shape their region's future, as presented to them by the process of phasing out coal, the group around Britta and Thomas is developing alternative concepts for transition measures that advocate local cooperation and a renewed care for environmental relations. The remaining working group for a sustainable transition presents its ideas to administration officials, politicians and other local stakeholders to raise awareness, get feedback, gain support, or simply make their point of view known.

One concept I was involved in drafting recommends the ecological reconnection of the remaining Hambach forest to other forest patches insulated by mining and agricultural activities. The concept argues that this reconnection project would not only protect the severely damaged forest from succumbing to recently intensifying

16 https://arepoconsult.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2017_gruene_arbeitsplaetze-braunkohle_kurzstudie.pdf

17 <https://www.ansev.de/unsere-ziele>

climate-change impacts, but also contribute to carbon dioxide sequestration and the regeneration of biodiversity as healthy old-growth forests act as effective carbon sinks and biodiversity hotspots. In contrast to environmentalists or more traditional nature conservationists, the group of engaged residents aims to combine this ecological reconnection with agroecological development centred around the conversion of intensively used agricultural fields bordering the forest into corridors for regenerative agroforestry. As Britta explained to me, this combination of silviculture and agriculture would not only potentially strengthen the edges of the existing forest, it could itself actively contribute to the regeneration of soils and make regional food production more resilient with respect to climate change impacts. Another aspect of the concept was that its successful implementation would require all the remaining land near the forest to be utilized. This was important because the mining company is actively pursuing the demolition of a not yet completely abandoned village adjacent to the forest for extraction of the soil needed to stabilize the banks of the mine after its shutdown. Rather than being a technical necessity, as the company claims, my interlocutors are convinced that the demolition of the village is justified solely by the mining company's business considerations, which makes the ongoing destruction of land and buildings another of the countless injustices that go unacknowledged by the state government and communal administration in their eyes.

Britta, Thomas and other engaged residents actively offer opposition to official transition measures that in their opinion do not seriously engage with the problems related to anthropogenic climate change, but almost exclusively bank on the development of technical solutions to guarantee a continuation of economic growth in a 'green' guise. Taking the structural transition process as an opportunity to consider how the needs of human and non-human actors like the forest or the soil can be jointly accounted for from the perspective of regional development, the self-organized group also goes beyond classic environmentalist concerns of nature conservation. The struggle for the public acknowledgement of mining-related damage as injustice and the active engagement for social and ecological regeneration thus to a certain extent overlap with the idea of 'justice as healing through recognition', that is, the striving to repair and revitalize damaged relations (Johnson and Sigona 2022:2). However, rather than emphasizing the closing of wounds once and for all, the justice negotiations entail a call for ongoing engagement with the inextricable mess that is present in the Anthropocene. Arguing for a simultaneous transformation of (agricultural) practices of production, care for extractivist damage and active engagement with planetary crises from a situated perspective, coal-critical civil-society actors in the Rhineland are challenging the destructive continuation of industrial exploitation (or the 'conquest of nature'; cf. Krämer, this issue) that rests on the avoidance of responsibility towards unacknowledged others, whether human or non-human.

The mining area's relative geographical marginality was once drawn upon to define it as a 'void', a sacrifice zone subject to destructive extractivism. Yet, under the auspices of intensifying environmental crises, coal-critical residents now posit its rural

character against official plans for industrial development and redepoly it as a resource for more socio-ecologically responsible future-making (cf. Puig de la Bellacasa 2015). In contrast to traditional(ist) conservationists (cf. Krämer, this issue), however, they are trying less to restore an idealized past than to intervene in the present situation and mobilize everything at their disposal to make a habitable future possible. While none of the people I met in this context were convinced their engagement would ‘save the world’, they nonetheless felt compelled to act in light of a perceived inability of official institutions to match the scale and urgency of the issues in question. By raising matters of concern against the matter of factness of the government and the mining company, my interlocutors insist on the possibility of a fundamental dissensus in the question of what has a part to play in political considerations and what does not (Rancière 2008). As I have shown, their engagement for a sustainable transition is characterized by calls for the public recognition of formerly unacknowledged losses, accounting for future uncertainties related to planetary transformations, and factoring in the well-being of future generations and distant others, as well as valuing non-human entities as something other than mere resources. Accordingly, the civil-society actors actively oppose the looming threat of the externalization, avoidance or invisibilization of Anthropocene concerns in official transition policies. In this sense, their practical commitment to situate deep time scale problems with planetary distribution within everyday matters may open up a space for responsibility for absent, yet entangled others (Barad 2010). In an evocative discussion of generational justice, Jacques Derrida even suggests that ‘[n]o justice [...] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility* [...] beyond all living present’ (Derrida 1990:xix). Justice in that sense is more than reparation, revenge, or the repayment of debts associated with the law. Instead of completely restoring some disjointed order, therefore, there is always the task of inheriting responsibility from other times and places. Derrida considers this responsibility towards spatially or temporally absent others to be the fundamental requirement for justice as something other than the effect of legal procedures. In the context of the Anthropocene, this assertion appears to become immediately more applicable since issues of planetary justice need to account for the entanglements of past actions with future events and to recognize the needs of absent others.

Conclusion

If I now apply Anna-Lena Wolf’s and Olaf Zenker’s analytical definition of justice, proposed in the introduction to this special issue, we can see this article depicting the self-organized coal-critical actors as the main *concerned agents* of justice in the present case. Based on a common obligation to maintain earthly habitability, these actors not only demand the discontinuation of industrial infrastructures, which are locally destructive and entangled with planetary crises: they also insist on a political transfor-

mation towards more sustainable socio-environmental relations as the *objects of justice*. Even though my interlocutors mainly engage with these issues from a localized perspective, the *subject of justice* ultimately implied in their actions is thus every entity that is threatened by accelerated planetary change. They do address state institutions and industrial actors as *agents responsible* for delivering what they consider is due. Yet, owing to the longstanding experience of close ties between the state and industry, as well as the overwhelming scale and urgency of the issues in question, the critical locals in the Rhineland's brown coal region primarily envisage themselves, and ultimately everyone, as responsible for challenging the status quo. This might lead us to another core element of an analytical definition of justice that is not explicitly mentioned by Wolf and Zenker: the *antagonists of justice* or *sources of injustice* that concerned agents regularly invoke. In the context of coal-mining as a local issue affecting villagers' quality of life, this position was chiefly ascribed to the mining company and some other influential local actors. However, with the potential loss of planetary habitability becoming a plausible possibility in the Anthropocene, this position is increasingly attributed to what can be called an 'imperial way of life' that is dependent upon infrastructures of externalization and implicates basically everyone, albeit in very different ways (Brand and Wissen 2017). Hence, the most fundamental *norm or value* animating my interlocutors' struggle against injustices related to brown coal mining is a care for the environment in terms of a *Mitwelt* (as some of them explicitly call it) that includes non-human others and future generations, as well as other matters of concern made absent in industrial relations of growth and progress (cf. Latour et al. 2018).

As illustrated by the recent decision of Germany's constitutional court, introduced at the beginning of this article, questions of intergenerational justice and responsibility for past actions and unintended (planetary-scale) consequences are increasingly being addressed in the legal arena as well. Yet, although the court ruling was influenced by taking future impacts of irreversible planetary damage into account, it still essentially depended upon the claims of presently living human subjects. The same, of course, goes for the practices of critical engagement I presented in this article, which depend on human faculties like language or social inventions like rights to make claims on behalf of the civil-society actors themselves, as well as on behalf of non-human others, or absent (human) others who are structurally excluded from the realm of politics. As I have shown, these practices of negotiation bring unacknowledged, avoided or externalized entanglements of human and nonhuman actors – like the spatial and temporal interrelations of forest, people, the energy industry and climate change – into the arena of politics, rearticulating them as matters of public concern.

Accepting the premise that the responsibility for absent (or *absentized*) others is the central condition of justice, I have presented my interlocutors' coal-critical activities as a struggle for justice in the context of accelerated planetary change. In light of this, the question remains if clinging to the ontological assumption of human exceptionality might not serve to justify the avoidance of responsibility for entangled others and eventually run the risk of obstructing the conditions for justice in the Anthropocene.

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