



Killing Environmental Campaigners: Manifest and Latent Justifications

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Abstract

In 2018, at least 200 land and environmental defenders were murdered, the deadliest year on record. This trend is growing but also spreading: killings were dispersed across 24 countries, compared to 16 in 2015. With many killings unreported, and often uninvestigated, it is likely that the true number is far higher. The tide of violence is driven by intensified activity by companies that pursue profit in unexploited areas. This paper gives an account and classification of these killings, providing an analysis of the vast literature produced by environmental NGOs. Adopting a modified form of techniques of neutralisation and drawing on the distinction between manifest and latent justifications, the paper examines the responses provided by official actors who are called to account for these killings.

Introduction

About 200 people were murdered in 2016 for protecting the land, water, and wildlife in their communities. The figure rose slightly in 2017 and 2018, when four campaigners a week were killed worldwide in environmental struggles; killings have seen a fourfold increase since they were first recorded in 2002 (Global Witness, 2018). This section, after offering a general overview of the phenomenon studied, highlights the theoretical framework adopted.

Statistics compiled by campaigning organisations are deemed to only represent the tip of the iceberg,



as killings of environmentalists may not be reported, particularly in countries with restricted freedom of speech. The data on which this paper is based, therefore, draws on sources that record verifiable events, names of victims, and the causes of their death (Global Witness, 2018).

Among the deadliest drivers of violence was the extractive industry, with mining accounting for 36 killings. The demand for minerals is said to be turning the Andes into a war zone, in which indigenous groups fight mine owners, while other communities confront agribusiness (which accounts for 46 killings), a business that occupies communal land, establishes ranches for the production of soy, palm oil, or sugarcane, and breeds beef (Watts, 2018).

Nearly 60% of the murders took place in Latin America, and Brazil was the deadliest country overall, with 57 killings. The Philippines saw 48 deaths, the largest number seen in an Asian country. Forty-six killings were recorded in the Amazon region, 32 in Colombia, 15 in Mexico, and six in Peru. In Africa, victims include park rangers in the Virunga National Park, which is home to some of the world's last remaining mountain gorillas. Twenty national park rangers and forest guards were killed in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and other countries in 2016.

These rarely prosecuted murders are being documented in more countries than ever before – 24 countries in 2017 as compared to 16 in 2015 (National Geographic, 2017). In 2017, some 2,300 cases of tension over water, territory, pollution, and extractive industries were identified.

Many of the victims of environmentally motivated violence are grass-roots leaders who stand up for their communities when threatened by environmental calamity: “They fight for what has been taken away from them” (Wallace, 2014, p. 2). In the US and Canada, protesters are active in Native American reservations, which are often regarded as sacred sites, and in response, new anti-protest laws are being devised. In other countries, for instance in the Philippines and Thailand, martial law has been declared to quell protests (Mining Watch Canada, 2018).

The literature produced by NGOs indicates general patterns and local peculiarities, and its selective examination, for the purpose of this paper, is focused on two related elements: who the NGOs designate as the culprits and how official agencies respond to such designations.

There are numerous theoretical perspectives in the study of the crimes of the powerful. One set of conceptualisations, for example, arises from the analysis of the state (Chambliss, Michalowski and Kramer, 2010; Rothe & Ross, 2009; Whyte, 2009), while others pertain to the economic sphere (Geis & Meier, 1977; Pearce, 1976). The study of organisations and their members has produced nuanced analyses of the relationship between power and crime (Geis, 2016; Pontell & Geis, 2007), while specific studies focused on sectors of the elite or of political and entrepreneurial activity have yielded novel areas of inquiry (Bakan, 2004; Barak, 2015; Platt, 2015; Ruggiero, 2017). A complete review of this literature would be redundant here, and would occupy an entire volume, starting with the obvious homage to Ross, Sutherland, and Bonger and finishing with the summary of the latest contributions (Benson & Simpson, 2015; Van Slyke & Benson, 2019). However, the specific perspective adopted is inspired by two theoretical traditions. The first refers to Sykes' and Matza's techniques of neutralisation, although as we shall see, these will be slightly amended as befits the specific events analysed. Such events, in fact, hint at the subtle difference between neutralisation and justification, with the former containing a denial that a fact occurred and the latter implying the rejection of responsibility for it. However, not all neutralisations or justifications are explicit, nor do they find verbal expression, as official narratives of events often remain at the stage of unarticulated ideology or collective *formas mentis*. For this reason, the analysis below adopts the distinction between manifest and latent justifications utilised by Merton in his exploration of political corruption and bossism. This specific aspect of Merton's work, focused particularly on powerful offenders, constitutes, therefore, the second theoretical background guiding this paper.

In the following pages, reference is made to “crime by proxy”, a concept originally formulated by Chicago School sociologists. In some cases, Sykes' and Matza's neutralisation of the harm caused takes the form of a rearrangement of the dynamics that caused it. At times, crime is justified through the description of victims as violent persons. Latent justifications, as we shall see, revolve around the

identification of economic and political priorities, but also around “higher loyalties” towards the sacredness of growth.

Violence by Proxy

What follows shows how the killing of environmentalists echoes forms of violence by proxy observed since the first decades of the last century to the current times.

Among those listed by NGOs as perpetrators of the killings are poachers, militia groups, professional assassins, police officers, private and security forces, and undercover mercenaries (Brown, 2018). Normally, victims receive death threats, which are ignored by the authorities when reported: the officials who ought to be defending the rights of activists are regarded as actually complicit in the attacks. For this reason, “perpetrators are feeling more emboldened by the widespread culture of impunity that is allowing violence” (Global Witness, 2018 p. 23). This was confirmed by the UN special rapporteur on human rights, John Knox, who stated that governments are encouraging such a culture:

There is an epidemic now, a culture of impunity, a sense that anyone can kill environmental defenders without repercussions, eliminate anyone who stands in the way. It comes from mining, agribusiness, illegal logging, and dam building (Watts & Vidal, 2017, p. 2).

The process of monopolisation of resources and land by corporations is supported by law and policing, echoing the approach of infamous colonisers of the past, their methods of plundering and appropriating land and natural products (Lynch, Stretesky, & Long, 2018). This form of monopolisation, exploitation, and privatization has been termed “biopiracy”, consisting of “appropriation of knowledge, redefinition of rights, and displacement of traditional owners and indigenous people” facilitated by police, armed forces, and private violence specialists (Goyes & South, 2017, p. 188).

Impunity connotes many cases highlighted by Global Witness (2015), suggesting, for example, that logging companies that operate in the Central African Republic continue to employ local militia as security forces. The rebel group known as Seleka, after seizing power in 2013, dispatched a number of squads to the country’s rainforests under lucrative contracts with CAR logging companies. Europe is described as being complicit for its continued trading with such companies and for illegally importing timber from the country. European states, in their turn, claim that their involvement in the region is based on the principle that the logging industry will contribute to local development. The logic of “development” as a justification will be discussed later.

Prosecutions, as already noted, are rare, being estimated at 2% of the cases: only 34 people worldwide are currently facing charges for violence against environmentalists (Global Witness, 2018). The following three examples may be revealing in terms of the networks of actors involved.

In May 2011, José Ribeiro da Silva and Maria do Espírito Santo were assassinated in the eastern Amazon Basin of Brazil. The victims had been fighting against illegal loggers, ranchers, and the operators of clandestine charcoal pits. Entrepreneurs employed enforcers to implement their own frontier justice and two of them were arrested and charged with the murders. There was no blatant cover up on the part of the authorities, although investigators ignored the role of middlemen employed by entrepreneurs and how these prudently distanced themselves from the executioners. Detectives exclusively focused on the “kill team”, refusing to consider the wider conspiracy behind the killing. In a recorded wiretap, one of the defendants threatened to report all his accomplices if he were not granted a top attorney, but the recording was not accepted as evidence. Only the hit men were found guilty (Potter, 2014).

Honduran indigenous activist Berta Cáceres was murdered in March 2016 after fighting the construction of a dam in the west of her country. The dam, to be built on the Gualcarque river, would threaten the subsistence of the local Lenca community, which was not consulted and, as a consequence, started engaging in peaceful protest. Cáceres had received numerous threats and was killed by a gunman at her home. Nine people were arrested, including a former soldier, an ex-security chief, an army major,

and a manager of the Honduran company Desarrollos Energéticos DA (DESA). In 2018 the trial was thrown into disarray when the victim's lawyers were expelled from the proceedings. The lawyers had accused the judges of incompetence in carrying out pre-trial hearings and guaranteeing due process, and the victim, the judge claimed, would be adequately represented by the public prosecutor. The manager of the company was also charged but faced a separate trial. His name was David Castillo, and he was a US-trained former military intelligence officer. He was found guilty, while the entire leadership of DESA remained untouched, as if the murder had been the outcome of Castillo's individual initiative. Moreover, the licence to DESA was never revoked (Earth First Journal, 2018).

Aysin and Ali, Turkish beekeepers, were killed in 2017. They fought against marble companies (including Turkey Marble and Natural Stone) operating in the area where they resided and worked. The open-cast mines diverted rivers and the relentless blasts stifled the surrounding vegetation. The two discovered that some excavations had been carried out in protected sites in contravention of licensing regulations. With the support of fellow campaigners, their action led to two marble companies being shut down, and two months later they were dead. A suspect was quickly found and arrested, and confessed that the killing would have been rewarded with the equivalent of \$12,000. In a letter smuggled out of the prison where he was detained, the owner of a marble company was urged to pay his debt: "Pay the money as you promised me. If you don't I will tell the truth on judgement day. In ten days, if you don't pay, your life will be in my pocket." The letter failed to guide investigators and later the defendant was found dead in a high-security institution where he had been moved for his own safety (Earth First, 2017).

Crime by proxy has a long tradition, bringing us back to the work of some distinguished Chicago School sociologists. The classic study conducted by Landesco (1929), for example, showed how official political groups became promoters of criminal activity by manipulating elections with underworld assistance. Violent operations against rival candidates and parties were "contracted out" to organised criminal groups for the benefit of institutional actors. The extant literature on the crimes of the powerful offers numerous examples of the legal-illegal nexus, describing the exchange of services and the mutual promotional activities conducted jointly by official and illicit actors (Antonopoulos & Papanicolau, 2018; Hobbs, 2013; Ruggiero, 1996; Scalia, 2016; von Lampe, 2016). Contemporary examples of such partnerships also include cases in which organised criminals act as service providers for official politicians and entrepreneurs – for instance, in activities such as arms trafficking, the disposal of toxic waste and, in general, the dissuasion or annihilation of competitors. On the other hand, the services provided by official actors to organised crime include money laundering and the opportunity to invest in legitimate arenas (Ruggiero, 2015). However, crime by proxy, the specific type of "power crime" alluded to here, requires partnerships between respectable actors endowed with large material and symbolic resources and agents providing a clandestine deadly arm.

Manifest Neutralisations

It is now time to situate the killing of environmentalists in the theoretical framework adopted.

The well-known denial strategies identified by Sykes and Matza (1957) may be helpful when examining the ways in which perpetrators deal with the imputations of guilt addressed to them. Sykes and Matza highlighted how offenders perceive the inconsistencies of the moral and legal order, finding continuity between acceptable and unacceptable conducts (Ferrell, 2018). They also pinpointed the specific neutralisations mobilised: the denial of responsibility, the denial of injury, the denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and the appeal to higher loyalties. In the examples presented below, however, perpetrators appear to find it necessary to mobilise additional, or more nuanced, exculpatory arguments.

The initial move of companies accused of masterminding the killing of environmental campaigners often consists of filing a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP). In other words, they initiate proceedings against individuals and/or groups who undermine their activities, accusing them of defamation or nuisance. SLAPP is a lawsuit that aims to silence protesters and force them to abandon

their criticism of corporate conduct. Initially, companies make very large claims for the alleged damages suffered, knowing that the other parties will be unable to pay. A SLAPP, therefore, is an attempt to immobilise campaigners through time-wasting legal quarrels. Campaigners, in such cases, may have to defend themselves from imputations of hate speech, so that their right of expression may be suspended (Baumann & Mazzeo, 2016). Judges often dismiss SLAPPs on the grounds that defendants have a right to criticism. However, when dismissal is not immediate, defendants are charged with the litigation costs, which amount to a form of punishment as well as a tool to dissuade them from speaking up in the future. When a SLAPP is not used or proves ineffective, the denials take other routes.

Misdirection. As we shall see in the following cases, it is impossible to “deny” the existence of the victim or of the injury, as the body of those killed could not be hidden. Rather, the technique utilised by the authorities opted for the designation of an alternative actor involved in the killing.

In July 2016, Lesbia Yaneth Urquia, an activist in the rural town of Marcala in Honduras, never returned from her daily bike ride. Her body was found in a municipal landfill and her head showed gruesome signs of trauma caused by a blunt object. Construction firm DESA is among the companies building a dam in the area, and its executives, along with the police, claimed that the perpetrator must have been a bike robber (BBC, 2016; ILC, 2016). There was no “denial of crime” in this case, rather a rearrangement of its meaning and an upset of its dynamic. Nor was there any “denial of victim or injury”, as an alternative injurious actor was clearly designated. There was indeed a denial of responsibility, while the identification of the purported criminal provided evidence of the willingness on the part of the companies involved to help investigators. “Misdirection” was the technique utilised, whereby those seen as suspects by the NGOs displayed knowledge of the community in which they worked and their desire to promote lawful conduct there.

In the Philippines, when Juvy Capion and his two young sons were assassinated, the military force misdirected investigators by describing the killings as accidents: the victims, they intimated, had found themselves in the crossfire between troops and armed criminals. Executives of Sagittarius Mines Inc. noted that they had repeatedly denounced to the authorities the presence of armed gangs in the area and warned against the lethal threats they posed (Bizuela, 2015). The following miscellaneous list enumerates similar cases.

When Chai Bunthonglek was gunned down in Thailand, the authorities suggested that the killing was the result of a private dispute turned violent in the community in which the activist resided (Grain, 2015). When Berta Cáceres was assassinated in Honduras (see case above), the investigation took off from the assumption that the killing was the unfortunate outcome of a bungled robbery (Alexander, 2016). Robbery was also the official motive for the killing of Ilya Borodaenko in the anti-nuclear camp of Angarsk in Siberia: the group of skinheads that attacked the camp was said to have targeted the personal property of the activists (Dr Prem, 2007). Finally, when three environmentalists campaigning against the “El Dorado” gold mine were killed in El Salvador, blame was placed on the inimical faction campaigning in favour of gold mining (Upside Down World, 2010).

Misdirection may also entail the suggestion by authorities that the killings were in fact suicides (Earth First, 2017). Incidentally, suicide by environmentalists was lauded in the pages of the *New York Times* when David Buckel killed himself after years of indefatigable campaigning. The obituary published in the paper raised disgust among activists for indicating (between the lines) that radical environmentalism fosters mental illness, self-loathing, and misanthropy. Campaigners were not sure whether the obituary condemned or praised self-immolation as a form of political communication (Smith, 2019). In other cases, as discussed in the next section, the killing of campaigners appears to be a form of punishment that can be described as “just deserts”.

Violent victims. The technique of neutralisation referred to as “condemning the condemners”, which depicts victims as “more criminal” than perpetrators, takes the form, in the events examined here, of narratives of self-defence. In other words, the victims are not only deserving of being victimised, they

also have to be obliterated before they engage in violent crime. Let us examine some cases that fall into this category.

Environmentalist and military veteran Jim Marker was shot by the police in February 2017 in Florida after damaging a section of the pipeline operated by Sabal Trail Transmission. The Florida Highway Patrol officer accused of the shooting was acquitted: the authorities claimed that he had fired between 54 and 58 times against Marker in self-defence because he thought the victim was holding a 45-calibre pistol (Sabal Trail Resistance, 2017). No verbal warning by officers was launched before the shooting and no actual evidence of the pistol was provided. The claim was later retracted, although self-defence continued to be cited during the trial.

Californian campaigners Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney were horribly injured by a bomb placed in their car in 2010. The FBI claimed that the bomb was being transported by the activists, who intended to perform an act of sabotage or to kill officials. In a public statement, the FBI announced that they knew the victims as terrorist suspects under constant scrutiny and investigation. Their arrest made the front pages of the *New York Times*, while fellow campaigners accused the police of aiming to discredit activists through a counter-intelligence operation similar to those launched in the past against the Black Panthers and the Anti-war movement (Thomson, 2012).

In 2012, documents showed how companies urged prosecutors to regard campaigners as terrorists. TransCanada, the corporation behind the Keystone XL oil pipeline, released a PowerPoint presentation in which police were briefed about protesters. Photographs, names, and background information relating to activists were transmitted to officers.

TransCanada offers police a playbook on how to go after activists. The company suggests prosecuting using criminal trespass, criminal conspiracy, criminal instruments or devices, and anti-terrorism statutes (Potter, 2014, p. 2).

In April 2018, environmental activist Saw O Moo was killed by soldiers in the Karen State of Myanmar. He was returning home after a meeting in support of displaced people following renewed hostilities between the military and the Karen National Liberation Army (Mongabay, 2018). The Myanmar military denied any wrongdoing and claimed that soldiers had been attacked by saboteurs caught in the act of planting mines. The victim, in brief, was described as a rebel fighter who carried weapons on his person.

Finally, 117 activists have been killed in the Philippines since 2001, 50% of whom were farmers opposing destructive projects such as mining or the construction of dams. The authorities described most of the killings as surgical operations against violent opponents to the regime (CHRP, 2017).

Latent Justifications

We can formulate hypotheses around the implicit or latent motivations pushing environmental campaigners into action. These include a “significance quest” that leads to activism as meaningful collective practice; this is an intense “desire to count” that may lead to commitment. In its turn, commitment is often the consequence of latent feelings of frustration or humiliation, due to loss of place or disorientation in environmental conditions over which individuals sense they have no control (Bonaiuto, Alves, Dominicis & Petruccioli, 2016; De Groot & Steg, 2008; Gousse-Lessard, Vallerand, Carbonneau & Lafrenière, 2013; Jasko, Szastok, Grzymala-Moszczyńska & Maj, 2019). On the other hand, latent justifications for those killing campaigners may be less clear. Certainly, they vary substantially depending on the analytical field we choose: studies focused on the psychology of the murderers would yield different results from studies addressing their professional group or specific local contexts; research into the subculture of killers would lead to different findings from those produced by enquiries into the legal aspects of killing. The choice, here, is to attempt an understanding of killings against the background of the values and principles that these reinforce and that refer to a general, all-encompassing narrative, a world view belonging to the perpetrators. Those making decisions about killing

environmental campaigners, along with those benefitting from the killings, need not reach an explicit agreement on the actions to be taken, but simply recognise one another as holders of a common interest and philosophy. In this respect, Merton's work can bring clarity. In his view, the manifest function of corruption and bossism is the allocation of resources irrespective of merit, while their latent function is

to organise, centralise, and maintain in good working conditions the scattered fragments of power[...] and to satisfy the needs of diverse subgroups in the larger community that are not adequately satisfied by legally devised and culturally approved social structures. (Merton, 1968, p. 126).

Also, remember Durkheim's (1960) analysis of religious faith: believers go to church with the manifest intention of establishing and reinforcing their relationship with a divinity, but their latent motive is the establishment and cultivation of relationships with people who adhere to the same principles and share the same beliefs.

Priorities. The latent motivations that emerge from the cases discussed below do not pertain to the religious but to the economic sphere, although the latter too may at times be bathed in a religious aura (Ruggiero, 2013).

In Ecuador, which once enjoyed an exemplary environmental reputation, government complicity with corporations and their exploitation of oil, gas, and minerals is justified through financial arguments. Debts owed to China are singled out as the major motivator of devastation and violent hostility towards those opposing it (Watts & Collyns, 2014).

In Costa Rica, often reputed to be a green and ethical travel destination, environmentalists, conservationists, and park rangers are victimised by poachers, police officers, and private security agents. National parks have become as dangerous for rangers as they are for animals. Its Pacific coast is a major nesting location for turtles, and campaigners are committed to saving eggs and defend them from thieves. After Jairo Moira, one such committed conservationist, was killed in 2013, a government representative stated that turtles (and, for that matter, those protecting them) are not a priority and their existence cannot stop the inevitable process of economic development. The country, it was contended, cannot solely rely on tourism for its income (Burrell, 2013; Fendt, 2014).

As these two cases indicate, appeals to general principles and grand narratives fall into mainstream economic reasoning, which emphasises job creation and growth. All sorts of conduct seem to be admissible once such emphasis is successfully conveyed. Economic development provides the justificatory backdrop for schemes that prove devastating for the environment as well as the state financial resources. In Nigeria, for instance, Global Witness (2018) investigated a large deal involving oil giants Shell and Eni, tracking down documents that showed how the large amount of money paid for the right to exploit the country's national resources was actually spent. A vast bribery scheme was revealed, involving pay-offs to, among others, the then Nigerian president. The furtive movement of funds was enabled by a convicted money launderer and former oil minister through his purpose-founded company.

The amount paid [by Shell and Eni] was more than Nigeria's entire 2017 health budget and one and a half times what the UN said was needed to respond to the current famine. (Ibid., p. 12)

Every year, hundreds of billions of dollars are paid to governments by oil and mining companies to access natural resources. These vast public revenues are officially earmarked for development projects and/or relief policies for people in need of employment or care. However, private appropriation of funds is often officially sanctioned by practices. For instance, lobbyists in the US achieved a resounding victory when they managed to overturn rules requiring extractive companies to disclose their payments to foreign official representatives and private actors alike (ibid.).

Arguments prioritising economic growth are mobilised in China, which is one of the largest timber markets and manufacturers of wood products. Its main supplier is Papua New Guinea, where abuse has led to 12% of the country being given away to mostly foreign-owned logging and agribusiness

interests for up to 99 years.

China imports from many countries where weak governance is leading to illegal logging, land rights violations, and rainforest destruction. It is also currently the only main timber consumer without a law to prohibit illegal timber importation. (Ibid., p. 20)

Higher loyalties. A driver of violence is the assumption, as we have seen, that environmental protection will hurt economic growth. However, the technique of neutralisation known as the appeal to higher loyalties, in our case, revolves around the celebration of economics as the repository of universal truth or as a set of religious precepts. Let us see some examples.

In its quest for development, Nicaragua is becoming an extremely dangerous country for campaigners, particularly after a Chinese company promised to invest \$50 billion to build a canal three times the size of the Panama Canal. The project will cross the country from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, forcing around 120,000 indigenous people to move. “The ambitious canal project may never be put in practice. However, the Chinese company still holds a 50-year concession and can sell the rights for the building of ports, airports, and tourism complexes’ (National Geographic, 2017, p. 5).

It should be noted that similar latent justifications inspired companies supporting invasions of countries such as Libya and Iraq. In Iraq, BP acted as a co-promoter of the war and, in the name of economic development, continues to practise environmental injustice through the pollution of water. Campaigners argue that its presence in Iraq does not benefit local people. This is the reason why a British Museum exhibition on Iraq, sponsored by BP in 2018, was energetically disrupted by environmental and anti-war activists (Mortimer, 2018).

Economic reasoning also supports self-serving forecasts by companies regarding their future role in economic development. BP and Glencoe, for instance, have been accused of making “bullish” predictions about the future demand for fossil fuels across the world (Clark, 2017). While attracting investors, such predictions may have a bearing on the degree of hostility with which environmentalists will be treated in the near future. Exxon joined in to reassure hesitant investors, announcing that it had found huge new deep-water oil deposits off the coast of Guyana, while OPEC released a report predicting higher oil demand due to increases in jet travel (McKibben, 2019). After warnings to consumers to think twice before buying an oil-powered car, since its resale price may fall dramatically in the next few years, renewable energy developers followed in the footpath of colleagues who defend their activity through the growth rhetoric. Environmentalists, however, argue that even alternative power plants harm nature (Roth, 2017).

The appeal to higher loyalties theorised by Sykes and Matza is here transformed into a confession of faith towards the precepts of “neo” as well as “proto” liberalism. Opposition to entrepreneurship, even when enterprise is harmful, is judged to be detrimental to the creation of wealth, therefore to the trickle-down principle that purportedly ensures its distribution. An example of how this principle is also held by criminal organisations is provided by the assassination of a local environmental politician in the Campania region of Italy, Angelo Vassallo, who fought for renewable energy and against illegal building construction. Regarded as a green mayor for his efforts in preserving a park and ordering the demolition of illegal houses built close to beaches, Vassallo was found in his car, shot dead (Environmentalism on a Mission, 2010). The criminal organisation that executed him was subliminally appealing to higher loyalties, namely the licit or illicit developers operating across Italy and elsewhere.

Transforming the original formulation, in brief, this latent justification does not refer to a specific social group or subculture, to precise peers, or a class. The perpetrators, rather, display their attachment to an idea, advocating abstract concepts and theories around society and the role of economics. The murderers of environmentalists cannot claim affiliation to a homogeneous human or social enclave but only to other non-homogeneous enclaves within which faith in certain economic principles is professed. Theirs is, in this sense, a “piecemeal” identity that binds them to a range of similar individuals and groups. Together, these dissimilar identities, these “lies that bind”, promote divisions and hatred, becoming sources of war (Appiah, 2018).

Conclusion

Some of the poorest countries in the world provide the resources that drive the global economy, and while competition to appropriate such resources grows, environmental activists find themselves in the firing line. This is at times described as the “resource curse”, whereby oil-rich countries, for instance, “suffer more conflict, greater corruption, higher inequality, less political freedom, and often more absolute poverty than their resource-free peers” (Shaxson & Christensen, 2015, p. 1).

In the previous pages, together with the presentation of a number of killings, the justifications adduced by suspects have been discussed, noting that the celebrated techniques of neutralisation proposed by Sykes and Matza must be slightly amended vis-à-vis these crimes. Justifications, moreover, have been divided into manifest and latent, following some perceptive elaborations by Robert Merton. Manifest justifications have been gleaned from official accounts, interpretations, and reactions. Latent justifications have been related to a set of principles and beliefs shared by those who see in unfettered economic development the only way of ensuring the accumulation of wealth and general well-being.

While impunity prevails, the criminalisation of protest is on the rise. Most notably in Africa, governments and powerful business interests are using their influence to marginalise land and environmental activists and turn public opinion against them, branding their actions as “anti-development”. Some concluding remarks may complete the analysis of the factors that contribute to the killing of environmental campaigners.

Powerful actors pursuing their interests do not always resort to coercion, nor do they need to justify their violations, whose perception as criminal acts depends on the strength of the legitimacy they enjoy. Successful power crime, therefore, needs to present itself as a philanthropic deed, in the sense that its effects must appear to benefit others more than the perpetrator (Ruggiero, 2015). Philanthropic criminals, in brief, manage to repel the criminal label from their activity and to persuade others that their goals correspond to those of the collectivity – hence the mobilisation, by those killing environmental campaigners, of prevailing economic doctrines whose rejection triggers extreme forms of violence. When opposition to the sanctity of economic interests shapes hostile identities, the latter feel legitimised to wage a contrived war, and at war, killing need not be justified. Those who refuse to kill, on the contrary, have to exculpate their refusal.

The killing of environmental campaigners is a form of proactive annihilation; it is premeditated, it is not reactive or impulsive, it is not a response to some immediate threat. Rather, it is meant to be dissuasive for those who are not killed, so that those who are inclined to follow in the footsteps of activists are shown the price of their potential decision. Proactive and dissuasive aggression requires coalitions, irrespective of the social condition and role of those who constitute them. As suggested by behavioural economists, those involved in coalitions identify one another as reference points and make choices that they believe to be the average choices of the group (Baddeley, 2017).

Poachers, militia groups, professional assassins, police officers, private and security forces, and undercover mercenaries, indicated by environmental groups as perpetrators of killings, “herd” together ideologically while conforming to the economic philosophy of corporations. Herding, in this case, is both normative and informational, in the sense that it results from rules guiding economic development, on the one hand, and imitation of widespread practices, on the other. Ganging up, therefore, allows all the actors involved in economic initiative to side with friends against enemies, and killing becomes one of the choices available. The dead enemies, moreover, become emblems of the death to come, which will be brought about by the future environmental devastation and the annihilation of those resisting it.

Ultimately, both “neo” and “proto” liberalism posit that resources belong to those who exploit them and that it is sacrilegious to leave them unused (Ruggiero, 2013). Consequently, those who appropriate them are not bound by any moral or social relationships to others, but only to what belongs to them.

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