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Notes from the Demolition Edge

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Abstract These notes gather the scenes of a single day around a coal mine. In the hinterlands of western Germany, thousands of protesters rallied in January 2023 to convey their opposition to the extension of the mine and etched the name of a village – Lützerath – into the collective memory of climate protests. These notes linger in the very moment of the village's passing and give way to the bewilderment of a peripatetic fieldworker thrown into the turmoil that flared up when the law arrived to disband what was left of a multi-year occupation, until its last devotees – two people barricaded in a self-dug tunnel – would have been dragged off. These notes are fragments on the conundrums of engaging with underground phenomena, on the fallibility of ideas of representation, and on the fragility of writing about conflicts over coal, climate, and communities.

Keywords Lützerath. Coal. Imaginary fieldwork. Climate activism. Diffraction.

Summary 1 Terrain. – 2 Field. – 3 Mud. – 4 Debris. – 5 Ground. – 6 Earth. – 7 Turf.

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One hope of conducting fieldwork in critical zones is to experience something more concrete and to hear, feel, smell, see something different than would be possible by sitting at a desk. To observe episodes of the climate crises out there holds the promise of compiling scenes, capturing speech acts, and becoming aware of things unfamiliar or surprising and letting them congeal into a coherent, cogent text.

But what happens when the protagonists and places to be observed are falling into disarray? When they are about to disappear? When taking note(s) gets out of hand? When the fabric of writing wears thin?

1 Terrain

Lützerath used to be a village in North Rhine-Westphalia. For much of its existence, the village "belonged to the municipality and parish of Immerath. Its postal code was 5141 until 1993, then 41812. Lützerath reached its largest population in 1970 with 105 people. In 2010, only 50, and at the beginning of 2021, 11 inhabitants still lived in the village".[1] Left uncounted in these figures are the climate activists who, since 2020, have positioned their bodies against the course of events. The activists occupied the brown coal village, living in houses left behind and building their own encampments. On 14 January 2023 – the last day of Lützerath's eviction –, the protest moved to the plots of farmland in front of Garzweiler II, the open-pit coal mine, vast and boundless. After Immerath, Holz, Spenrath, Pesch, Otzenrath, and Borschemich, the mine is about to swallow another village.

A few kilometers from the edge, Greta Thunberg is speaking on a stage, before a march of thousands will head on to join the protesters on the acres. Hand-painted banners abound. They read "The 1.5 degrees frontier runs through Lützerath", "Renewable energies not fossil fuel fantasies", "Lützi stays", and "Lützi lives".[2] For protesters of various denominations – from Ende Gelände and Fridays for Future to Menschenrecht vor Bergrecht and Alle Dörfer bleiben – the fall of Lützerath will leave a scar. It is a day likely to recast the history of climate politics in Germany, paving the way for another extension of the coal mine that will have set off unfathomable amounts of CO_2 by the time of its closure (or its depletion).[3]

1 That is the count reported in *Wikipedia* 2023. All translations by the author, unless otherwise stated.

2 Originally in German, the banners announce in bold letters: "Die 1,5°-Grenze verläuft vor Lützerath", "Erneuerbare Energien statt fossile Fantasien", "Lützi bleibt", and "Lützi lebt".

3 The former of which is said to take place in 2030, according to statements made by RWE Power AG (2023) that runs the mine.

Much of Lützerath's history comes to an end on that day which makes it into the pages of *The New York Times* (Schuetze 2023). The street signs in the area have already been changed; they don't recall the existence of the village. Simultaneously, another story picks up speed, one that turns Lützerath into many things at once: a symbol of a cleared protest (for the climate movements), a climate policy calamity (in terms of commitments to the Paris Agreement and its one-point-five-degree target), a terrain to be mined (for the bucket-wheel excavator), a component of a controversial plan (to fix the energy crisis after the Russian invasion of Ukraine), a question of identity (for the Green Party), an entrepreneurial stroke of luck (for RWE, whose corporate property the village became), and an epistemological quandary for me, the fieldworker.

2 Field

On my way to the demolition edge. Behind me wind turbines by the dozen. A few hundred meters in front of me the coalfield, below me the macerated earth, next to me protesters, all around police, helmeted, on horseback. Unfriendly weather up there. A gust. A protester of old age with a raincoat, reddish-orange, possibly a color from 1968. It flutters in the wind, as if its wearer were about to take off and announce the apocalypse.

In practice, doing fieldwork rarely means roaming over actual acres. Here in the hinterland, however, between the hamlets of Holzweiler and Keyenberg, the concept of fieldwork takes on an agricultural dimension that is missing in most ethnographic methods books.[4]

When the last crops were harvested on this Rhenish loess soil is impossible to determine. And I won't know what it is like to hold out for weeks, for months, or longer in a protest camp on a patch of soon-abandoned earth. This experience cannot be traced like an opinion or an argument, through a conversation or an interview; it is inscribed in the bodies; it is part of the activists' way of life that can be questioned and observed for a long time and yet remains untranslatable into a fieldnote.

Do numbers count? The bucket-wheel excavator, built in 1978, weighs twelve thousand eight hundred and forty tons and measures ninety-six meters in height. A protester measures between one meter forty and two meters, approximately. For every ten protest shouts there are about three police horses. Two courtrooms it saw, the

4 But see the stunning collection of papers by Leemann and Sutter (2023) who mull over fieldwork as it relates to agricultural practices.

complaint against the cession of land from farmer Eckardt Heukamp, an icon of the protests (Leue 2022), before being dismissed by the twenty-first senate of Münster's Higher Administrative Court (OVG Münster 2022).

3 Mud

This day is wretched. This day is dire. In nearly-bygone Lützerath, my desire for representing and recounting what happens wants to lie down in the mud. The idea of an "ethics of exhaustive recording" (Hoffmann 2018, 113) – taking note(s) of as much as you possibly can, with a chronicler's hand – is cast aside as quickly as the questions conceived at my desk before I arrived in the field. The literature I read on carbon cultures and extractivist landscapes: I forget about it. As raindrops dampen my notebook, I wish my observing gaze would fade and my interpretative inclination wither.

And you can't have them back so easily. There are moments of research and moments of writing that, for reasons to be found or not, resist being integrated into the logics of scholarly text production. Notes of whichsoever genre – be they more provisional like fieldnotes or more postscriptal, essayistic – might not overcome the perplexity and complexity of Lützerath's passing in favor of a coherent argument, a comparative analysis, a conclusive account.

If research into the public lives of climate issues is thought of as a quest for empirically unearthing how people make sense of, position themselves to, enact, and perform the climate crisis, then the demolition edge is a tough place to be. When smoke petards go off, clouds settle in, and violence flares up, the very notion of 'empirical' gets obfuscated. The data (so-called) is elusive. Nothing is for the taking here. Even "rubber boots methods" (Bubandt, Andersen, Cypher 2022, 7-12) are on the cusp of going phut.

I am not among the vanguard crowds that are being hit hard nor do I run a risk of being arrested. Still, sensing scenes of resistance troubles my notion of analytical distance, of the ways of becoming part of a field and at the same time imagining myself as its observer. That participant observation does something to its so-called subject matter, shapes it (through the choice of a perspective, a mode of description) and that, vice versa, the events in the field affect the ways and means of observing is nothing new. But what follows epistemologically from the shifts of perspective and position that I experience out there on the demolition edge?

Does being affected by the climatic – which is to say: the cultural – consequences of coal mining call for a normative standpoint, a committed judgment? Can there be such a thing as a neutral position towards the epistemic object? At what level of

involvement does this so-called object become something else? What problems of positionality arise when analytically approaching contemporary forms of climate protests which are in constant flux? Where could the fieldworker's position be if it is neither ostentatiously critical nor naively affirmative? On this side or beyond the climate movements? On their fringes, in their midst, apart from them? Or do I have to wait until climate activism at the coal mine becomes history?

4 Debris

Just a few days past the eviction in January 2023, the protests – and the infrastructure they deployed – are already weathering away. Lützerath's "protest architecture", which consisted of tripods, rope constructions, tree houses, and other sylvan designs, has been demolished; only "debris in the mud" is left (Simon 2023). And Eckardt Heukamp's farm, eventually sold to the coal mining company, has fallen.[5]

Prior to the big day, the Deutsches Architekturmuseum had tried to preserve one of the camp's dwellings. Thanks to a loan agreement concluded with the residents of a hut, the curation team had planned for *rotkoehlchen* (the dwelling's name) to be transported to an exhibition in Frankfurt. This did not stop the demolition work from going ahead, though, and the ambition of preserving cultural artifacts from evanescence came to nothing.[6]

As an object, the hut did not make it to the museum, but the protests did (Elser et al. 2023, 288-307). They prevail through posters, through stories of those who were there, through photographs – so many of them that it might require the work of several curators to process and interpret them. On one hand, there are professional press photographs published in newspapers and magazines. On the other, there are scores of photos circulating on social media, among them Marius Michusch's shot of a bucket-wheel excavator which, as the art historian Verena Straub (2023, 80) remarks, "appeared almost surreal under dazzling lights [...], reminiscent of dystopian scenes from *Star Wars* or other works of science fiction". This photograph made its way through virtual channels countless times (ARTE 2023),

5 Already by 2022, more than 80 per cent of the residents in the perimeter of the Garzweiler mine settled with the company, the journalist Alina Saha (2022, 4) notes in a reportage on everyday aspects of "living at the edge".

6 Likewise, Lützerath's remarkable tree houses remained impossible museum objects, "without a corresponding ceiling height, without a corresponding tree" in the exhibition space, states Oliver Elser, curator in charge of *ProtestArchitecture: Barricades, Camps, Superglue*, on air with Deutschlandfunk Kultur (2023).

juxtaposed to other footage produced by the people on site who documented their own practice, continuously and digitally.[7]

The protesters' videos, feeds, news, and posts are research material in their own right. Scrutinizing this material usually takes place in front of the screen, in the office, and must therefore do without the stench of smoke petards. When a field is explored virtually, there is no standing around, no wandering, no waiting, no spontaneous exchanges of words. The weather loses its meaning. Likewise, there is no more cleaning your boots of field debris (and no more contemplative moments that come with that practice).

5 Ground

On the flip side of fieldwork romanticism, though, are the expectations enshrined into a spontaneous methodology that declares every moment of being out there a high-yielding data collection exercise and conceives of fieldwork as a process which – minus assessable disruptive factors – moves routinely and confidently from observation to description. Ethnographic writing – be it in the mode of "writing down, writing over, or writing up" (Clifford 1990, 68) – runs the risk of becoming a thoroughly technologized practice that unerringly paves the way to future theses and arguments, by dint of placing "the vertigo of notation" (Barthes 1989, 145) on solid ground.

In contrast, I understand my notes to be an archive of ambiguity, of hesitation, of astonishment, all of which were present during my observational practice and slowed that practice down. As part of a research process that cannot be sure of its epistemic things, taking note(s) in and beyond that mess called the field becomes an insecure and "open-ended arrangement" (Rheinberger 2006, 354) that confronts my science studies interests with untried questions.[8]

For example, questions to do with activist thought styles that give shape to scientifically saturated scenarios and planetary futures – one-point-five-degree futures that circulate from sites of protest into political, academic, artistic contexts and become inscribed into ways of life, far beyond the climate movements. Does the end of Lützerath change how these futures are negotiated and

7 How did the images that circulated from the protests affect debates in the spheres where they were taken up? It is short-sighted to simply consider them as powerful, Straub (2023, 88) holds, since the images' "political effectiveness is dissipated in conflicts of interpretation, dissolved under several layers of irony".

8 Rheinberger's (2006, 350) context is the laboratory, where all sorts of "notes formulated into the impure, scribbles and overwritten protocols" are being produced. How might the constitution of fieldnotes compare to the everyday "acts of writing" (Hoffmann 2018, 9) that occur inside the lab?

thought about? I cannot say, since this is a question too large in scale for these notes. What Lützerath does as a discursive event cannot be measured while standing on the ground. It remains below the threshold of the palpable. The same applies to the matter that once ignited the conflict over Lützerath: the coal, down there in the earth.

6 Earth

I know – everyone knows – that there is coal to be extracted from that crater, even when it is impossible to see or sense this matter. I cannot – and do not want to – touch the matter with my hands. Neither can I smell it nor walk on it. The open-pit mine lies protected behind a hefty fence. From there, protesters can look down into a vast terrain where the process of excavating, transporting, and washing coal begins. The crater, preternatural in its extension, is a critical zone that remains distant. If I endeavored to enter it, the earth below me might become instable. I would tumble and fall from the demolition edge like from a cliff at the end of the world. Are there activists who have dared to rappel down from here? What would it feel like to have the disputed earth under your feet?

The inaccessible, the intangible, the barely manifest, the untranslatable, the unnameable, the inconspicuous, the disappearing. Plodding my way through the open field that faces the mine leaves me with a plethora of phenomena beyond grasp, beyond sight, beyond reach, beyond touch, beyond experience.

In that sense, writing notes from the demolition edge is an imaginary practice.

This practice could be thought of as part empirical, part fictional – very much in a *I swear I saw this*-kind-of-way (Taussig 2011). It is neither entirely a product of the mind nor is it simply derivative of the things and events out there. It is filled with sensory experience yet confronted with an interpretative void. It is as much in-between mind and matter as my fieldwork notebook, this "ancillary organ" (137) that mixes "raw material of observation with reverie" (xi) and "plots a course between chance and story" (137).

Fieldwork on conflicts over climate, coal, and community can steer away from extracting useful snippets from those working their butts off to construct a solid empirical argument. Instead, my fieldwork goes astray in the thick of things. It twirls as in a derwish of human and non-human agency (including the landscape and the weather) that alters the observer and the observed so thoroughly that a distinction between the two becomes hard to uphold.[9] I do not

9 Dancing agency is of Andrew Pickering's (1995) making.

find – nor do I search for – a vantage point from above. My gaze is "diffracted" (Haraway 1992, 318), the attention diverted. I have given up on that trickery of a bird's eye perspective.[10]

7 Turf

Standing at the demolition edge, with the crater up front and CO_2 curves on the horizon, I picture how extractivism is something other than a catchy, glossy vocable. Not least the extractivism that sometimes imposes itself on conducting fieldwork: the more material you amass and the deeper you go, the more you will know. No. Shifting the attention from horizontal to vertical matters may be just another move in an "age-old aesthetic of "representation'" (Barthes 1989, 148) that has exhausted itself. En attendant, my means for describing, designating, deciphering, or depicting the vertical sphere remain as limited as those of any practitioner out there, any activist, any journalist, any bucket-wheel driver, any photographer, any police person, any note-taker from close or afar.

Yet what happens on the terrain is that neat distinctions become messy. What exactly remains at the surface, what reaches deeper? Where (and how) to locate that line – is it a line? – between low and high, depth and surface, earth and atmosphere, ground and air, past and present? How many layers of meaning, politics, bodies, dramas, livelihoods, worries, biographies, hopes – they reach far into the history of industrialization, the history of a coal mining region, and the history of climate activism – will archeologists bring to the surface if Lützerath were to be turned into an excavation site?

I am not sure any science can help in that regard. Less so when trying to imagine that in under a decade, the coal mine will have pulverized all sorts of earthly evidence, which makes it hard for future archeologists to do their work. But other traces are plenty. For all its oblivions, the archive is stocked up.

So I decamp, dour, moving like a coal country kid past this scarred landscape that used to be the activists' turf back in the day.

10 A trickery as in Donna Haraway's notion of the "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" which Haraway (1988, 581) connects to an "ideology of direct, devouring, generative, and unrestricted vision" (582).

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