NACLA Report on the Americas

ISSN: 1071-4839 (Print) 2471-2620 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rnac20

Wind Energy: Toward a “Sustainable Violence” in Oaxaca

Alexander Dunlap

To cite this article: Alexander Dunlap (2017) Wind Energy: Toward a “Sustainable Violence” in Oaxaca, NACLA Report on the Americas, 49:4, 483-488, DOI: 10.1080/10714839.2017.1409378

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2017.1409378

Published online: 13 Dec 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 2

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rnac20

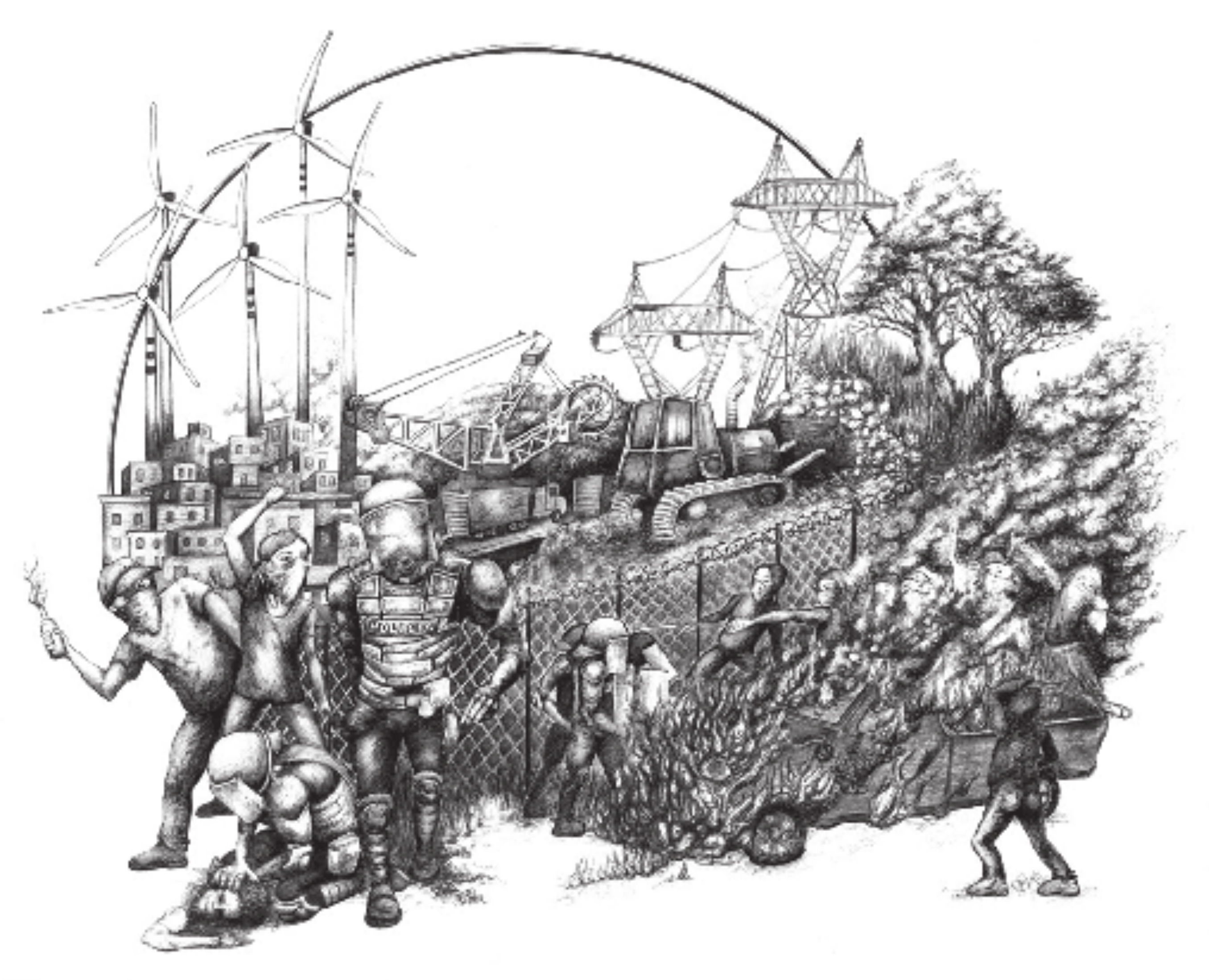
Download by: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] **Date:** 18 December 2017, At: 00:37

ALEXANDER DUNLAP

Wind Energy: Toward a “Sustainable Violence” in Oaxaca

In Mexico’s wind farms, a tense relationship between extractivism, counterinsurgency, and the green economy takes root.

> *People say the motivation behind wind energy development is global warming, but I feel that businessmen are using it as an excuse. In my mother tongue, global warming is the sickness of the earth—Mother Earth is sick, but those people who have money are…taking advantage of Mother Earth’s illness… so they can grab all the natural resources from the First Nation people from this land. They are grabbing our water, they are grabbing our wind, they are grabbing our lands, they are grabbing our forests. They use the protection of natural resources as an excuse, but in Mexico the First Nation people are well known for giving offerings to and respecting the life of Mother Earth—taking only the natural resources that they need.*
>
> *–The Wild Tiger, Juchitán February, 2015*



ARTWORK BY RÍONA O’REGAN

Destruction continues. Not only ecological destruction, but the tearing apart of the remaining social fabrics of Indigenous and non-indigenous peoples that value and defend their ecosystems, cultures, and alternative ways of living against sprawling industrial interventions. Governments and their business partners have long declared war against these people and their environments. This “Fourth World War,” as Zapatista Subcomandante Marcos has called it, continues; a war spread all over the world in a series of diffuse low- and high-intensity contestations and conflicts that seeks to harness, control, and domesticate the natural resources of the world—human and nonhuman—to the imperatives of financial capital. The *Environmental Justice Atlas* demonstrates the breadth of this war, which culminates in the generalized drive towards militarizing and marketizing ecosystems. This war threatens to transform ecosystems into energy extraction and natural capital projects to maintain a self-reinforcing assemblage of natural resource control through state industrialization, growth, and expansion.

The spread of industrial infrastructure with urbanization and, consequently, ecological crisis, begs the question: How does the industrial system, with its flagrant disrespect and outright destruction of ecosystems and the people attached to them, persist? The simple answer is that the state apparatus is a political-economic structure of conquest. Underneath this answer, however, is a complex relationship between extraction, counterinsurgency, and the green economy that enables this structure’s persistence. In Oaxaca, Mexico, we see these processes coalesce and emerge through the development of wind energy.

Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

© 2017 North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA)

Throughout Latin America, the structure of conquest advances capitalist resource control and commodification, further entrenching its vision, ideology, and operation in new and increasingly insidious ways. This process becomes possible through the normalization and invisibilization of everyday forms of institutional violence and warfare techniques, rendering ecological crisis inseparable from military, police, and extra-judicial violence, as I have written in various articles.

Counterinsurgency, a security doctrine designed to subdue, mitigate, and harness insurrectionary tensions, is indispensable to understanding old and new forms of managing resistance against both traditional fossil fuel and renewable energy industries. David Kilcullen defines counterinsurgency as "a competition with the insurgent for the right and ability to win the hearts, minds and acquiescence of the population." Here, he writes, winning hearts means "persuading people their best interests are served by your success," and winning minds means "convincing them that you can protect them, and that resisting you is pointless." Counterinsurgency is low-intensity, asymmetrical combat, a style of warfare that emphasizes intelligence networks, psychological operations (PSYOPs), media manipulation, and even security provision and social development to maintain governmental legitimacy. The definition of what constitutes an "insurgent," or even a "terrorist," is troubling. For over thirty years, governments have increasingly defined "insurgent" to mean anyone deemed threatening and undesirable to governments and corporations, which includes labeling political organizing and nonviolent direct action as proto-insurgent activities.

Military, police, and private security are mandatory for governmental and extractive rule and increasingly trained in preventative counterinsurgency techniques. Brutal campaigns continue to exist, especially in the case of Mexico, where drug cartels are becoming increasingly involved in land deals and clearing people from their land, as Dawn Paley writes in her book *Drug War Capitalism*. Yet today, there is another strategy taking place. Due to the costly nature of military-police campaigns that attempt to secure territory for investment, occasionally leading to protracted conflicts or civil war, in the 1990s, "softer" neoliberal preventive counterinsurgency strategies began to emerge. Energy companies acknowledged the economic and social benefits of mitigating conflict, recognizing the importance of gaining a "social license to operate." Obtaining such social licenses involves indirect counterinsurgency strategies that utilize corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs designed to integrate social and environmental concerns into business operations and free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) consultations that require participatory consultations to occur with Indigenous populations before development interventions incur upon their territory. CSR and FPIC are not mutually exclusive. Both can be viewed as concessions within which emerge from century-long battles against state-corporate exploitation.

Despite the continuing struggle for Indigenous self-determination and control over megaprojects, these efforts remain painfully mangled. In practice, CSR and FPIC can function as divisive counterinsurgency strategies—often, social development funds and consultations do not arrive until one to 15 years after the start of development projects, as was the case with wind energy development in Oaxaca. CSR and FPIC openly try to mitigate conflict through sophisticated public relations efforts, using formal or informal funds to promote social fragmentation and using public consultations as platforms to legitimize controversial development and extractive projects. Contrary to popular interpretations, neither CSR nor FPIC actually permit Indigenous or other communities to reject development projects. Instead, they are forced to either negotiate, accept the company's offer, or fight to stop the arriving projects. For the people across the world resisting development and extraction projects, the stakes of the Fourth World War quickly become life or death.

A Poorly Dressed Wolf in Expensive Sheep Skin

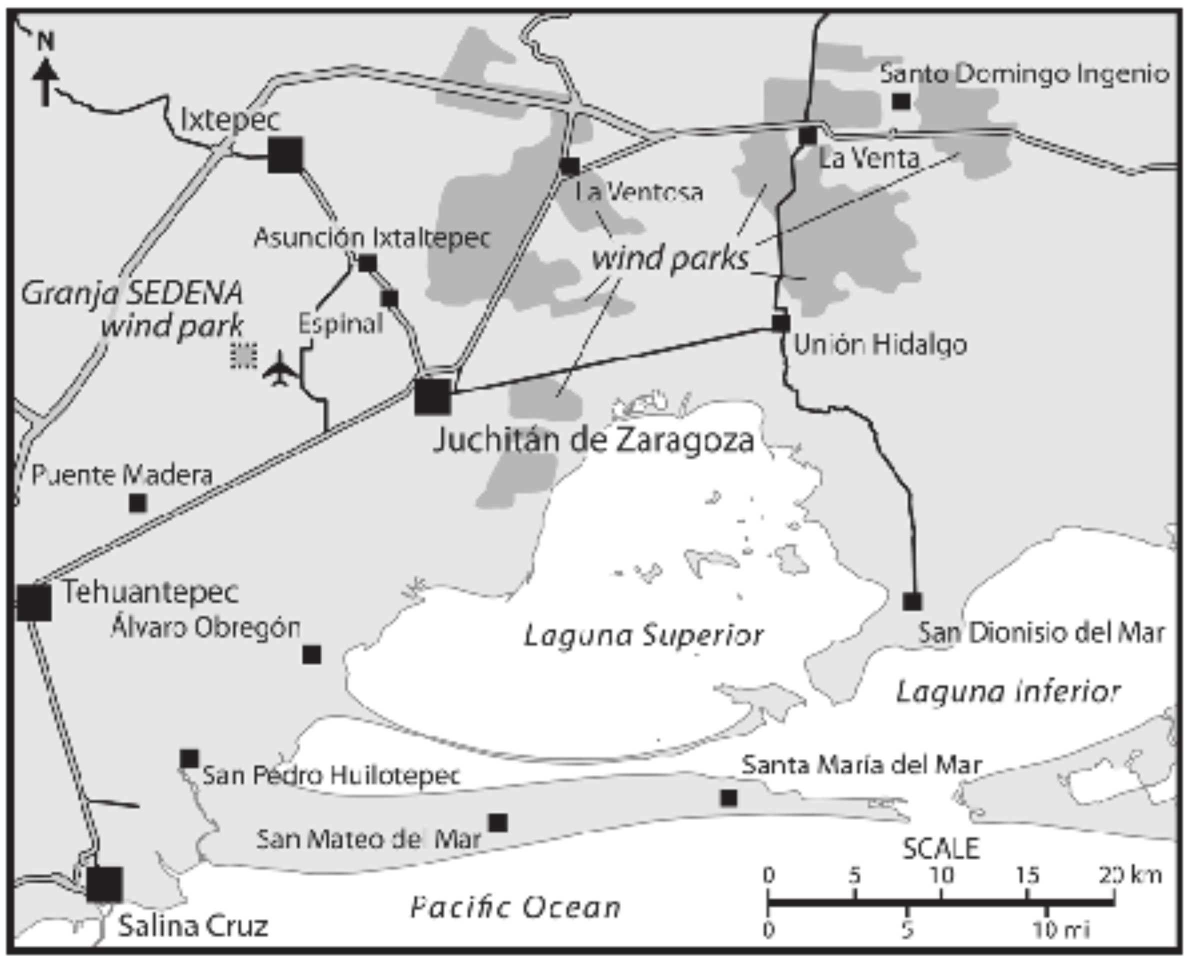
To mitigate resistance and open new markets, capitalist development needed a "softer" and more effective approach. The concept of "sustainable development," popularized in the 1987 *Brundtland Report*, proclaims that capitalist development can coexist responsibly with the earth. This logic developed further with the rise of green economic and climate change mitigation programs. After the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, climate change mitigation became wedded to a market-based environmentalism that believes in "selling nature to save it," according to Kathleen McAfee, later reframed as "saving nature to trade it" by Sian Sullivan. This necessitates transforming nature into a kind of natural capital, or quantifying and commodifying nature into "ecosystem services" as a means of making nature commensurable with economic logics and financial systems, according to Sullivan. Since Kyoto, approaches to mitigating ecological and climate crisis rely principally on market-based approaches.

For example, while Mexico retains the most progressive environmental and climate change legislation in the global South, it is at the same time orchestrating a Dirty War under the justification of the War on Drugs to legitimize coercion against Indigenous, poor, and dissident segments of the population. Militarization, policing, extra-judicial, and narco violence co-exist and become complementary to tourism and economic growth. At the same time, governments pass progressive Indigenous conventions such as ILO 169/FPIC signed in 1989 and environmental legislation, such as the Renewable Energy and Energetic Transition Law (2008), General Law on Climate Change (2012) and The Special Climate Change Program (2014-2018).

Paying lip service to ecological crisis and attempting to pacify popular resistance against neoliberalism and its infrastructure, the green economy is advancing the grabbing of Indigenous land, while privatizing social property and the extraction of wind, solar, hydro, thermal, "carbon," and "biodiversity" resources. In short, the green economy is a continuation of war by other means in the Fourth World War. An examination of wind energy development in Oaxaca reveals how.

Entering the *Istmo*

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec region of Oaxaca, Mexico, known locally as the *Istmo*, demonstrates this war by other means and all of its complications. The World Bank's International Finance Corporation claims the Istmo has "the best wind resources on earth." Between the years 2000 and 2016, roughly twenty-seven wind parks and more than 1,800 wind turbines were built on the Istmo, according to the Mexican newspaper *El Excelsior*. While some have embraced their construction, others have responded with outrage, militant resistance, and violent repression.



Map of the Coastal Isthmus of Tehuantepec CARL SACK

Wind energy development in the coastal Istmo occurs in two sections, in the north and south. The northern part sits at the bottom of the Atravesada mountain range and is predominately Zapotec (Binnizá). It was the first area to experience wind park development around the towns of La Venta, La Ventosa, Santo Domingo Ingenio, and Unión Hidalgo. While there was a seven-turbine pilot project in 1994, a 2003 USAID report publicized this excellent wind resource and triggered a "wind rush" in the region, attracting European and U.S. transnational companies including Iberdrola, EDF-EVM (Mexico Valley Electric), Acciona, Gamesa, Vestas, and Clipper Windpower.

Mexico's 1992 Electricity Law and the 1994 passage of NAFTA have allowed the overwhelming majority of wind parks in the region to become "self-supply," both nationally and internationally. Self-supply electricity is private, generated and reserved for investors or co-owners of wind parks, which, in the Istmo, transports electricity to Guatemala, the United States, and industrial areas within Mexico that power a range of industrial construction companies, superstores, and even mining companies, amongst others.

Local elites, including *caciques*, have embraced the wind projects locally, which were built on *ejidos*, private, and other communally-owned land. Initially, companies and their local collaborators sold the wind energy projects as a solution to poverty and unemployment and a gateway to social development and progress. While there have been reports of contract manipulation, false promises, and intimidation, only select landowners and land commissioners were consulted, whom I was told provided negligent information regarding the socio-ecological impact of wind parks.

It was not long before La Venta and La Ventosa were completely enclosed by wind turbines, while other towns, such as Santo Domingo Ingenio, were partially enclosed.

The Southeast Wind Energy Project in the Istmo PRESIDENCIA DE LA REPÚBLICA MEXICANA

Summarizing the situation, a resident from La Ventosa told me in an interview: "We are still poor and now we are surrounded by wind turbines." The wind project resulted in a rise of income-inequality, temporary work contracting, token social works, and widespread heath and ecological concerns. Today, the residents of La Ventosa continue to struggle for greater inclusion in wind energy profit shares, including access to civil works such as sewers, roads, and improved health care facilities. Residents are also negotiating for heavily-subsidized, if not free electricity for the town.

The wind companies' desire to spread wind parks across the region led developers to the southern Istmo. Primarily Zapotec and Ikoot (Huave) fishing communities living around the Lagoon Superior and Inferior and the Barra de Santa Teresa sandbar, as well as towns such as San Mateo del Mar, San Dionisio del Mar, Juchitán, and Álvaro Obregón, were far more reluctant about arriving wind projects. These coastal communities had seen the impact of wind energy development in the north and recognized that building large wind turbines by the sea would disturb marine life and potentially threaten their livelihoods. Nonetheless, in 2006 Mareña Renovables, later renamed Eólica del Sur (South Wind), and Fuerza y Energia (Power and Energy) Bíi Hioxo Wind Farms began negotiations, eventually paying local political authorities to manage land deals and political stability in these areas. A lack of consultation, political corruption, unequal benefit sharing, restricted fishing access, and ecological devastation led to demonstrations, sabotage, blockades, and even insurrection in Álvaro Obregón. This has led to violent repression and what I have argued was the deployment of counterinsurgency techniques to "deactivate the social movements that have arisen around" Bíi Hioxo Wind Farm, as stated in a leaked company document. This deactivation has included both violent repression (assaults, death threats, shootings, assassinations, etc.) and indirect approaches (media slander, social science, public relations, and social development campaigns) that created and widened existing social divisions. Describing the divisive tactics employed by the wind companies and their collaborators, Wild Tiger, a Zapotec Land defender, explained to me in 2015:

> *If I go to a ranch and I want to make chicken stew, the farmer throws some grains of corn on the ground and the chickens come to eat the corn and so he chooses the best chicken and grabs it. The assistance that the wind companies are giving is like that. Once they have the people in their hands, they grab them. The wind energy companies have dominated Juchitán—they cause our world view to disappear.*

The sense of conflict is further illustrated in the experience of Isabella, a community activist, who recounted:

> *Of course they are taking away our peace. Our resistance has provoked many threats. Twice they have tried to take away* compañera *Carmen and Sara. They have tried to take Carmen's son away—a ten-year-old boy. They have called me on the phone and threatened to kidnap me, they put [community activist] Mariano López in jail. They called [activist] Carlos Sánchez all the time with threats and harassments. They came on December 19 and fired shots near my house. On January 9 they set fire to my parcel [of land]… This is because I am in the struggle and they want to intimidate me, frighten me, so I will stop protesting.*

The Bíi Hioxo wind park was completed on the Lagoon Superior in October 2014, while repression and strategies of social fragmentation have stifled assertions of Indigenous self-determination and autonomy against wind energy megaprojects in Álvaro Obregón.

Militarization and Marketization of Nature: Sustainable Violence in Progress

In Oaxaca, the Secretary of National Defense (SEDENA) has begun grabbing Indigenous communal land to build military bases around extraction sites in Sierra Norte, Tlacolula and the Istmo. In the Istmo, this is because SEDENA itself is buying a five wind turbine (15MW) wind park called the Granja Sedena, (SEDENA Farm) to power military infrastructure. Completed in 2013 before the November 2014 FPIC consultation, the Granja Sedena wind park emerges amongst the 1,800 wind turbines and widespread protests, barricades, riots, and shootouts against the wind parks in the region between 2011 and 2016. The Granja Sedena project is a microcosm of larger trends in the Istmo and capitalist progress in general, demonstrating the interrelated and diffuse imperial nexus of mineral extractivism, militarization, and sustainable development.

Granja Sedena, operated by Vestas, is also tied to a airport expansion in Ixtepec. Vestas, through Tradeco, a local company, is mining *Cerro Igú* (Igú Hill), where a sacred religious site is located and shared by the towns of Puente Madera, Rancho Llano, and Loma Bonita in the municipality of San Blas Atempa. Cerro Igú, situated between Juchitán and Tehuantepec, hosts the Igú Holy Cross Chapel. Multiple times a year, people perform pilgrimages to the hill. Tradeco is mining Cerro Igú for two principal reasons: first, the hill consists of a “yellow earth” or clay excellent for road or airport construction, and second, the area is the site of the Granja Sedena electricity substation. A desire to pursue extraction projects led the Oaxaca governor and Secretary of Security and the mayor of San Blas Atempa to pressure the communal land commissioners to sign over 20 hectares of communal land to SEDENA, according to the International Service for Peace. This occurred without public consultation or agreement from local authorities in surrounding towns. Furthermore, SEDENA refuses to display copies of the substation land contract, claiming that these documents are not public, while the General Secretariat of Oaxaca State (SEGEGO) says they do not have copies of the contract.

In the Istmo, as well as other regions in Oaxaca, we are witnessing a method of participatory land grabbing or “green grabbing,” facilitated by law, state institutions,

EXIGIMO LA E
RENOBABLE QUE SE
DE LA BARRA STA TERESA
NO AL PTO. EOLIC
Unidos en la defensa de nuestros mares, lagunas y tierras los ikoots Biniza

A 2016 protest against the expansion of wind farms HTTP://3LHORMIGUERO.ME/

and select local elites. This combines institutional power, clientelism, and collaborating segments of the local population to take over communal land to impose controversial energy projects—whether with the Bíi Hioxo or smaller ones like the Granja Sedena project. The end result is prioritizing capitalist industrialization over the sensitive land relationships, spiritual values, and alternative developmental aspirations of Indigenous communities. This communal land grab then results in a civil conflict perpetrated by transnational corporate actors backed by the state, producing low-intensity civil war-style dynamics within the towns near wind energy projects, most notably Álvaro Obregón and San Dionisio del Mar. Furthermore, the imposition of and resistance to these projects continue as attempts to build wind parks around the Lagoon Superior and Barra persist, *El Universal* reports.

Stifling Alternatives, Sustaining Repression

Now more than ever, true alternatives to capitalist development are necessary. One corporate alternative is an industrial-scale community wind park offered by the Yansa Group. This 44-turbine wind park would generate and sell 100 megawatts to the national utility company. After servicing its debt, Yansa Group would split profits equally with the partnering community, who would retain control over their land—by far the best wind deal in the Istmo.

The Mexican government, however, denies permitting for this communal wind park on grounds that the Yansa Group is not an existing legal entity in Mexico, as Sofía Avila-Calero documents. Instead, the Mexican government continues mandating more transnational corporate-led police and mercenary-enforced wind parks. The stifling of community friendly alternatives overlaps with widespread repression against groups resisting wind park development. Protests against Cerro Igú mine and the Granja Sedena substation have resulted in similar patterns of repression documented in previous years.

On March 27, 2017 when four members of the community, including a municipal agent from Puente Madera, went to Cerro Igú to confirm that mining was indeed occurring, they were illegally detained and beaten by police, according to the independent media outlet *Ruptura Colectiva*. This led to numerous protests, blockades of the Inter-American Highway and shutting down the mine. Repression has included threats, assaults, intimidation by gunmen and burning fields near the road blockade. On July 1 of this year, ten state police patrols equipped with riot gear invaded the town of Puente Madera. Despite this show of force, this was the third time protesters were able to temporarily shut down the Cerro Igú mine.

Civil conflicts continue to spread across the Istmo, designated in 2016 as a new Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Resource extraction projects—deemed green or otherwise—are causing social upheaval as communities face riot police and mercenaries who dispense death threats, assaults, and intimidation in response to resistance. Such conflicts have parallels across the world, from the Hambach Forest Occupation in Germany to the NoDAPL anti-pipeline protests in the U.S., where processes of extractivism, counterinsurgency and, at times, the green economy, work to further extract, divide, and conquer both people and their environments. Globally, the grabbing of Indigenous land takes on increasingly complicated forms as it increasingly occurs in the name of climate change mitigation and efforts to "green" the economy. Extractive projects and even the military are attempting to make their operations of facilitating dispossession, ecological degradation, and political violence sustainable with wind and other renewable energy systems.

We are witnessing the gradual articulation of a sustainable violence, which seeks to expand the scope, scale, and effectiveness of police-military power by integrating renewable energy, and works towards making repression campaigns ecologically friendlier, operationally more sustainable and, ideally, perpetual. When assessing renewable energy projects, we must not fall for the vague promises of so-called green energy. We must constantly ask: where are the raw materials coming from and what will this energy be used for? Because the "greening" of the military to make repressive operations self-sustaining is not something people or communities impacted by military and police violence should promote, let alone applaud. ■

Alexander Dunlap *is a post-doctoral researcher in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Alexander has recently published in the journals:* Geopolitics, Journal of Peasant Studies, Human Geography, *and* Political Geography.