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‘Quanto Vale a Sua Vida?’: Individuals’ Resistance Under Corporate Repression

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In Minas Gerais, Brazil, activists challenging Vale’s extractive activities are often portrayed as obstacles to economic progress, while their resistance is criminalised. Paradoxically, as corporate repression intensifies, individual forms of dissent persist and evolve. Through ethnographic research, this article explores how isolated activists navigate an environment marked by surveillance and legal intimidation, resulting in social isolation. It reveals a forced transformation from collective to individual resistance, and from broad anti-extractivism to targeted critiques of corporate practices. These transformations, while fragmenting movements, have engendered more resilient, albeit solitary, forms of activism, challenging narratives of complete corporate hegemony in extractive contexts.

Keywords: individual trajectories, labour conflicts, mining companies, repression, Resistance, sociology of work.

Brazil, particularly regions near the Amazon rainforest, stands out for its high rates of intimidation and crimes against environmental and human rights defenders (Global Witness, 2022). Yet, this pattern of repression is not confined to the Amazon region. Minas Gerais, a state located in central Brazil, also experiences significant levels of repression. This article examines the paradox between persistent acts of resistance against both extraction and corporate practices in Minas Gerais, and a pervasive climate of repression and criminalisation. Activists and social movement members there face various forms of intimidation, from open threats to subtle surveillance tactics (Losekann and Mayorga, 2018). In December 2021, an activist, who asked to remain anonymous, confided:

I hardly use my phone now and avoid taking it with me when I meet other activists or victims. With Bolsonaro in power, his supporters feel unleashed. They do not hesitate to threaten us. I’m cautious when leaving home because, sadly, I’ve heard too many stories of violence. (Interview with the activist in Belo Horizonte, 9 December 2021)

Minas Gerais, a State with a rich history of mining dating back to the colonial era, is home to Vale, one of the world’s largest mining companies (Aguiar, 2022). Vale’s operations, particularly in iron ore extraction, have profoundly shaped the region’s economic, social and environmental landscape. Vale has notably been responsible for major industrial disasters, such as the collapses of the Mariana dam in 2015 and the Brumadinho dam in 2019 (CPI de Brumadinho e outras barragens, Federal and Viana, 2019). In the aftermath of these catastrophes, the company has been accused by various public institutions of repressing activists and silencing those who seek to defend socio-environmental rights. These actions aim to stifle socio-environmental conflicts arising from its operations and suppress public scrutiny of its practices, raising serious concerns about corporate accountability, human rights and environmental justice (MPF, 2016; Delgado and Correia, 2019; CPI ALMG, 2021). In this context defined by corporate influence and environmental disasters, the resistance in Minas Gerais presents a complex picture. While some organised movements exist, large-scale mobilisations against Vale’s

practices are not readily apparent. This apparent lack of widespread visible protests, despite significant grievances, raises several questions: Is it a result of corporate suppression? Does it reflect a climate of fear among locals? Or are there other underlying factors at play that inhibit collective action? However, signs of dissent persist, often in less obvious forms. One such example is the street tag in Brumadinho ('Quanto Vale a sua vida?', Figure 1) which subtly challenges Vale's practices by asking: 'How much is your life worth? Is it worth sacrificing your life for the interests and profits of Vale?'. This covert expression of dissent hints at underlying tensions and forms of resistance that may not be immediately visible, but are nonetheless present.

This apparent paradox – the coexistence of severe repression and persistent activism – reflects a complex reality that challenges existing understandings of social movements in extractive contexts. While some research suggests that corporate repression and co-optation effectively suppress widespread resistance (Gudynas, 2012; Svampa, 2019), other studies indicate that activism persists, albeit in less visible and more nuanced forms (Dunlap, 2018; Buu-sao, 2023). This study aims to contribute to these ongoing discussions by examining the specific case of Minas Gerais, where the deep-rooted presence of Vale creates an opportunity for understanding the dynamics of repression and resistance. Rather than assuming a binary opposition of conflict or co-optation, this research adopts an epistemological approach that considers the subtle, everyday forms of resistance that may coexist with apparent compliance. This brings us to the core inquiry of this study: Why do some individuals persist in their activism amidst such adverse conditions? In a context and territory with low loud general mobilisation, how can isolated protestors still act in opposition to a locally strongly rooted private company? Furthermore, how do these acts of defiance evolve in response to repressive practices?

From the outset, this article argues that the persistence of acts of resistance in Minas Gerais, despite pervasive corporate repression, reveals a nuanced interplay between corporate power and social resilience. It contends that these individual acts of defiance, while often covert and fragmented, are not anomalies but significant indicators of underlying social tensions and the spirit of resistance among local communities, challenging the dominant narrative of corporate hegemony. Repressive

Figure 1. Wall Tag on a Destroyed House in Brumadinho With the Inscription in Portuguese: 'How Much is your Life Worth (Vale)? 100 Thousand? Vale Murders'



Source: Photography by Léa Lebeau-pin-Salamon (2021).

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practices not only induce the transformation of resistance activities, but also fragment social movements, leading to a more individualised form of dissent. Moreover, actions that were once legal are increasingly criminalised through corporate influence on state institutions, reframing these acts of resistance as illegal – not because they inherently violate the law, but because they are redefined as such by corporate and state actors.

This research employs ethnography to examine the lived experiences of activists facing corporate-imposed criminalisation. It focuses on individual trajectories, exploring how activists navigate the blurred lines between legality and illegality. It investigates the resources they use and the repercussions on their private lives, professional activities and daily experiences. It explores how they forge or redefine their identities as challengers in a context where activism often leads to isolation and disconnection from larger networks. By examining the transformation of resistance in Minas Gerais, this study contributes to research about the nature of activism under repressive conditions. It challenges narratives of corporate hegemony by revealing how individuals and communities continue to resist, even when open contestation appears absent. This article aims to fill a gap in the literature by providing a nuanced understanding of how resistance adapts and persists in contexts where visible forms of protest are suppressed or criminalised by corporate interests.

The article begins with a literature review examining two main perspectives: one that emphasises the effectiveness of corporate repression and co-optation in suppressing resistance, and another that highlights the persistence of resistance in less visible forms. This theoretical and methodological framework sets the stage for analysing the specific case of Minas Gerais and reveals the often-silenced experiences of those facing corporate and state repression. An integrated analysis of the findings examines the varied strategies of resistance and their impact on individuals' personal and professional lives. The results and discussion section provides ethnographic insights into three key aspects of resistance transformation: the individualisation of protest under corporate repression, the shift from opposing extractivism to contesting specific corporate practices, and the criminalisation of previously legal forms of activism.

The Spectrum of Resistance in Extractive and Repressive Contexts

The Myth of Compliance: Corporate Strategies to Silence Opposition

The relationship between extractivism – defined as the large-scale exploitation and exportation of raw or minimally processed natural resources (Gudynas, 2009) – and socio-environmental conflicts is well documented (Bebbington, 2012; Farthing and Fabricant, 2018). Scholars have analysed how large-scale resource extraction leads to environmental degradation and socio-political tensions, especially in regions where corporate interests conflict with local livelihoods (Allain and Maillet, 2021). On a broader scale, concepts such as 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2004) and 'neo-extractivism' (Gudynas, 2012; Svampa, 2019) explained how these dynamics manifest globally. These frameworks show how corporate strategies prioritise resource extraction over sustainable development and local well-being. Not only do corporations engage in economic activities but also in strategies to maintain control over exploited territories, including the criminalisation of resistance and repression of social movements.

Research on social movements repression has traditionally focused on state institutions' role, particularly law enforcement and police actions during protests (Fillieule, 1997; Favarel-Garrigues, 2003). In Latin America, criminalisation of social movements has often been framed as a state-driven process to curb collective actions (Rasch, 2017; Fernandes, 2020). Scholars have detailed how state mechanisms, including police operations, restrictive legislation and media manipulation, serve to delegitimise and dismantle social movements (Cruz, 2011). In parallel, other scholarship has focused on the critical role of non-state actors in the repressive landscape. Combes (2020) highlights how private entities – such as multinational corporations, paramilitary groups and criminal networks – have a significant impact on the repressive landscape. Terwindt (2014) suggests that focusing solely on cases where human rights are violated offers an incomplete picture, proposing that criminalisation should also be considered as the initiation and development of criminal proceedings focusing on the specific details of prosecutions.

These actors operate within or in conjunction with state apparatuses, employing legal and extra-legal measures that blur the lines between legitimate governance and oppressive control (Auyero, 2007). This intersection of public and private interests complicates the identification and critique of repressive practices, particularly in environments where political and economic elites are closely intertwined (Hibou, 2005), including in Latin America (Giraudy, 2012). For example, Grajales (2020) discusses how corporate actors in Colombia have used legal and extra-legal measures to undermine opposition to development projects. Similarly, Quentin Delpuch (2014) reveals how corporate violence and anti-union repression in Guatemala are normalised, creating an environment where resistance is risky and activism meets severe repercussions.

The expansion of extractive industries in Latin America has led to environmental degradation, increasing socio-environmental conflicts (Göbel and Ulloa, 2014; Bos and Velut, 2016). The interplay between states and corporate strategies leads to the criminalisation and repression of local resistance. In Brazil, these dynamics are pronounced, particularly under Jair Bolsonaro's administration. His government has supported the extractive industry, at the expense of environmental protection and social justice (Cezne, 2019). Wanderley describes the government's actions as 'mobilising criminal, anti-democratic and eco-ethnocidal practices and ideologies' (Wanderley, Milanez, and Ricardo, 2020: 563), which have intensified the repression of social movements and led to a decline in their activities.

In Minas Gerais, a region with a long history of extractive activities, these trends are particularly evident. Established in the 16th century, Minas Gerais flourished with the expansion of Vale, which was privatised in 1997 amidst neoliberal reforms (Coelho, 2015). Vale's dominance, especially in iron mining, has made the company a central economic force in the region (Zorzal e Silva, 2004). However, the proliferation of extractive projects and the 1990s reforms of public companies have led to increasingly contentious relationships between local populations, international financial institutions and industry leaders (Moura, Guazina, and Brasil, 2018). Socio-environmental conflicts in Minas Gerais have persisted, with disasters like the dam collapses in Mariana (2015) and Brumadinho (2019) exacerbating tensions (Ragazzi and Rocha, 2019; Fabrício, Ferreira, and Borba, 2021). Lyra (2019) notes that these events have led to growing mistrust of the extractive industry, with increased suspicion and negative perceptions associated with resource exploitation. Despite this, companies like Vale have continued to push for greater extraction, often using repressive measures to quell opposition (Lebeau-pin-Salamon, 2023). Studies show the company has developed repression and co-optation mechanisms to suppress resistance and integrate local populations into the economic and social fabric of the mining industry (Melo and Guimaraes, 2023).

The co-optation mechanisms employed by extractive companies deserve particular attention in this context. Rajak's research on corporate power in South Africa (Rajak, 2016), although geographically distinct, provides critical insights into how Corporate Social Responsibility policies can function as a tool of control and co-optation. Her work shows how these programmes mask deeper forms of exploitation and repression, which is relevant for understanding similar dynamics in Minas Gerais. Welker's study on mining industry practices in Indonesia sheds light on how companies use CSR as a strategic tool to manage relationships with local communities and neutralise potential opposition (Welker, 2009). Welker demonstrates that CSR becomes a sophisticated mechanism of 'corporate security' that seeks to integrate local communities into the company's orbit, creating economic and social dependencies that make resistance less likely and less effective. This perspective enriches the understanding of strategies employed by companies like Vale in Minas Gerais, suggesting that co-optation through CSR can be as effective as more direct forms of repression in maintaining control over extraction territories. This process can be understood within the broader framework of repression, which refers to strategic efforts to suppress contentious acts or groups (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001). The repression employed by corporations like Vale extends beyond physical measures to include psychological tactics aimed at undermining the solidarity of opposition groups (Starr, et al., 2008; Della Porta, 2010). This approach aligns with Tilly's (2010) perspective on non-routine collective action, emphasising how repressive practices prevent mobilisation and discourage resistance. The limited visibility of protests in regions like Minas Gerais could be a result of the pervasive fear and coercion fostered by Vale's presence. Aguiar's study on the dynamics of globalised labour in Brazil emphasises how corporate strategies create an environment where open resistance is not just difficult

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but potentially dangerous, leading to a suppression of visible mobilisations (Aguiar, 2022). This aligns with broader observations of political patronage and corporate interests working together to stifle collective activism in extractive regions. The repressive context created by companies like Vale has profound effects on activists (Trocatte and Zonta, 2016). Those who continue to mobilise despite these challenges often find their efforts criminalised, their movements suppressed and their support networks fragmented. Understanding repression can provide a lens to analyse the lack of visible protests, not as a sign of acceptance, but as a consequence of the coercive environment fostered by corporate and state actors.

Beyond Visible Conflict: How Criminalisation Shapes Resistance

While the previous section examined studies that emphasise how repression and co-optation can suppress resistance, this section shifts focus to how acts of resistance adapt and persists in the face of these challenges. Scott's work on 'Everyday Forms of Resistance' (Scott, 1989) illustrates how marginalised groups can engage in subtle acts of defiance, such as foot-dragging, sabotage and evasion, particularly when direct confrontation with authority is too risky. This concept has been widely applied to understand resistance in various contexts, including those dominated by extractive industries. Horowitz (2011) for instance has explored how corporate power intersects with local cultures of resistance. Her work examines how communities in New Caledonia engage in forms of resistance that blend local traditions with modern activism, effectively navigating the repressive measures imposed by both corporate and state actors in an extractive context.

In Latin America, scholars observe how social movements adapt to increasing criminalisation, leading to the emergence of new forms of resistance that are less visible but no less significant. Allain (2020) examines the everyday acts of resistance by Colombian peasants who, despite extreme violence, choose to remain on their land and cultivate it, turning their daily survival into a form of political resistance. Buu-Sao (2023) explores the nuanced interactions between indigenous communities and extractive industries in Peru, showing how these engagements lead to both routinised and pacified forms of resistance, which nonetheless carry profound and ambivalent transformations in local societies. Similarly, Dunlap (2018) documents how activists in Mexico against the Bii Hioxo wind park have employed legal strategies and international solidarity networks to resist land encroachment. These studies demonstrate a shift from visible, large-scale protests to more strategic, often quieter forms of resistance that are harder for authorities to suppress. In parallel, Krupa highlights how, despite the increasing power of private companies in state governance and territorial control in Ecuador, local actors such as unionists, associative leaders and indigenous representatives have managed to carve out their own political capital, contributing to a dynamic local institutional landscape that partially escapes corporate domination (Krupa, 2010).

In Brazil, particularly in regions like Minas Gerais, the lack of large-scale visible protests against extractivism may reflect the development of more subtle forms of resistance, shaped by the pervasive criminalisation of activism under Jair Bolsonaro's administration. Scholars such as Gomes, Pessoa Cavalcanti, and Abarca (2021) have highlighted how the repression of social movements in Brazil has led to the development of resistance strategies that operate under the radar of both state and corporate surveillance. In the context of Minas Gerais, Lyra (2016) observes that while open and visible mobilisations do occur, they often focus on demanding increased compensations or advocating for the rights of victims, rather than directly opposing extraction activities. These movements face difficulties in recruiting locally, even as their alignment with or against extractivism varies (Schoering, 2019). The territory does not exhibit systematic opposition to extractivism (Lebeaupin-Salamon, 2022), but a more nuanced reality characterised by temporary alliances, hidden resistances and even mobilisations in favour of Vale's expansion. These observations could suggest a complex landscape of resistance and accommodation in regions affected by extractive industries.

Unveiling Transformed Resistance in Minas Gerais

Conceptual Framework: Transformed Resistance

This study explores the nature of resistance against extractive activities in Minas Gerais. The initial research question was threefold: Who is contesting these activities? What are they demanding? How are they expressing their contestation? These questions aimed to uncover whether resistance was primarily individual or collective, if grievances targeted specific corporate practices or broader extraction policies, and how actions navigated the boundaries of legality amid potential criminalisation. The study examines how Minas Gerais has become a privatised, criminalising and repressive habitat, exploring how resistance and compliance intertwine in everyday life, potentially offering insights applicable to similar global contexts. The analytical approach draws inspiration from Scott's work on *Weapons of the weak* (1985) and recent studies in extractive contexts, provides tools for understanding less visible forms of resistance that challenge the simplistic view of a dominant/dominated dynamic in local responses to corporate influence. Müller's work on seed patenting controversies in Canada reveals forms of resistance that transcend activism, often manifesting through pragmatic negotiations and localised actions (2019). Murray Li's research on land reforms in Indonesia demonstrates how local populations employ adaptive strategies via everyday practices and subtle non-compliance (2019). This body of work underscores the need to not only examine visible protest in Minas Gerais, but also underlying social processes and personal trajectories that contribute to resistance. Preliminary observations in Minas Gerais identify three key areas in the transformation of resistance. The first examines the possible individualisation of contestation, where corporate repression may fragment social movements, leading to more isolated forms of resistance. The second considers a shift in the nature of claims by those resisting corporate practices, investigating whether resistance has evolved from broad opposition to extractivism to more specific challenges to corporate behaviour. The third area focuses on how the potential criminalisation of resistance forces activists to adapt their strategies, reshaping the landscape of local activism.

This framework explores how resistance persists in Minas Gerais despite corporate repression, moving beyond the co-optation versus conflict dichotomy. It examines individual trajectories within collective contexts, revealing how people navigate a landscape shaped by extractive activities. This focus on transformed resistance requires a methodology capable of capturing nuanced, often invisible forms of contestation. The following section outlines how an ethnographic approach operationalises these theoretical considerations.

Methodological Approach: Ethnography of Resistance

The ethnographic approach adopted offers several key advantages that align closely with the research objectives. By immersing in the daily lives of individuals in Minas Gerais, ethnography enables the observation and analysis of subtle forms of resistance identified in the conceptual framework. This method provides a nuanced understanding of the micro-foundations of resistance in extractive contexts. Drawing from McAdam's *Freedom Summer* (2012 [1964]), this study recognises the lasting impact of high-risk activism on individual trajectories. Following the path of Fillieule and Neveu's work *Activists Forever* (2013), this research expands the analytical focus to actors beyond social movement organisations, examining their interactions with the state and the oppressor. This shift renews interest in the micro-foundations of collective action, adopting a more sociological approach to protest mobilisation and individual resistances. The ethnographic approach allows for a deeper exploration of the biographical consequences of protest activity. As highlighted by the collective work (Fillieule and Neveu, 2013) examining the life courses of individuals who have participated in movement activities gives a richer understanding of the long-term impacts of activism, moving beyond movement-centric analysis to consider broader social and personal implications of resistance. By employing ethnographic methods, this study aims to overcome limitations of traditional approaches. Following Becker's recommendation (1963 [2024]) this research shifts from asking 'why' to exploring 'how it happened', focusing on the chain of events that shape individual trajectories and collective

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actions. This methodological choice enables a comprehensive analysis of how people join political organisations, participate in protest campaigns, remain involved or disengage.

This ethnographic approach uncovers the nuanced forms of resistance in Minas Gerais that have often been eluded by conventional research methods. By examining everyday interactions and individual experiences, it reveals how communities navigate and contest corporate influence beyond visible protests. This perspective enriches the understanding of resistance, capturing its evolution and persistence in the face of extractive practices.

Fieldwork Methodology and Data Collection

Fieldwork in Minas Gerais revealed complex dynamics of corporate influence, challenging simplistic dominant/subordinate dichotomies. This complexity emerged through ethnographic engagement with various actors, including beneficiaries of CSR and compensation programmes, widows of company workers, victims awaiting compensation, residents advocating for mine activity resumption, former employees and union members. Research spanned 12 months in Belo Horizonte, Mariana and Brumadinho, with 135 interviews conducted over two periods in 2019 and 2021. Participants included disaster victims, political leaders, union representatives, judiciary officials and Vale communicators. For key interlocutors, multiple interviews were conducted, some in formal settings, while others were more informal. Extended stays in neighbourhoods helped build trust and gain access to long-term information – insights often not captured by other forms of data collection. This immersive approach allowed researchers to witness and document less visible, sometimes illegal, everyday acts of resistance that are critical for understanding how individuals contest corporate power in their daily lives. The research also involved observing protests, parliamentary inquiries, victims' reunions and meetings in the mining sector. Documents analysis played a crucial role, encompassing judicial case files, public prosecutor's office requests and parliamentary inquiry reports. These documents were important for triangulating data from interviews and observations, offering a comprehensive understanding of the corporate and state dynamics in Minas Gerais.

Case Selection and Profiles

From this corpus, this article focuses on individuals whose experiences reveal the broader struggle against Vale's influence in Minas Gerais. While their connections to the company vary, they all share the experience of resisting its practices, often in isolation. The study presents four cases of persisting resistances: Gustavo, a unionist from Mariana, dismissed after organising a strike; Ana, a former Vale geologist, whose personal investment in company housing was jeopardised; Flávio, a critic of Vale, representing a neighbourhood affected by the Brumadinho disaster; and Jucélia, a Pataxó tribe cacique, who witnessed the devastation of her territory by the dam collapse. Their stories, captured through multiple interviews and extended observation, reveal the persistence and adaptability of resistance in the face of repression. Each case illustrates different aspects of resistance: Gustavo's situation shows the individualisation and criminalisation of union activities; Ana's highlights the shift from broad opposition to specific critiques of corporate practices; Flávio represents the resilience of vocal criticism despite legal risks; and Jucélia's experience exemplifies the intersection of indigenous legal resistance with corporate repression. Collectively, these cases align with the theoretical framework and provide a comprehensive lens through which to explore the nuanced dynamics of how resistance manifests and transforms in response to Vale's influence in extractive contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns regarding confidentiality and consent were carefully addressed throughout this ethnographic study, which also faced certain limitations, particularly regarding safety issues. All individuals' names have been anonymised to protect their identities. Participants provided explicit consent for the use of their narratives, both at the moment of collection and redaction, which have been conveyed with the utmost care. The reported accounts reflect lived experiences and personal testimonies rather

than facts or accusations. Interview translations were conducted by the author to preserve the original sentiment and content as precisely as possible.

Results and Discussion: Ethnographic Insights on Activist Struggles against Corporate Repression

Isolating Dissent: The Individualisation of Protest in Corporate Repression

The courtroom was not as Gustavo had imagined it would be – instead of wood-panelled walls and stern-faced judges, it was his own familiar space, now doubling as a virtual courtroom due to the ongoing pandemic. With the rest of the attendees, his friends in solidarity, we remained out of the camera's eye:

You are summoned today because you are contesting your dismissal by the Vale company for serious misconduct. Can you explain to us the reasons why Vale decided to dismiss you from your position as operator at the Timbopeba Mine in Mariana? – Yes. I helped tertiary employees organise a picket line, and they didn't like it'. (Quote from the virtual courtroom, in the Union's offices in Mariana, 12 January 2021)

Months ago, Gustavo had been dismissed for his involvement in a week-long picket line, a gesture of support for contracted bus drivers demanding fair wage recognition. Gustavo suspects that Vale had long viewed him as a disruptor, and his dismissal served as a way to silence collective efforts and isolate him from his peers. Gustavo's experience illustrates how corporate repression can lead to the individualisation of collective resistance. His dismissal reflects a broader strategy by Vale aimed at dismantling solidarity within the workforce. Despite the ongoing threats and isolation, Gustavo remains committed to his cause. He reflects: 'With Vale, the honeymoon lasts 2 years. Decent salary, uniform, pride ... and then comes reality.' He continues to receive threats, both from former colleagues and through anonymous intimidation, yet remains resolute: 'I'm not afraid. I don't have much left to lose now; everyone knows who I am and what I stand for'. This account of Gustavo's journey also underlines the broader decline in unionist and activist numbers within mining companies. Vale's growing reliance on subcontracted labour – typically more precarious and less likely to unionise – contributes to this trend. According to data from the Agência nacional da Mineração (ANM, National Mining Agency), the proportion of subcontracted workers in the mining sector increased from 18.7 to 37.5 percent between 2016 and 2022. This trend suggests that the reliance on subcontracted labour should continue growing across various areas and services within Brazilian mining operations. This shift has had a profound impact on labour dynamics within Vale, where the fear of unionisation is prevalent not only among workers but also within their families, who often discourage involvement due to the associated risks. *Even when activists continue their engagement through public speeches and demonstrations, these actions often highlight their growing isolation rather than their collective power, as former colleagues increasingly distance themselves from such visible forms of protest.* The personal costs of sustained activism become evident in these moments of public contestation, where the growing gap between individual commitment and collective withdrawal becomes most apparent.

Ana's decade-long tenure as a geologist at Vale, both in Pará state and Minas Gerais, was more than just a job; it was a connection to her personal history and identity. Growing up in Vila Samarco, a former company town for Vale employees, Ana's ties to the community were deep-rooted. She invested in properties there, envisioning what she considered a stable future for her children. However, her dismissal in 2020 disrupted these plans, and she was subsequently displaced from her home due to the threat of an unstable dam. The loss of both her job and her home left Ana isolated, both physically and emotionally. Her experience demonstrates the pervasive use of surveillance as a repressive tool. She recounts:

How dare they watch me 24/7? I was already a leader, already under police surveillance – which wasn't really the police but Vale's security. They'd follow me; every time

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I left my house, they appeared. If I went for a walk and looked back, they were there.
(Interview with Ana in a public park in Mariana, 22 January 2022)

The discovery of a hidden camera on her door further deepened her sense of violation and unease. The constant threat of job loss and the fear of reprisals loomed over Ana, mirroring the experiences of many other activists. She shares:

When they tell you 'you're going to lose your job,' it's not a threat, it's a real risk. [...] When I got laid off, I didn't see it coming that time. I think I had just made some bosses unhappy because I had tried to do my job too well'. (Interview with Ana in a public park in Mariana, 22 January 2022)

Her dismissal, reduced to an employee ID number, underscores the dehumanising nature of corporate retribution. Since her dismissal, Ana has faced significant personal sacrifices. Her activism led to the dissolution of her marriage and strained relationships with her family. She now battles anxiety and depression, requiring psychiatric intervention and medication – a direct consequence of the psychological toll of her resistance. This struggle has left her unable to find work, exacerbating her sense of isolation and financial insecurity. Her case reflects the broader trend observed among other activists and unionists at Vale, where dismissals and prolonged legal battles are used as tactics to stifle dissent, contributing to the decline in unionist and activist numbers within the company. The cases of Gustavo and Ana reveal how corporate strategies effectively isolate activists, transforming collective resistance into individual struggles. The tactics employed by Vale, from dismissals to surveillance, systematically dismantle solidarity within the workforce, leaving activists to confront significant personal and professional challenges in isolation.

Beyond Opposition: Contesting Practices, Not Extractivism

Ana's relationship with the mining industry is complex and deeply rooted in her personal history. Growing up in Vila Samarco, a company town for Vale employees, she was fascinated by the industry. Her uncle worked in the mines, and throughout her childhood, education and professional life, Ana lived in mining territories. Her initial view of the extractive industry was far from oppositional; she saw it as a natural and integral part of her environment. However, her perspective began shifting as she became more involved with activist circles and union environments. It was through her interactions with victims of dam failures and her growing awareness of the implications of large-scale extraction that her stance evolved. Ana reflects, 'I wasn't against extraction at first. It was just part of life, something I grew up with. But seeing the impact on people's lives, on entire communities, made me realise the scale of the damage'. Her involvement with these communities, particularly those affected by the catastrophic failures of mining dams, opened her eyes to the global challenges associated with massive extraction. This awakening did not lead her to entirely reject the industry, but rather to demand significant changes in its practices. Ana's activism stems from a desire to reform the industry rather than oppose extractivism outright. Her geologist expertise only amplifies her activism, as she continues to advocate for safer practices and greater accountability, driven by the awareness that 'another disaster could happen at any moment'. She says: 'Every night I think about what would happen if another mine retention dam cracked, how many people would die? I can't sleep'. Despite her growing opposition to the practices of the mining industry, Ana's stance remains nuanced. She does not call for the end of mining but instead pushes for a responsible process of extraction that prioritises the safety and well-being of communities. Her transition from a geologist accepting mining as the norm to an activist advocating for the rights of those impacted by the industry demonstrates a personal journey, while her current position – advocating for reform rather than abolition – exemplifies the nuanced nature of resistance in extractive contexts.

Flávio shares a similar perspective. While he is critical of Vale's harmful practices, he does not advocate for the end of mining. Instead, his activism focuses on promoting ethical standards and minimising the harm caused by the industry, particularly in terms of human rights. As the representative of the neighbourhood committee in Parque da Cachoeira, Flávio plays an active role in seeking compensation for those affected by the Brumadinho dam disaster in 2019. Despite facing legal challenges and

surveillance, he continues to speak out against Vale's practices. His legal battles, including a court case over alleged defamation of Vale, underscore the intense pressures that activists face. Flávio's activism is not solely about opposing the company; it is also about advocating for a fairer approach to mining. His personal identity has become deeply intertwined with his activism, as he strives to balance the needs of his community with the realities of the extractive industry. Like Ana, Flávio was once employed by the mine. He had left his position shortly before the Brumadinho disaster but had long worked as a safety officer. Having grown up in the region, Flávio holds a deep attachment to the area. The experiences of Ana and Flávio underscore a nuanced form of resistance that does not reject extractivism but calls for its reform. Their activism reflects a demand for responsible and ethical practices within the industry, emphasising the need for a balance between economic development and social responsibility.

Legal Activism Turned Criminal: How Corporate and State Repression Transforms Dissent

Flávio's activism illustrates the process of criminalisation driven by corporate interests and facilitated by the state. Initially a vocal critic of Vale's practices, his focus was on human rights and ethical standards rather than outright opposition to mining. However, his advocacy led to his criminalisation. Accused of defaming Vale, Flávio faced legal actions that severely restricted his ability to protest. These restrictions were not only legal obstacles but also psychological barriers that further isolated him from the broader movement. His case exemplifies how corporate and state actors collaborate to transform legal activism into criminal behaviour, effectively silencing dissent through both legal and extra-legal means. As the representative of the neighbourhood committee in Parque da Cachoeira, an area heavily impacted by the Brumadinho dam disaster, Flávio became a key figure in the fight for compensation for the affected communities. His outspoken criticism of Vale in the media and at public events made him a target for legal pushbacks and surveillance by the company's private security. On September 2021, Flávio was summoned to court in Brumadinho on allegations of defaming Vale, with the case files spanning over 1300 pages – evidence of extensive surveillance documenting his public and private activities. Despite these challenges, he persisted in his activism, though increasingly isolated as others withdrew, intimidated by the overwhelming difficulties. The repression experienced by activists encompasses not only legal challenges but also profound impacts on their mental health and well-being. Flávio's life is punctuated by weekly therapy sessions, a stark reminder of the ongoing impact of his advocacy work. Flávio's experience highlights the broader strategy of using legal systems to criminalise legitimate protest, thereby isolating activists and weakening collective resistance. The divisive tactics employed by Vale, such as uneven compensation that drives wedges within communities, further erode solidarity, making it more difficult for activists to organise effectively. Despite the repression, Flávio remains committed to the cause, his identity becoming inseparable from his role as an advocate for justice. His determination is evident in his daily activism, where he constantly demands priority for his neighbourhood's compensation, even as he faces growing isolation. 'Do you want to give up, do you want to let them win? I will continue alone if I have to', he declared during a meeting with representatives of neighbourhoods affected by the dam's collapse, exemplifying how individual commitment can persist even when collective mobilisation appears to wane.

Jucélia's experience illustrates the issue from another perspective. As the cacique of the Pataxó tribe, she witnessed the devastation caused by the Brumadinho dam collapse that destroyed her community's river and left lasting scars. Displaced from her home and denied compensation, Jucélia found herself in precarious living conditions, with no assistance from Vale. This situation forced her into acts of protest that were quickly criminalised. Desperate for justice, Jucélia's tribe resorted to halting trains and blocking railways – actions born out of necessity, not as a desire to break the law. Her story underscores the reality that in repressive contexts even collective actions aimed at securing basic needs, such as access to clean water and sanitary living conditions, can be labelled as criminal acts. The repression Jucélia faced was not limited to legal threats: after the dam collapse, her community was subjected to covert surveillance, including by an anthropologist who, under the guise of offering support, was actually employed by Vale to gather information on them. This breach of trust underscores the intricate strategies of corporate repression, where even academic inquiries are leveraged to weaken resistance. Unlike those who retreat in the face of repression, Jucélia and her community have been

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driven to take decisive steps to assert their rights. Despite receiving occasional support from larger organisations and non-governmental organisations, she remains largely isolated in her struggle. Her participation in parliamentary inquiries and hearings by the Public Prosecutor's Office raised awareness of Vale's actions, but the fundamental issues of displacement, lack of compensation and recognition as victims persist, leaving her in ongoing conflict with the company. Flávio and Jucélia's experiences exemplify how corporate and state entities collaborate to criminalise legitimate activism. Their cases illustrate the transformation of lawful protest into criminal behaviour, a process that isolates activists and complicates collective resistance, revealing the broader strategy of using legal frameworks as tools of repression.

Conclusions

The persistence of resistance in Minas Gerais, despite intense corporate repression, reveals a transformation in the dynamic between extractive industries and local communities. Beyond the visible manifestations of protest, our research reveals how corporate power operates through more subtle mechanisms of invisibilisation, depoliticisation and individualisation of conflicts. Rather than demonstrating the effectiveness of corporate control strategies, this study shows how activists develop innovative forms of resistance that challenge traditional understandings of resistance in extractive contexts.

This research contributes to three major theoretical debates on resistance dynamics. First, moving beyond Harvey's (2004) concept of accumulation by dispossession, this study shows that the individualisation of protest, rather than indicating movement decline, represents a strategic adaptation by activists. When collective structures are targeted by repression, individuals develop more resilient forms of contestation that are harder to suppress. Second, while Scott's (1989) work highlighted the importance of subtle contestation and routinised practices, this research demonstrates that contemporary resistance in repressive contexts emerges through conscious adaptation and appropriation of various tools. Following Allain's (2020) analysis of Colombian peasants' resistance and Delpech's (2014) work on anti-union repression, this study shows how activists deliberately navigate between visibility and invisibility according to the context. Third, building on Losekann and Mayorga's (2018) work on corporate influence in Minas Gerais and extending Grajales's (2020) analysis of corporate violence, this research reveals how the transformation of resistance tools reflects a deeper evolution in contentious politics, where activists actively reinvent their methods of struggle even when traditional forms of collective action are increasingly difficult.

These findings suggest new research perspectives on the evolution of social movements in contexts of corporate hegemony. Rather than viewing the individualisation of resistance as a sign of movement weakness, this study proposes to analyse it as a strategic adaptation that might contribute to new forms of collective action. This hypothesis raises questions about how individual resistance, far from representing a terminal stage of movement decline, may constitute a transitional phase in the cycle of contentious politics. Future research could be to explore whether and how these seemingly isolated forms of resistance potentially connect with broader social movements through emerging forms of solidarity.

Moreover, this study contributes to a renewed examination of how resistance evolves in extractive contexts. Following Buu-Sao's (2023) analysis of 'capitalism through appropriation', this research suggests moving beyond the binary opposition between resistance and co-optation. The case of Minas Gerais shows how activists may appropriate and transform corporate mechanisms into new repertoires of action. Instead of focusing solely on visible forms of protest or assuming corporate strategies are wholly effective, this perspective reveals how local communities develop complex forms of engagement that combine adaptation with contestation. Similar to what Buu-Sao observes in Peru, activists do not simply resist or submit to extractive capitalism, but rather create innovative forms of action that transform the very mechanisms meant to control them. This contributes to our understanding of how social movements evolve in contexts where traditional forms of collective action are increasingly constrained.

In conclusion, by examining individual trajectories of resistance, this research demonstrates how activists creatively adapt their methods of struggle even under severe constraints. The case of Minas

Gerais suggests that what appears as fragmented resistance might be understood as a strategic reconfiguration of collective action, where new forms of solidarity emerge through the very process of navigating corporate constraints. This perspective enriches our understanding of how social movements evolve in contemporary extractive contexts, where new forms of contestation emerge through strategic adaptation rather than direct confrontation.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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