

# Earth Uprisings

LES SOULÈVEMENTS DE LA TERRE & KRISTIN ROSS



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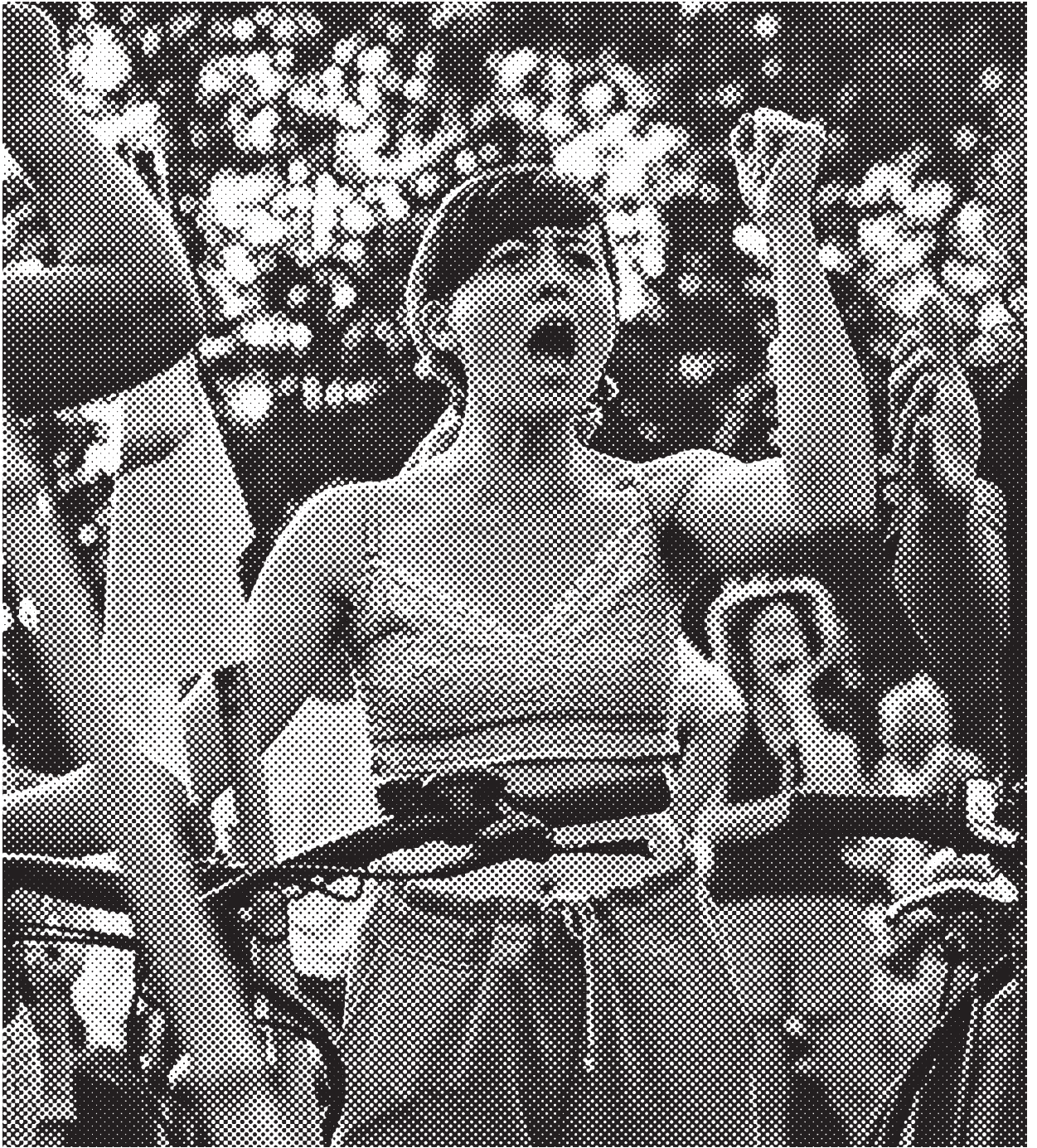
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March 2023

**LES SOULÈVEMENTS DE LA TERRE**

# Les Soulèvements de la Terre: Composition of forces and new offensives in defence of land and water

*This text was written in March 2023 to present the Uprisings of the Earth with a view to international tours as the mobilization of March 25 approaches “not one more basin.”*

**It all begins in January 2021**, in the bocage of Notre-Dame-des-landes, near Nantes... well, not “all”...

What will come together under the name “Les Soulèvements de la Terre” and which, at the beginning of 2023, is threatened with dissolution by the French state for its supposed role in “the radical turn of environmental activists”, was born there. The story we are telling here is a situated story. It is written from the precise place and time in which we find ourselves. Within a vast and tumultuous movement. It attempts to trace the elements of context that have allowed for a set of concrete convergences, common analyses, which in turn have nourished the ongoing experi-

ence within the *Soulèvements de la Terre*. It does not claim to be exhaustive, but rather to share the salient elements of this very young history. It is both a contribution and an invitation to a necessary sharing of our analyses and experiences of struggle across borders.

January 2021, the moment has its importance, we have just come out of the successive confinements that had brought a whole part of the world to a standstill and which, as we could see at the time, had also got the better of the two social forces that had tinted the winter of 2019-2020 with hope. The powerful and spontaneous Yellow Vests movement on the one hand, the unprecedented mobilisation of youth in the Climate Marches and its myriad of action groups, which sought to push the limits, on the other.

Two movements. One that brutally sounded the end of the resigned silence of a part of the French population, forgotten by the political class, the non-unionised proletariat, left to do menial jobs and small-scale entrepreneurship, strangled by the rising cost of that life. The other, which at first wisely, but increasingly loudly, reminded us that the “future generations” would not wait for the end of the disaster film that had been served to them since the cradle to rebel. Two movements which, despite everything that could and should have brought them together, had a hard time meeting. The calls, on both sides, to understand what intimately linked the problems of “the end of the month” to those of “the end of the world”,

which had marked the end of the movement, were drowned in a cloud of gas. In spite of the numerous initiatives — sincere but late — of convergence, launched from various places in France, these two impulses didn't have the time to operate the overtaking that their rapprochement promised. Dozens of hands torn off, eyes gouged out by rubber bullets, thousands of legal proceedings as well as, and perhaps above all, the exhaustion of some and others to see nothing come to fruition, had pushed most people, even before the “state of health emergency” had been declared, to go home.

When the confinements came to an end, then, as in many other places in the world, many people wondered how they could avoid returning to the way things were before, to the headlong rush that had brought us to the brink of climate change, the collapse of biodiversity, the time of pandemics, and the breakdown of social and health systems. Even the most cynical politicians were talking about the “world after “.

While on our side, decentralised days of action are being launched in every corner of the country “against the re intoxication of the world”, the world of the economy, well watered with public money, is not slow to resume its course. Concrete is being poured again. The construction of mega-basins, giant open-air water reserves dug out of farmland, is being resumed to “adapt to climate change”, and more are planned to compensate for the drop in snowfall on the ski slopes... once again, everything is being done to ensure that nothing

changes, neither in production methods, nor in lifestyles, nor in the sharing of resources.

What is striking, then, beyond the speeches and the ambient green-washing, is this colossal inertia, this generalized inability to change the course of things. The more widely publicised the findings on the catastrophic state of resources and the exponential effects of climate change were, the less action, wherever it came from, seemed to be equal to the situation.

It is at this point, in the face of these observations, that, since the last massive and victorious struggle against the artificialization of land in France, on the ZAD of Notre Dame des Landes — a local resistance that mobilized nationally against the construction of an international airport on a zone of hedged farmland —, a call was made to converge forces in order to go beyond the limits encountered in the relative isolation of the initiatives of one another. The peasant union struggles are caught up in a form of sectoral corporatism; the climate marches are confronted with the horizonless impotence of demonstrations, even massive ones; the “autonomous” modes of action are lost in their own dispersion and their lack of a coordinated strategy; the collectives of inhabitants who lead local battles against ecocidal projects, without having — too often — the means to win.

This is how the first call of the “Soulèvements de la Terre” was launched, from the meeting of different forms of organization, experiences and

ways of doing things, pushed by the urgency of the situation to group their forces without denying their singularities. Trade unionists, farms, collectives of inhabitants in struggle, autonomous collectives, environmental groups, citizens’ associations signed a common appeal that spoke in these terms:

“Only a radical changeover — an uprising - could stop global warming and the 6th mass extinction of species already underway. Basically, we know that there is no other way left today but to put all our forces into the battle to stop the ongoing disaster, and bring down the devouring economic system that is creating it.”

### **BUT WHERE TO START?**

In the wake of the struggles led by the peasant trade unionism not affiliated to agribusiness, which is a minority but still alive, embodied today by the Confédération Paysanne — the French union for the defence of peasant agriculture\*—, the components of the movement gathered on this occasion identified the most immediate issue, and the most powerful lever, in the struggles over land. In the next ten years, 50% of farmers in France will retire, most of them without any takers. The big agri-food groups and the companies banking on the “green energy” market have understood this and are preparing, if nothing is done, to establish their stranglehold on the vast majority of the country’s arable land. Two hundred farms are already disappearing every week in the country, to the benefit of ever larger agricultural infrastruc-



Demonstrations and disarming actions of Lafarge Cement factory near Marseilles



tures, cut off from the peasant link to the land and subordinated to industrial companies.

Three main threats hang over agricultural land: that of its unrestrained monopolisation by agribusiness, which exhausts it and squanders water resources; that of the increasing artificialisation of the soil, its “concreteisation”, by urban planning and by the economic activism of the building and public works giants; that of the irreversible destruction of soil life by the fertilisers, pesticides, fungicides and herbicides dumped all over the world by the multinational petrochemical companies. In addition to agricultural land, thousands of hectares of wasteland, forests and wetlands, vital reserves of biodiversity, are also being devoured by tourism, shopping centres and the expansion of metropolitan areas. This choice of political intervention by the “Soulèvements de la Terre”, this angle of attack on the very soil, links the ecological and peasant question of the reproduction of the conditions of life on earth, the social question of the distribution of agricultural, hydrologic and food resources, and the political question of the capitalist structuring of production sectors. Tearing up spaces from concrete or agro-industry is also the possibility of freeing places, of reclaiming the means of production and of inventing more desirable forms of life and sharing.

Once the targets had been identified, it remained to find ways of coordinating efforts and arranging them strategically. The first call of the “Soulèvements de la Terre” inaugurated a movement that

would be structured around “seasons” of actions decided at half-yearly assemblies. The idea was no longer to organize decentralized days of action, but rather to target four to five more or less massive mobilizations per “season”. The idea is to regularly come together at the national level to support a local front at a turning point in its history: because the classic institutional channels of protest have been exhausted without being heard, because building sites are going to start, because evictions are going to happen, because it is necessary to try something else, to be more visible, to cross a threshold.... In the course of these actions called after each moment of meeting between the components of the movement and local struggles, as they emerge or manifest themselves, a narrative and a strategy are woven that are strengthened, fleshed out in the sequence of events and in the enthusiasm of new complicities. From one gathering to the next, a whole network of places and new anchorages in the territories was created.

The shared will, in the construction of these seasons of the “Soulèvements de la Terre” is then to mark the rise of the movement of intermediary victories. It was decided that the characteristic gestures of a Soulèvements de la Terre mobilisation would be occupations of threatened land, blockades of building sites and industries, or direct and collective dismantling of ecocidal infrastructures. These three types of actions are privileged, not because they are sufficient in themselves to carry out struggles, but because their diffusion seems

essential today to have a concrete impact in the political field and in the face of the climate emergency.

When one goes to an “act” of Soulèvements de la Terre, one is more and more interested in finding ways to gather that actually and directly change the situation. In almost two years, some fifteen national actions have been carried out and some challenging projects have been halted while others will require more persistence.

People from the 4 corners of the country have converged on land destined for concrete in a working class district of Besançon to set up a pirate market, in vineyards in the south of France to savagely harvest a billionaire’s grapes and make juice for the struggles, in a peasant bocage in the west of the country devoured by sand quarries in order to dismantle a dam that privatises the water of a stream, in a forest in the Alps to support the valley’s inhabitants who are fighting for their lives. In a valley fighting against its destruction by the tourism industry and artificial snow, on Provençal market gardening land threatened by an industrial zone to have a carnival and attack the machinery of the local mayor and property developer... Over time, the forms of organisation of the uprisings evolve. Tools for monitoring and coordination were developed, and local branches were set up. The movement retains a hybrid character between the broad coalition of groups and organisations, the network of friends, the organisation and the movement.

The simultaneous invasion in June 2021 by several hundred people of three major sites of the concrete industry in the Paris region at the call of Soulèvements de la Terre and eXtinction Rebellion gave rise to numerous debates and certain changes of orientation within the environmental groups. The occupiers were not content to simply occupy the sites, but this time sabotaged machines, silos and cement bags to prevent the sites from restarting after their departure. They then put forward the term “disarmament”: “Lafarge (international cement giant) and its accomplices do not hear the anger of the generations they leave without a future in a world ravaged by their misdeeds. Their machines, silos and mixers are weapons that kill us. They will not stop unless we force them to. So we will continue to dismantle this infrastructure of disaster ourselves. We call on all those who are rising up for the earth to occupy, block and disarm the concrete.”

### **A TURNING POINT IN THE MOVEMENT: THE EMBLEMATIC STRUGGLE AGAINST ME-GA-POOLS IN THE CEREAL-GROWING AREAS OF HAUT AND BAS-POITOU - THE MARSHES AND PLAINS OF WEST-CENTRAL FRANCE**

In the still recent history of Soulèvements de la Terre, the meeting with the inhabitants of the Marais Poitevin who were fighting against the irrigation projects of industrial cereal farming marked a decisive turning point. Since the 1970s, a generation of farmers, driven by the bad wind of the agro-business sector, has taken up the challenge of competing with the large cereal-growing

**“The movement retains a hybrid character between the broad coalition of groups and organisations, the network of friends, the organisation and the movement.”**

plains of the Paris basin, at the cost of continuously disrupting, over a period of forty years, the ancient hydrographic system of what was one of the largest wetlands in France. Having reached the end of these extractivist production choices, the sector must now face the effects of climate change, and find the water that is no longer available in the summer in rivers and groundwater. Not content with the feat of having turned the rivers upside down towards their sources over the past twenty years, by dint of excessive water withdrawals, they are now planning to store water in winter to irrigate in summer when the rivers are dry. Dozens of projects for the construction of giant open-air water reserves have been launched and,

validated by the State, should be built with public money. It is in the face of this blindness on the part of the industry, which refuses to consider the suicidal nature of its irrigation practices, that the inhabitants have been rising up for over twenty years. Initially relatively isolated in the face of the power of the agro-business lobby in this region, this struggle has gradually grown in scope as they seek to build new alliances. From the meeting between the Bassines Non Merci collective, the Confédération Paysanne, a farmers' union that defends other practices, and the emerging Soulèvements de la Terre movement, a new cycle of struggle with its own rhythm and stakes has emerged. From September 2021 to the present day, the rise in mobilisation, made possible by this new composition plan, has led to a new cycle of struggle with its own rhythm and issues.

From September 2021 to today, the rise in mobilisations, made possible by this new composition plan, has transformed this local struggle into a national, even international, struggle on the burning issue of the monopolisation of water resources by agribusiness and its world.

The first few hundred mobilisations that managed to take over the giant craters dug for these water reserves, as in Mauzé-sur-le-Mignon, were quickly confronted with disproportionate police measures. The public authorities clashed with the farmers' unions defending industrial practices, forcing a diversification of the tactics of struggle. In November 2021, after a chase with the police

through the fields, nearly 2,000 people stormed an illegal mega-pool near the new construction site, which had been transformed into a fortress. The crowd of demonstrators managed to “disarm” the tank by destroying its covers and pumping system. The following spring, with the support of more than 150 organisations and groups calling for action, 6,000 people circumvented the militarised zoning set up by the prefecture to disarm the supply system of a future basin in La Rochénard, another commune in the Marais Poitevin.

Following these demonstrations, and no doubt largely inspired by them, night actions neutralised several other basins in the region. These actions, which were claimed and sometimes filmed, have in turn popularised these gestures of “disarmament”, which can be easily carried out by everyone with rudimentary means, such as simple cutters.

Faced with the deafness of the authorities and the instigators of these workcamps, the movement continued to grow. After a summer of historic drought, a new mass demonstration was organized near the small commune of Sainte Soline in a lowland area south of the Marais Poitevin. This time again around 8000 people defied the prefecture’s ban on demonstrations. The demonstrators of Bassines Non Merci and Soulèvements de la Terre managed to take the police by surprise and set up a base camp in the middle of the forbidden zone to welcome the crowd of demonstrators the day before the ban came into force.

The next morning, three processions of more than 2,000 demonstrators, each taking a different route, overran the massive police presence and finally reached the outskirts of the construction site of the largest mega-pond ever built, some of them breaking down the security fence. The construction site will be stopped for more than a week. This last action, by rendering inoperative all the efforts of the state to protect the construction site, 3000 riot police, seven helicopters, barricades and bans on demonstrations, pierced the media blackout applied until now to these water defence mobilisations. The “Battle of Sainte Soline” effectively halted the construction for several weeks, made the headlines on television and in the newspapers, and provoked chain reactions at the highest levels of the State. It was undoubtedly the words of the Minister of the Interior, who called the determination of the demonstrators’ processions acts of a kind of “eco-terrorism”, the day after the crushing defeat of the police forces on the ground, that fuelled the biggest buzz in this sequence.

### **“ECO-TERRORISM” OR ECO-RESISTANCE?**

More than a verbal slip, these chosen words of the minister were preparing the implementation of the means of anti-terrorism in the repression of ecological and peasant resistance actions which do not cease multiplying.

As proof, following a new “disarmament” action, this time against the French cement giant Lafarge, carried out in the early hours of 10 December

by two hundred demonstrators dressed in white suits, an investigation was opened by the anti-terrorist prosecutor's office and entrusted to the Anti-Terrorist Sub-Directorate. This action, filmed and claimed by an anonymous group, brought one of the cement manufacturer's largest production sites in the south of France to a standstill, causing, according to the media, nearly 4 million euros in damage to the multinational Lafarge. The case is comical: this is the same company that was recently condemned in the United States for having financed Daesh in exchange for the continuation of its extraction activities in the Syrian desert. Lafarge, in addition to its major role in one of the most climate-damaging industries on the planet, has also been indicted in France for "complicity in crimes against humanity" in the context of a judicial investigation opened in June 2017. This indictment is in addition to two others for "financing terrorist groups" and "endangering the lives of others".

The Soulèvements de la Terre are now being singled out by the French security services as the instigators of a "radical shift in the environmental movement" in France and a French intelligence report goes so far as to recommend its dissolution by the state. Faced with this threat, a tribune published in the press at the beginning of January gathered more than three thousand signatures in 48 hours, testifying to the strong support of many personalities from all walks of life for gestures of active resistance to the destruction of life and the monopolisation of natural resources.

The coming months will be decisive for the future of the movement and for the battle in defence of land and water. Either the movement will expand further and succeed in putting a definitive end to the tank construction programmes, or the government will succeed in dividing the movement, repressing its most active fringes and going by force.

It is as much to catch the forces of repression off guard once again, as to make the vital struggle for the defence of land and water resonate internationally, that we come to you today. We are starting a new mobilization for the next act of the struggle against mega-pools, because we believe that this battle is decisive and vital, as are, in recent weeks, the battles against the extension of the open-cast lignite mine in Lützerath to feed the energy rush in Germany, or against the destruction of the Atlanta Forest for the benefit of a police training centre in the United States.

The next massive demonstration called by Bas-sines Non Merci, Les Soulèvements de la Terre and the Confédération Paysanne will take place on March 25 and 26 somewhere in Poitou. We warmly invite all those, from all over the world, who are not planning to watch the "end of the world" from their sofa. making the last scenario more likely.



Demonstrators defend themselves against aggressive police during demonstrations against Sainte-Soline water reservoir.

August 2023

**KRISTIN ROSS**

# War of the Worlds in France

*In the past two years Les Soulèvements de la Terre, a network of ecological activists and groups, has used direct confrontations with polluters and developers to threaten industrial agriculture's monopoly on the French countryside.*

**For many months,** the neoliberal government of Emmanuel Macron has confronted a population that rejects its politics en masse. Macron's proposal to raise the retirement age in France provoked opposition across the board — from far right to far left, and pretty much everyone in between — that united squabbling unions, inspired high-profile work stoppages across major labor sectors, and launched demonstrations in cities and towns that set the rhythm of daily life all winter and spring. Antipathy to Macron's austerity politics, which erupted dramatically in 2018 when the *gilets jaunes* protested a fuel tax hike, reached a pinnacle in March when Macron, realizing he would lose the parliamentary vote on the retirement reforms, relied instead on executive fiat to push them through. A new wave of upris-

ings began on June 27, when the police murdered Nahel Merzouk, an adolescent of North African descent, in the streets outside Paris.

In the face of such widespread unpopularity, Macron's government has resorted both to militarized police repression of protesters and to subtler strategies of diversion. When on June 21 Macron's minister of the interior, Gérard Darmanin, pronounced the "dissolution" of Les Soulèvements de la Terre (SLT), or the Earth Uprisings, a network of ecological activists and groups, it might have seemed only another tactic to divert attention from the government's unpopularity and the unchanging colonial situation in the *banlieues*. There was, Darmanin claimed, a new figure of terror wreaking havoc, not in the cities but in the countryside: the ecoterrorist.

But while targeting so-called ecoterrorists may well have been a useful diversionary strategy, the government had other reasons for wanting to dissolve SLT. In its brief two-year existence, through its theatrical, direct confrontations with polluters, developers, and infrastructure, the network has become a real threat to industrial agriculture's monopoly on the countryside. The administrative dissolution of groups suspected of antistate violence, the ultimate political weapon in the government's arsenal, had until recently been used primarily against Islamic terrorists and neofascist groups. Now it is being deployed against ecological activists. On Friday France's highest administrative court, the Conseil d'Etat, temporarily

suspended the dissolution while it considers the merits of the case.

Les Soulèvements de la Terre is neither a declared association nor a party and has no proper legal status. The term preferred by its members to describe the shape of their activities is "constellation." Dissolving such a nebulous entity ("A social movement cannot be dissolved" is one of SLT's slogans) is proving far more difficult than in the 1960s and 1970s, when the state targeted Trotskyist and Maoist political cells. The government stalled for two months between announcing its intention to dissolve the group and doing so. It soon emerged that Macron was strong-armed into getting on the dime by Arnaud Rousseau, the head of the FNSEA, a powerful agro-industrial syndicate of big landowners frequently responsible, from SLT's perspective, for deciding from on high how land is allocated and used. "Today," Rousseau said in an interview in *Le Point* on June 15,

there is total impunity which will lead everyone to civil war. Farmers are not second-class citizens, they must be protected and their rights reclaimed. The FNSEA, which acts responsibly, urges everyone to be calm and measured. But I am obliged to add that I cannot be sure of holding back my troops for much longer.

Rousseau had best be taken literally. His "troops" are fighting in what the journalist Nicolas Truong has called "a war between worlds." On one side, in



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the words of the anthropologist Philippe Descola, is “a small group of producers” engaged in intensive agriculture and monoculture farming, who either refuse to accept that agribusiness has any ecological consequences or simply don’t care if it does. On the other are partisans of an agriculture built around smallholdings and ecologically sustainable methods who recognize that climate change requires us to completely transform what we grow and how we grow it. Out of the many ecological crises confronting us, SLT has chosen to prioritize defending agricultural land from developers and agro-industrial encroachment. The overly abstract call to “save the climate,” in their view, must be brought down to earth, in fact to particular plots of earth. Their actions have included occupations, blockades, and what they call “disarming,” a form of sabotage conducted not by a few shadowy figures late at night but by thou-

sands of people in broad daylight. In June 2021, for example, occupiers of the Lafarge cement factory poured sand in the gas tanks of machinery to keep the site disabled after their departure.

I first joined an SLT action in March 2022, in the Deux-Sèvres region of western France. It was a demonstration against mega-basins — huge pits that stockpile groundwater for some 7 percent of the region’s farmers, large landholders who grow thirsty crops like cereals and corn to feed livestock in factory farms. Groundwater is pumped into the mega-basins in the winter and stored for spring and summer, but its yearly replenishment is far from guaranteed in this drought-prone region, still less so due to climate change. The filling of the mega-basins with what was once a resource shared in common — like the land enclosures of an earlier era — has depleted the local water supply. Despite evidence that mega-basins allow agribusiness to consume more water than the natural environment has to offer while leaving small farmers at a loss, the government continues to approve their construction and lets illegal ones continue to operate. Half of the agricultural land in France is destined to change hands over the next ten years as farmers age. SLT’s actions in carefully chosen, mostly rural conflict zones like Deux-Sèvres have put the question of that land — its access and use — both at the center of political debate and at the center of a war.

A recent issue of the magazine *L’Obs* contains a useful list of some of the casualties of that war:



Demonstration in support of Les Soulèvements de la Terre in Paris

the pressures, insults, attempts at intimidation, and even physical aggression that defenders of agribusiness have directed against journalists, antipesticide militants, and opponents of destructive projects like artificial-snow ski parks. A young antibasin militant coming home from his daily jog was attacked by two men in his front yard who fractured his ribs, broke his nose, and put him out of work for a month. On January 30 Paul François, a farmer who successfully sued Monsanto by demonstrating to a court that he had been poisoned by one of its products, was violently assaulted in his garage by three men who tied him up and threatened him with a knife. “We’re tired of hearing you and seeing your mug on TV,” they told him.

Les Soulèvements de la Terre attacks infrastructure and property but not people. Its disarming actions might include digging up and dismantling pipelines used to fill mega-basins with newly privatized water. SLT views such actions — the primary basis of the government’s decision to dissolve the group — as self-protective, in that they seek to destroy what is destroying us: pollution and the capitalist system itself are weapons of mass destruction directed against our liberty, our health, and the land and other natural resources that sustain us.

The movement originated in a decades-long occupational struggle that came to be known as the Zone à Défendre, or ZAD. It began in the mid-1970s, when farmers refused to sell a pocket of

land outside Nantes that was designated to become the site of an international airport. For years the state tried to no avail to wait the farmers out. In the early 2000s the state resumed the project, the farmers called for help, and a few hundred activists, younger farmers, and naturalists arrived. By the end of the decade a communal occupation had taken shape: participants constructed cabins and other buildings and devised alternative ways of satisfying basic needs — a kind of lived and livable secession from the state. What began as a defense of agricultural land over time came to entail protecting the very collective life project that took shape during its defense. After many years of legal wrangling, referendums, armed invasions by the state, and the destruction of homes in the zone, the ZAD won the battle: the airport, the Macron government decided in 2018, would not be built. Some of the occupiers who stayed at the site to continue experiments in collective farming later helped brainstorm and organize SLT.

I believe that resentment for the loss of the airport battle is in part what fuels the violence now being directed at SLT. Scratch the surface of the ecoterrorist caricature the government has manufactured and you’ll find its earlier manifestation: a Zadist. Days after Darmanin announced the government’s intention to dissolve SLT, he proclaimed the founding of an operation of “anti-ZAD jurists” designed to make sure that a ZAD, which a previous minister of the interior compared to a cancerous cell, would never again be allowed to put down roots in France.

The Zadists' skill at building and maintaining broad alliances created panic among the elites. The Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre believed that this kind of alliance-building across wide social and ideological divisions was a feature of all battles over land. Though the ZAD's battle was with "the airport *and its world*," it was able to mobilize people — including conservatives, shopkeepers, and elected officials — who were not necessarily anticapitalist but who simply did not want to live near an airport. Zadists call this solidarity between people of disparate ideologies, identities, and convictions "composition." The diverse makeup of the movement allows it to express itself through various actions; at the ZAD, these included filing legal briefs, building and maintaining communication with distant support groups, confronting the police, cataloging endangered species on the zone, and sabotaging machinery. No one method was presumed superior to another; neither legality nor illegality was fetishized. Proponents of one method refrained from arguing the superiority of their way. The emphasis, as one friend put it, was on "tact, not tactics."

After the victory over the airport, the enemy was ever-present but less tangible. Now that the airport was gone, how best to continue the fight against "its world"? The large, well-behaved pre-Covid climate marches in European capitals and elsewhere were deemed largely ineffectual, in part due to their abstract goals. What was needed was a rootedness in pragmatic local struggles, an attention to particular communities and their

histories, and a way to unite these efforts into a common front with global ambition, unfixed and flexible but still organized.

In January 2021 SLT came into being when a hundred or so activists of different strains and persuasions — among them members of Extinction Rebellion, Youth for Climate, Amis de la Terre, and ATTAC — met with ZAD occupants and members of *paysan* unions like Confédération Paysanne to coordinate their activities and, as one friend put it, "link up the earth of the paysans with the planet of the ecologists." They carefully orchestrated a series of actions: against a Monsanto factory in Lyon, in defense of workers' community gardens in Besançon, and against sand extraction for cement manufacturing near Nantes. The group now has over 150,000 members across the world, including Noam Chomsky, the entire Zapatista community, and me. Over 50,000 people have joined since the dissolution; Greta Thunberg stood with members of the movement at the press conference held in Paris on the day of the government's announcement and expressed her support at a summit days later.

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At the first SLT demonstration I attended, in Deux-Sèvres, there were a few thousand people — a crowd that seemed enormous to me and others then accustomed to the solitude of Covid confinements. A year later, at Sainte-Soline on March 25, again for a demonstration against mega-basins,

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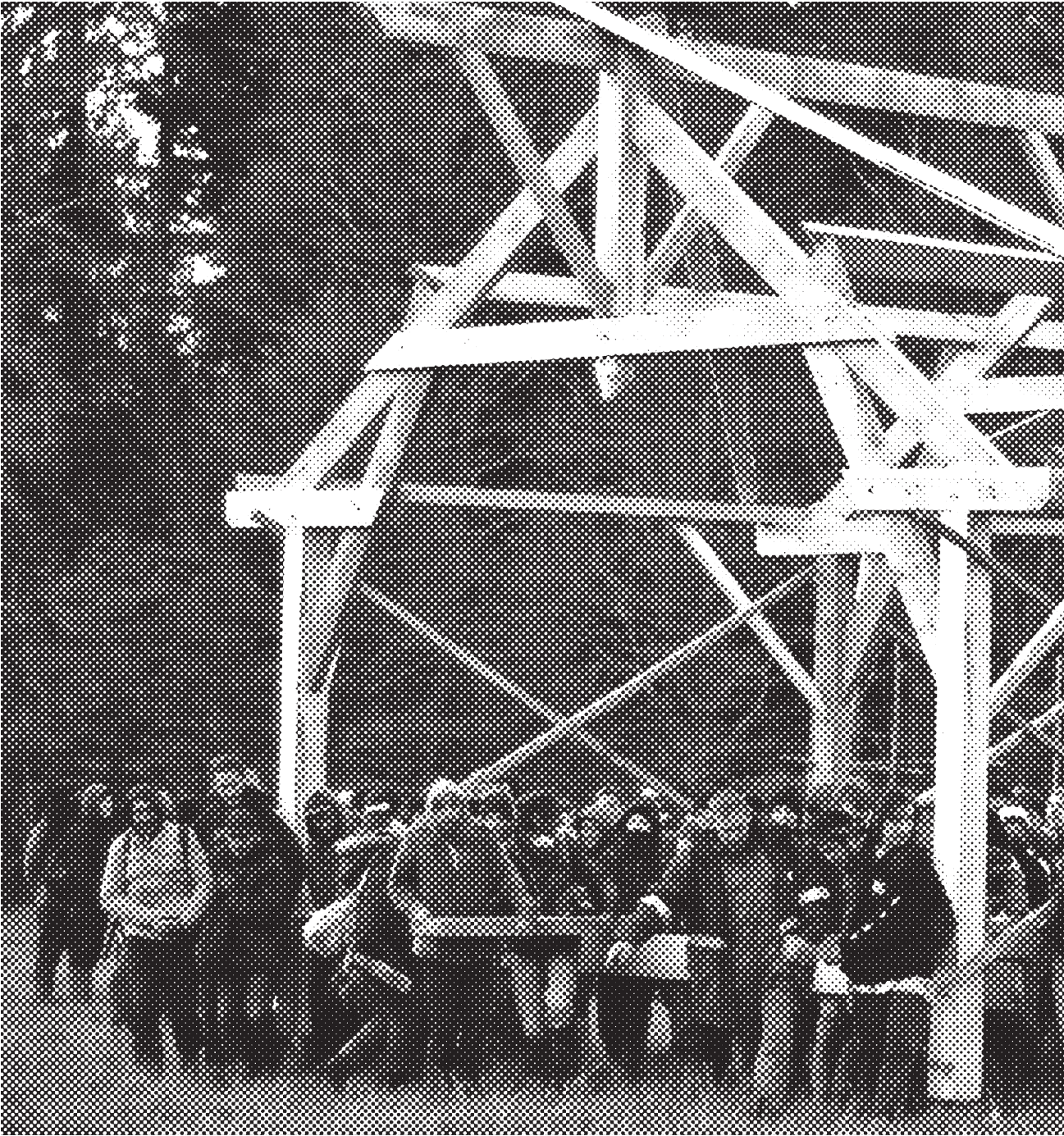
we were 30,000, a testament to SLT’s talent for directing the gaze of urbanites onto the crimes being committed in the countryside. That day, police in armored vehicles surrounding the perimeter of the basin launched, by their own estimate, over five thousand grenades at demonstrators in under two hours, causing two hundred injuries and leaving two people at death’s door. Some of the grenades they used, not authorized anywhere else in Europe, are deemed military-grade weapons of war. The police blocked emergency crews attempting to reach the wounded.

In his analysis of the police violence at Sainte-Soline, the historian Christophe Bonneuil began by asking why the government was willing to go to war with its own citizens to protect a hole in the ground. First, he suggested, it felt the need to present a show of brutal force as a warning to the demonstrators in the cities, increasingly enraged by the use of executive privilege to pass

the retirement reforms. But the government was also doubling down, he added, on its wholehearted support for productivist agriculture. It was in his view ready to kill its own citizens to protect capitalism’s “unjust social order.”

It was also clearly panicked by the sheer visibility, the public nature, of the mounting discontent — an anger so widely shared that it could cause thousands of people from all over the country, many of whom had not known of the existence of mega-basins a few weeks earlier, to travel hundreds of miles to a place city dwellers might describe as the middle of nowhere. A crowd that size moving slowly through cultivated fields is a strange, and strangely moving, sight. The last time so many French people felt the need to displace themselves for a political reason was fifty years ago, to support sheep farmers in the Larzac region in their (ultimately victorious) attempt to defend their land from expropriation by the government for use as an army training ground.

France’s government — or our own, for that matter—doesn’t care how many studies are written about capitalism’s destruction of the lived environment. They aren’t bothered by statistics or data or treatises or academic roundtables. They pay no attention to predictable, well-intentioned marches in the capital. But 30,000 people in the fields outside Melle in the middle of the Deux-Sèvres is something else.



Inhabitants carry a frame of a building in la ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes.



The ZAD stands for zone to defend.



Demonstrators marching with the Outarde Canepetière or Little Bustard, an endangered species threatened by water reservoirs.



April 2023

**LES SOULÈVEMENTS DE LA TERRE**

# To Those Who Marched at Sainte-Soline

**Three weeks have passed since March 25 at Sainte-Soline**, a day that will remain forever ingrained in our bodies and memories. Since then, it feels as if we've been trapped within a game of ping pong between the government's aggressive offensive and our counter-offensives, which sought to establish a semblance of truth about what took place and the current political context. This has pushed us, amongst many other undertakings, to accept conditions of speech that were far from satisfactory and which limited our possibilities of expression, including TV appearances. For the injured and for the future, we cannot give free reign to so much indecency and lies spread by authorities that are literally running wild. It's time that we step out of the emergency response mode and address a series of legitimate questions. We are only just now

beginning to process this weekend (which took months to prepare) in a critical and collective way; nevertheless, it's important that we share some explanations and interpretations on our part.

We would like to share them with everyone who walked the 12 kilometers with us that day, those with whom we attempted, as best we could, to encircle the construction site of the Sainte-Soline mega-reservoir [*méga-bassine*]: those who came on a whim, as well as those who had been preparing for this day for some time; those who arrived by bicycle convoy from Brittany, as well as those who took a break between blockades and demos to join us in Deux-Sèvres; all the people who traveled from Italy, Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium; those who managed to slip past the police roadblocks and helped set up the camp, or simply made it there by Friday. But also those who endured repeated police controls in Melle during the days prior and opted as a result to hang back at the festival grounds and keep an eye on things. Finally, those who were unable to make it at all, but who joined us in their hearts.

What matters to us is that we find ways to continue fighting together; this is why we share these reflections, imperfect and fragmented as they may be. We don't yet possess the necessary distance to draw very many decisive conclusions concerning the specific events of March 25, or even about the longer timeframe of struggle against the mega-reservoirs in Deux-Sèvres. This will take time, and will be undertaken in several steps. But to

begin, it seems important to remember how we got here. What was the context, and the state of power relations that led to the events of March 25?

### **1. SOME CONTEXTUAL ELEMENTS**

#### ***Stop the mega-reservoirs***

Over the past two years, the struggle against the mega-reservoirs saw an unprecedented acceleration both at the level of sheer participation as well as in the tactics deployed.

In September 2021, the construction of the mega-reservoir at Mauzé sur Mignon was joyously invaded by 500 demonstrators and a convoy of tractors: as demonstrators resisted the police, an excavator was disabled.

On November 6 2021, 3000 people cleverly opted to bypass the construction site at Mauzé sur Mignon, where 1000 police — as well as farmers from the FNSEA<sup>1</sup> and the Coordination Rurale<sup>2</sup> — were waiting for them, and instead dismantled the neighboring reservoir at Cram-Chaban, which had its pump dismantled with the help of the Confédération Paysanne. The force of this gesture, which was the result of a coordination between Bassines Non Merci, Confédération Paysanne, and Soulèvements de la Terre, lay in its effort to push beyond the traditional form of the political demonstration, insisting on the political urgency of collectively disarming infrastructure and disrupting construction sites.

**“If we can’t always  
stop construction  
completely, we can  
participate in creat-  
ing an unmanage-  
able and costly  
situation for our  
opponents.”**

At Rochénard the following March, the crowd of 6000 people decided not to venture into the red zone and instead to dismantle the pipes at a nearby reservoir still under construction.

At the first excursion at the Sainte-Soline site on October 29-30 2022, 8000 demonstrators split up into three marches with the aim of confronting the police lines according to distinct tactical approaches. After significant clashes, the first column managed to force its way into the reservoir, before the other two danced their way in. Still, the column that briefly occupied the construction site endured heavy grenade fire from police, with the demonstration ending in a pattern of clashes that foreshadowed the limits we would encounter on March 25, as a single fixed

point faced off with the whole police line guarding the reservoir.

In the aftermath of this action, construction at the Sainte-Soline location was paused for two weeks, partly due to the damage inflicted upon the fences that enclose it, but above all because the visibility and the power balance around these projects had now crossed a threshold.

If we can’t always stop construction completely, we can participate in creating an unmanageable and costly situation for our opponents. Of the seventeen reservoirs planned in the Deux-Sèvres region, only two have broken ground. No other work has yet started, although several are planned. This is a direct consequence both of daytime demonstrations carried out by the organization as well as the anonymous work of nighttime artisans who disarmed thirteen reservoirs in the area, along with the colossal work of scientific counter-investigations designed to undermine the arguments of agribusiness.

***General Strategy***

The aim of the struggle against the mega-reservoirs led by the Confédération paysanne, Bassines Non Merci, and Les Soulèvements de la Terre is to halt project construction while creating the conditions for a genuine debate over the usage and distribution of water understood as a common good. However, this takes time. The first battle of Sainte-Soline did not bring about the definitive end of construction, and we knew that, by itself, a new mobilization wouldn’t either.



Front line protesters carry banner reading "Bassines? By no means!"

In line with the chant, “Not one more reservoir,” the agreements and shared feelings that we have progressively built between different collectives and organizations engaged in the struggle led us to target the construction of new reservoirs rather than older ones. Without any new construction site available to focus on after October’s demonstration, and with the Sainte-Soline reservoir still under construction, it quickly became the agreed upon target. Well aware of the difficulty of trying to reproduce for a second time the same action on the same terrain, we carefully studied other ideas for weeks, but none ultimately corresponded to the common criteria for a new mobilization.

Four objectives were established during the March meeting:

- to gather at least twice as many participants as in October.
- to confer a greater visibility of farmers’ participation in the struggle.
- to ensure that the demonstration impacts the construction site again. No one in the coordination imagined a simple stroll through the countryside or a demonstration without a strategic objective.
- to create the material conditions for useful debates over water, while highlighting the international dimension of the struggle.

### ***The Mellois region is not a desert***

The strength of the Bassines Non Merci collective lay in its tenacious ability to carry out a local

fight against the construction of reservoirs over the span of several years, thereby initiating a broader reflection over the sharing of water. For many participants, the organization of two days of discussions, conferences, and concerts during the next mobilization was every bit as important as the demonstration itself. Given the material precarity that the harsh terrain carried with it, it felt necessary to ensure that a permanent base camp existed. To this end, the town of Melle courageously agreed to play host to the events that took place alongside the demonstration, giving the town a way to pledge its support for resistance to the mega-reservoirs.

Over the course of two years — and this is one of the strengths of this struggle — each event we organized together considerably extended the field of struggle and allowed us to forge new alliances. One by one, most of the local actors have chosen sides and participated in problematizing the project and its long term consequences. Making time for a festival and a conference in Melle was thus also a way to confer visibility upon the locals who inhabit this region and contribute to making the large mobilizations possible — a way to show that the Mellois region is not a desert but a territory populated with people who struggle and take the place where they live seriously.

As the local political context is concerned, it’s been remarkable to see how many such folks are prepared to welcome the struggle, offering up their work tools (tractors for farmers, flatbed

trucks for craftsmen, forklifts, etc.) as well as their time and their networks. Yet even though a large part of the population supports the struggle against the reservoirs, the local political context is strained, and the FNSEA still controls a portion of the political life of Deux-Sèvres. As such, it's not easy to find space for thousands of people to camp and park their cars without exposing oneself to a certain climate of hostility.

### ***What's lacking ground, the water or the ecologists?***

One of the strategies used by the government and the pro-reservoir groups has been to pit farmers against environmentalists. The struggle against the mega-reservoirs is supposedly led only by outside environmentalists who understand nothing about the stakes and difficulties of the agricultural world. However, farmers have struggled against water grabbing for years. The internal conflicts of the agricultural world are powerful, but often smoothed over and ignored.

During the Spring Vegetable Market demonstration in March 2022, the farmers' tractors that faced off against the mega-reservoirs were rendered invisible, in part because they were unable to join the march of demonstrators due to a police barricade. After the media explosion on this topic, with its focus on violence, it felt essential to insist once again on the strong participation of farmers in this struggle. A convoy of fifty tractors from all over France was thus ready to come to the mobilization, with the goal of joining Friday's camp. The

presence of the tractors was all the more important, as the FNSEA had just demonstrated in favor of the reservoirs and pesticides a few days prior at Rochelle on March 22.

These contextual elements explain why we didn't organize only one demonstration, but instead three separate but complementary events:

- Discussions, conferences, and round tables with people from abroad, accompanied by concerts, canteens and bars for 10000 people.
- A convoy of tractors, joined by various car convoys, between Friday and Saturday morning.
- A demonstration of more than 20000 people that needed to take place in a different region than Melle, in a town that didn't have the infrastructure to welcome as many people.

## **2. TACTICS ON FAMILIAR GROUND**

The dramatic outcome of Saturday's demonstration and the subsequent ridiculous statements by state figures like Darmanin tended to overshadow what made the weekend so diverse. Whereas discussion has largely centered on what transpired that Saturday, it's important to remember the other elements that reflect the different modes of participation throughout the weekend. In Melle, despite the pressure exerted by the police checks, more than 20000 people were drawn together and by powerful experiences of collective sharing.

**“ ...despite the pressure exerted by the police checks, more than 20000 people were drawn together and by powerful experiences of collective sharing.”**

***Demo on Thursday, camping on Friday***

The setting-up of the camp was initially planned for Thursday, but out of concern for coordinating with the movement against the pension reform we decided to set up only after the union demonstration. Moreover, as the logistics of the event at Melle mentioned above required a ton of effort, this left the camping logistics uncertain, and unable to welcome thousands of people over several days. Finally, it was all the more important to keep the date and location secret for as long as possible, since an encampment had already been launched the previous October and the Prefecture could have anticipated it, making it difficult to set things up.

Despite all that, following a meticulous organizing plan in an area that had been checked and re-checked over the course of a week, 300 people succeeded on Friday morning in setting up tents, medic areas, generators, port-a-potties, etc. — all under the nose of the police — resulting in an encampment that welcomed some 5000 people later that day. But after such an operation, there was little time left for discussion and preparation of the next day’s demonstration.

***“Be water,” even on a tractor***

In the early afternoon, a public gathering was announced at Lusignan where the tractor convoy was to meet up with international delegations for a press conference. As they approached Lusignan, it was clear that the Vienne and Deux Sèvres prefects were going to do everything in their power to prevent the tractors from reaching the encampment. To put fortune on their side, the farmers decided to turn away from Lusignan and head directly to the N10 to shorten their route. This unforeseen change of plan forced the state police to deploy on the N10 and to block the off-ramps of the highway in a hurry. In reaction, a march of several hundred people set off from the encampment to lend a hand to the farmers. Confronted by an imposing apparatus set up at both highway offramps as well as on the bridges above the regional train tracks, which made accessing the encampment from the highway all but impossible, the march decided to invade the tracks. This action forced a section of the police to abandon its position and intervene, thereby freeing up



Demonstrators drumming as they march



a bridge in the meantime. By the end of the afternoon, both Highway 10 and the LGV train line connecting Paris-Bordeaux were blocked. Despite negotiation attempts by the Confédération Paysanne spokespeople, the authorities refused to let the tractors pass.

In face of the authorities' inflexibility, the farmers improvised. A few kilometers from the final off-ramp allowing access to the encampment, the tractors slipped away from the police escort and made an epic escape: they ditched the four-lane highway in order to race the police down the rural roads and pathways, before infiltrating the forbidden zone and passing over the liberated bridge at the last minute. The tractors rolled into the camp to glowing fanfare just as the day came to a close.

The encampment set up and the convoy's passage reveals several elements of importance: firstly, that with both meticulous planning in a broad composition as well as rapid improvisation, it is sometimes possible to thwart an asymmetrically powerful apparatus. Secondly, we are stronger when we are in motion. This intuition was reinforced by the events of the next day, as the conflict and the confrontation became bogged down in a war of attrition, which was clearly detrimental for us.

### ***Repetition is not reason***

If we now turn our attention to Saturday, we can see that the tactical repetition between the first and second battles of Sainte-Soline was a ma-

JOR error. In hindsight, it's hard even to retrace the thread that led us there. Despite the common sense idea that advises against attempting the same thing twice, it's as if a kind of funneling happened, in which the progressive shrinking of possibilities pushed us to reproduce the same movement.

In many ways, the tactical arrangement of the marches has not managed to evolve since that rally in October. In an open countryside like this, where the expanses stretch as far as the eye can see, there are only so many paths one can take. Hence the idea, that day, to proceed once again to the edge of the reservoir, try to encircle it, and if the situation permitted, to reach it. However, we weren't ready to enter at all costs.

Given the topographical constraints — the overhanging reservoir accessed only by a vast open area — the difficulty lay in successfully creating a surprise. But since we had announced publicly that we were going to Sainte-Soline and/or Mauzé sur le Mignon, we didn't think we could keep any secrets about the day's objectives. With the camp lying outside the red zone, we were worried about finding ourselves blocked and confronting a police apparatus at the edge of the red zone, which would provoke a clash miles away from the reservoir. The Prefect could legally arrest us in front of the red zone, but the state police had also drawn a few lessons from October. That morning, we were relieved to discover that the bridges around Vanzay were clear. By castling in and around the

reservoir construction site, the cops had committed themselves to a strong defensive position. Although this “castle maneuver” was predictable, we lacked the requisite time and creativity to communicate and overcome this situation. It would be difficult to force the police out of the reservoir. The pipes are part of the construction work, we always say, but the technical difficulties of dismantling them did not make it the kind of goal that tens of thousands of people could participate in.

Nevertheless, we believed that if we could reach the reservoir our numbers would allow us to surround it, leaving the perimeter open to various approaches that could eventually permit us to tear down the fences and to halt the construction — if only temporarily.

### 3. CHANGE OF SCALE

March 25th signaled a quantitative leap in participation in the movement against water grabbing. How can we coordinate and continue to move together while taking this change of scale into account? The considerable enlargement of the marches entails an evolution of our modes of information transmission and collective decision making, before and during the demonstration — an evolution that we did not anticipate well.

Our goal has been to take singular struggles and escalate them, to make them resonate, in the hopes that the enthusiasm they generate will over-

**“We cannot master such overflow, nor do we seek to, since it extends far beyond the strength of our own forces. When a struggle reaches this point, it awakens in tens of thousands of people the hope of winning against something bigger than ourselves.”**

flow the initial impulse, that the situation will overflow us, thereby rendering our ability to emerge and coordinate indecipherable and unpredictable for our enemies. We cannot master such overflow, nor do we seek to, since it extends far beyond the

strength of our own forces. When a struggle reaches this point, it awakens in tens of thousands of people the hope of winning against something bigger than ourselves. The first battle of Sainte-Soline had exceeded our expectations, and we welcomed this overflow, and hoped to see it emerge again; yet we did not sufficiently take into account what such a change of scale would mean.

This change of scale in participation from October frightened us, at the same time as it delighted us. We attempted to recreate the conditions that allowed us to reach the reservoir during the first battle, with the same scale in mind. But leading three marches of 2500 people isn't the same thing as coordinating three marches of 10000 people. The forces actively organizing the operation, as well as the means of communication implemented, needed to be adapted to the change of scale. Without a doubt, we failed to better anticipate what a pure fortress-like police line would produce. By the time we realized this, it would have been difficult to completely divert our collective energy away from the symbolic target of the construction site and its guards, but perhaps we could have imagined ways to avoid confronting it so directly.

Our usual strategy, which consists of eluding and foiling the police line, was undermined by the enemy's plan that day, and by the inertia and difficulty of communication from within a crowd that was already in motion. The first march of the pink bastard arrived on the scene easily, and formed

a kind of human chain along the west side of the reservoir. It got rained upon by tear gas canisters, but still held fast for an hour and a half, as people of all ages formed a single body together, advanced in a line, burying the tear gas as they went. When this line finally came into contact with the police line, attempting to push them back with nothing other than inflatable animals, offensive grenades began to rain down upon them too. At the same time, a set of smaller, more mobile groups advanced in order to seize the opportunity to break through the police line at the point where the main crowd had arrived. They imposed relentless pressure on the police line. The processions left at the back, bigger and less mobile, were besieged by grenades and unable to coordinate.

Without a pre-established backup plan, nor any capacity for improvisation in such a large demonstration, things quickly went from bad to worse. We would have needed a real time-out to imagine something else, but we no longer technically had this possibility. When the seriousness of the number of wounded was shared from one procession to another, the inadequacy of our collective means became glaring. Above all, the means to evacuate the wounded, but also to communicate between the marches. Even if it wasn't obvious to everyone, we pushed for a collective withdrawal from the area.

At this stage, the other actions carried out in parallel by the farmers and other processions — building a greenhouse, planting hedges, disman-



Demonstrator carries inflatable crocodile. Play can also be disarming.

ting the networks that fed the reservoir — seemed quite paltry and relatively invisible.

Due to these same requirements of scale, an immense amount of work was done by the rear base in terms of organization, structure, and support before, during, and after the demonstration. Included in the coordination but also structured as an entity in its own right, the base was able to adapt to the change in scale. And we had a long way to go. To give an example, in October, our organization had not thought of providing psychological support or fighting against sexist violence for such an event. Likewise, in a few months the Infoline switchboard evolved from a single telephone managed part-time by one person to a 24-hour team from Thursday to Sunday, set up to help participants join the weekend. After October we felt the need to take this into account, and a beautiful process of organization was set in motion that then proved a valuable contribution to the weekend and its aftermath. The rear base's work, like the legal work, is still in process. On the side of action, we need to recognize where the necessities that accompany a change of scale have not been sufficiently anticipated. More generally, a real study of the effects of scale is required, specifically in terms of advance organization and the spread of information.

#### **4. THE MAINTENANCE OF ORDER**

Police violence and its legitimization by the state are nothing new. It has always plagued the aban-

doned and invisibilized populations. It has long been (and remains) a rather distant abstraction for most of the citizens of this country. It took the emergence of movements of a spontaneous and overflowing struggle like that of the yellow vests, the youth black blocs against the 2016 Labor Law, and the ZAD for the weapons that maim the people living in the banlieues to begin to threaten almost anything that stirs. Sainte-Soline is one of the latest examples of this. The risk of losing a limb or dying in our efforts to construct another world is increasingly shared. The young generations will have to live and fight with this risk.

While we expected gas, grenades, tanks, and the whole military arsenal regularly deployed, we did not expect this déluge. Given the different factual "errors" made by police and the Interior Ministry's comm's service, it is difficult to believe the numbers given, but we can try to make this comparison: for the 5000 grenades fired in two hours, we must compare the 11000 grenades fired in one week on the ZAD in Notre-Dame-des-Landes in 2018. Despite the memory of Rémi Fraise's death, we weren't ready to face such a desire to kill. A milestone has been passed.

In the midst of protest against the retirement reform, in a political moment where environmentalism is laden with conflictuality, the government attempted to shock the world by raising the possibility of maiming and killing without comment or question. It's one more occasion to witness, without any decorum, the State's normal expression

of its claim to legitimate violence. By claiming that the crowd is “illegitimate,” this is where Macron has situated the debate.

The apparatus deployed by the police forces was designed to break our forces beyond that day. And this is what the police feedback group is still congratulating itself about: to see us return to the camp “demoralized.” Their obstruction of access to medical assistance for people in life-threatening emergencies reveals this strategy of tension. Despite the efforts of the medic teams on site, we realize that we will have to count more than ever on ourselves to defend our friends and provide them with good and proper care.

The State has militarized the question of water. On that day, it made that hole in the ground the symbol of its authority, a metaphor for its power. We went up against the construction of the mega-reservoirs in order to stop them from investing so much money in the works and to expose their vulnerability. Our forces were unequal. Despite this fact, the determination to break through the police lines was impressive. The dispersal of our collective body did not discourage certain people’s determination to break through the line. This desire drove some of the processions, even if it was impossible for the whole. The success of the previous mobilizations lay in the fact that all of the demonstrators could take an active part in “passing through.” But passing through to go where? Most of the thousands of people there on March 25 couldn’t participate in

this gesture. The crowd, held at a distance by the rain of grenades, found themselves spectators of this moment without being able to act on it. The marches attacked the fences of the construction site and part of the police line that was protecting the fences was momentarily put in trouble. But it is clear to us that such a direct attack was far too costly. And words are never enough or always clumsy when it comes to writing or saying it.

Afterwards, people everywhere took time to discuss and listen to each other. Many recalled the evasive tactics that made October so successful. Many of us who found ourselves in the streets the following weeks were struck by a certain sadness and a new sense of foreboding. The past weeks have rekindled in us an anger and a rage that are spreading widely, dispelling any remaining resignation.

### **TEMPORARY CONCLUSIONS**

Last October, when we packed up camp the day after what we now call “the first battle of Sainte-Soline,” we asked ourselves: how can we go further? How can we attain the definitive abandonment to all of these reservoir projects? These are the questions that motivated the coordination during the four months of preparation for March 25. Even today, it’s unclear if we have drawn the full measure of the impact that weekend in October had. Did it open up a form of hope concerning the question of the reservoirs or ecological struggle more broadly? On the vital

problem of water? We saw a symbol emerging, with all of the ambivalence between hope and expectation that these can harbor: mega-reservoirs as a symbol of the climatic aberration of agro-industry and of the total allegiance that the ruling authorities have pledged to it.

In the short memory of the struggles in which we have participated, we had never experienced what happened on March 25. We have witnessed attacks on fortified sites in Sivens, but also in the Val de Susa, on the other side of the Alps, during the NO-TAV struggle. The threshold of intensity that was crossed in the repressive violence of Sainte-Soline demands a rethinking of our tactical impasses, and an effort to overcome them. The struggle against the mega-reservoirs has only just begun. They cannot fortify each and every one of these sites. And if local committees spread everywhere, it is not one project that could be attacked, but dozens. After Sainte-Soline, the struggle will need to reinvent its forms of intervention, regain confidence in its collective capacity to produce impactful gestures, while maintaining as broad a composition as possible.

We are tending to our wounds and thinking of the wounded. We need to reassemble the different narratives of what the day meant for everyone. We will continue to support the wounded, to struggle against the hoarding of water, and to take the streets against the retirement reform, because there is a continuity among these different fronts. These issues are linked together,

underwritten by same stupid and hated policies pushed by Macron, which care nothing for what they destroy as long as the markets are secure. The mobilization against the reform is massive, as is the awareness of the ecological stakes. The absence of dissociation and the solidarity among a broad political spectrum so far has been remarkable. The distrust of the executive branch is only matched by the anger brought out by the images of daily police violence on the news and networks.

Macron's attempt to get back on track at Serre-Ponçon lake was interesting because it showed that those who marched at Sainte-Soline were able to place the question of water on the agenda. With its "water plan," the power system has taken advantage of the shock to unroll a false discourse about water, the mega-reservoirs, and to reverse the ban on pesticide. This communication maneuver by the President was quickly swept aside by the startling reality of drinking poisoned water. There hasn't been a day since without an article published about water, its scarcity or its contamination. The stakes are real, the problem is reaching a growing number of people, whose feelings tend towards revolt. The struggle around water is open; it is vital to continue fighting, let's prepare for what comes.

*—Les Soulèvements participants at the March 25th coordination.*



Barricades up during clashes with police after La Rochelle port blockade and demonstrations.



November 2024

**KRISTIN ROSS** INTERVIEWED BY ILL WILL

# A Common Horizon for Situated Struggles

*An increasingly combative current of ecological struggle has pushed questions of space and place, territory and its defense, to the forefront of today's political imagination. These issues, and the politics of space more generally, have long been a focus of Kristin Ross's writing, reaching back to her first book on Rimbaud and the Paris Commune. As her new book, **The Commune-Form: the Transformation of Everyday Life** (Verso 2024), hits bookshelves this fall, we reached out to Ross to discuss *Les Soulèvements de la terre*, federated communes, and how to reclaim the revolutionary offensive in a climate of anxiety and despair.*

**Ill Will:** How do you see your work on May 1968 in light of the strong anti-colonial strands of last year's uprising in France, triggered by the police murder of Nahel Merzouk, a 17-year old of Algerian and Moroccan origins? It's hard not to see the connections between Merzouk's death and the police murder of Tortuguita, the Atlanta forest protester of Venezuelan origins murdered by police while sitting cross-legged in their tent with their hands up. What is the relationship between the boomerang-like return of anti-colonial revolt to the metropolis and contemporary ecological and place-based struggles? What role might your conception of restitution play in this return?

**Kristin Ross:** My work on May'68 is not changed at all by the anti-colonial strands of last year's

uprisings in France after the police murder of Nahel Merzouk. In fact, the argument I make in the book I wrote many years ago, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, concerns the principal role played by the anti-colonial wars, in Algeria and Vietnam particularly, in the insurrections that sprang up in Paris streets and throughout Europe and beyond: the worldwide 1960s. This is a common enough perception now, but when I wrote the book in the late 1990s, the dominant idea of '68 in France was that of a misguided panty-raid of sorts, the uprisings attributed to college boys not being allowed to enter girls' dorms at night. Workers — let alone Vietnamese peasants — were nowhere in sight, the largest strike in French history “disappeared” by a narrow and self-interested focus on the biography of a few turncoat student leaders anxious to make their way in the corporate media.

What *does* alter my thinking about the '68 years is illustrated by my shift in focus, in *The Commune Form*, towards movements like what was occurring at the same time in a provincial city like Nantes — the whole set of alliances and networks formed there between *paysans*, students, and striking workers and their families as they set about together to recreate, manage, feed, and live their city and its environs as an insurrectional commune. The experience was short-lived, but far more consequential now, from the perspective of today's preoccupations, than what was occurring in the capital. When we shift our focus to Nantes, we can begin to see the outlines of another whole history, one that reaches back to mid-century, to

**“ ...the whole set of alliances and networks formed there between paysans, students, and striking workers and their families as they set about together to recreate, manage, feed, and live their city and its environs as an insurrectional commune”**

the political consciousness informing the Paysans-Travailleurs [peasants-workers] movement, for example, a consciousness and orientation that had already made that region the center of a new agricultural left. And when Nantes comes

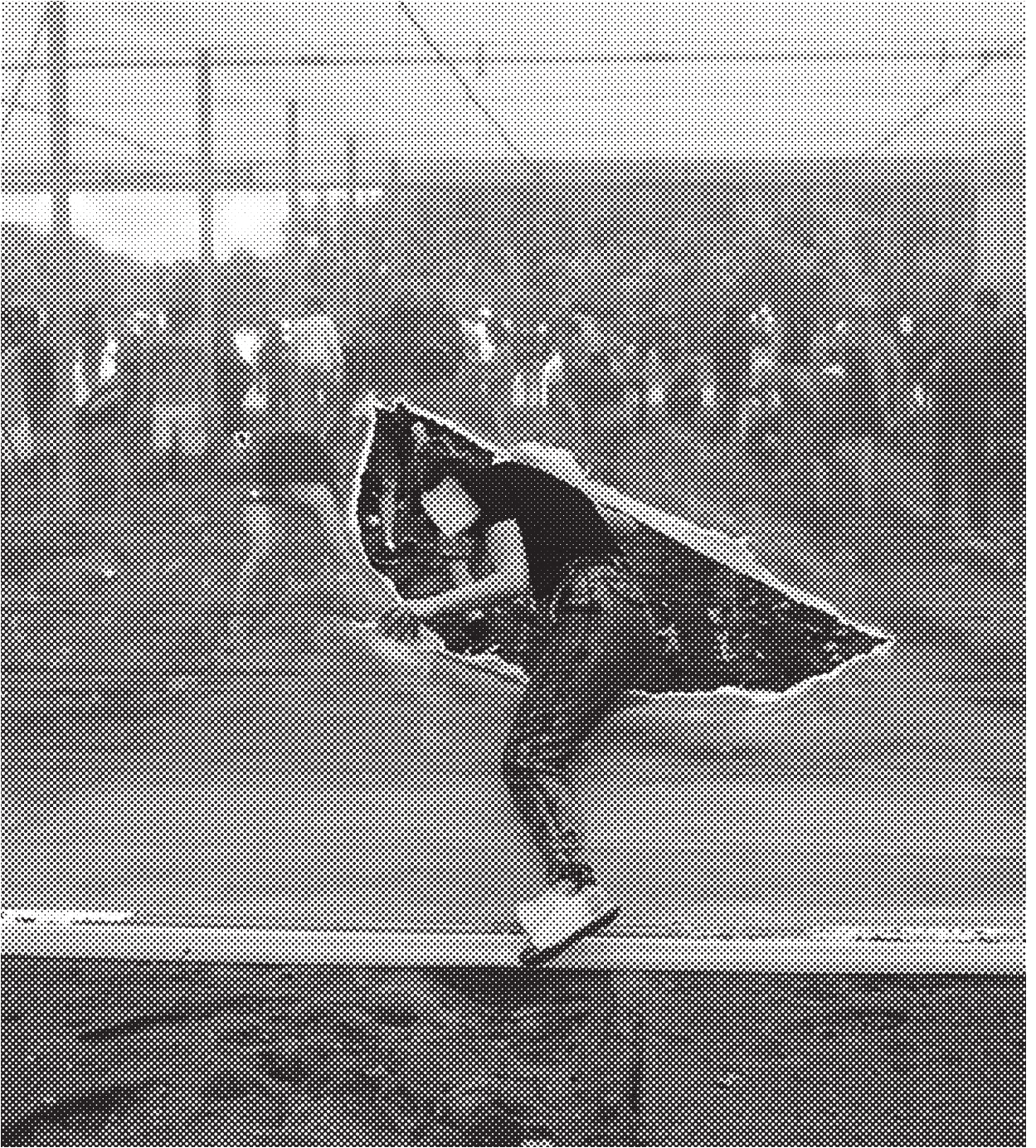
into view, then the Larzac can no longer be seen as an afterthought of the long 1960s or a waning in its energies. The Larzac and the long battle to block the building of the Narita Airport in Japan can now be seen as events that reconfigure the entire history of the second half of the twentieth century up to our own time.

I wonder what exactly *are* the connections you see between Nahel Merzouk's death and the death of Tortuguita, the Atlanta protester at the Stop Cop City occupation — other than that they both occurred unnecessarily and at the hands of the police? What if we were to begin with the differences rather than the connections, especially when we can all agree that police violence is both on the rise and highly unwanted. And especially when the situations of Merzouk and Tortuguita were so very different. The difference, as I see it, is that Tortuguita was murdered at least in large part because they made the political choice to devote themselves to trying to save the Weelaunee Forest from being clear-cut and transformed into a cop training facility. That decision demanded a physical displacement on their part to the occupation site and undoubtedly any number of other existential modifications of their daily life. This is how they came to be in a tent in the forest. Nahel Merzouk, on the other hand, was stopped and murdered while merely driving near his neighborhood in a car. For him, as for countless adolescents of color, in France and in the United States, it was life (and death) as usual. I am obviously not suggesting that one death is less disturbing

or less unjustifiable than the other. Merzouk's murder by a racist police force, as he went about his daily life, reveals once again the unchanging and putrid colonial situation of the *banlieues* surrounding French cities (whose inhabitants reacted accordingly). Tortuguita's death — the first state murder of an ecological activist in the United States — was just that, the murder of an activist.

As for going about articulating the colonial question with the ecological question, I think one good way to begin would be to return to CLR James' powerful insight, in *The Black Jacobins*, that the whole agro-industrial complex of today has its point of origin in the New World plantation system. It all starts then and there.

**IW:** The 19th and 20th century revolutionary tradition taught us to think of revolution as a “great evening,” a compressed decisive event. When such events become unimaginable, or when uprisings don't scale up this far, there's a risk of depression, despair, or even nihilism. The desire for a decisive revolutionary break transforms into a desire for a decisive collapse. You write instead that revolution as you envision it needn't be totalizing but can happen *pièce à pièce*, bit by bit. You also challenge us to stretch the temporal frame in which we understand movements; for example, in your account of the long struggle against the Nantes airport prior to the creation of the ZAD as an occupation. When we think through this frame, revolution becomes a problem we can tackle here and now once again. In short, you seem to say



Collective sabotage against agriculture industry growing fake organic crops.

that collapsism and other nihilisms rest on a misunderstanding of the nature of revolution in our era. Can you say more about this? What explains the persistence of this misunderstanding, and how do we go about correcting it?

**KR:** We've long ago forgotten the fantasy of an abolition of private property arriving by decree from a central revolutionary power. Just as we've stopped waiting for the "right moment," the conjuncture that would bring about, in one fell swoop, systemic change for everyone across the planet. A centralized plan that would liberate us from capitalism is as difficult to imagine as all the technological fixes needed to repair what capitalism has done to the lived environment. Equally implausible or hard to imagine is a state government responding decisively and positively to the demands of well-behaved "save the climate" marches in its capital city.

The vacuum left by so many disappointments can easily be filled with nihilism, personality collapse, the loss of any meaning to life. In *The Commune Form*, I trace the political memory of an archaic form that flourishes when the state withdraws, and which as your question suggests, can be understood as offering an alternative understanding of, and temporality to, revolution. Certainly, both Marx and Kropotkin saw it as such: the commune form, in their view, was both the context and content of revolution, revolution's setting and the means of bringing it about. The commune as a form is both recognizable and infinitely transmuted,

changing incessantly according to different situations and historical moments. The book is in large part an exercise in re-localizing, re-staging some examples of the form's instantiations (the Nantes Commune, Stop Cop City, for example), and working out the system of echoes that make those experiences, and the commune form itself, figurative for us today.

So, the vacuum left by disappointment can be filled by nihilism or it can be filled by action: action, as Miguel Abensour reminds us, creates its own utopian horizon. It's the capacity of struggle in the present, the capacity for collective action that creates dreams and desire — not the reverse.

And they create dreams and desires that all the privatized and state-approved pleasures, the whole repetitive world of underwhelming products available by next-day delivery, can't satisfy. What a world harnessed to the total digitalization of society offers in the way of compensation can no longer make up for such a fundamental loss in any way we might have about the world we inhabit.

It really comes down to the question of pleasure and the possibility of other worlds, as the university administrators who called in the cops instantaneously upon the first sign of a Gaza occupation on campus last spring, knew well. The French Minister of Transport, responding to the ongoing attempt to establish a ZAD at the site of a planned highway construction near Toulouse, recently made clear what was at stake for the authorities

and powers that be: “A ZAD is not a benign or happy gathering, it’s not a festival; it’s a violation of the elementary rules of private property and public space.” Now, while the second half of his statement is undoubtedly true, the threat, for the government is actually revealed in the resentment dripping from the first part of his statement: what is unacceptable is the possibility of unscheduled and other convivial pleasures or of a life not limited to values based on economy, hierarchy and prestige.

**IW:** *The Commune Form* will introduce many English-speaking readers to Les Soulèvements de la Terre [Earth Uprisings] for the first time, and you sketch out how this campaign “grew organically out of the ZAD” following its victory over the airport. But unlike the ZAD, which intervened in national politics by defending a single place, Soulèvements is mobilizing actions on a national basis to support local struggles. Could you speak to this shift in strategy and what it means for the concept of *defense*?

**KR:** When I say that SLT grew organically out of the ZAD, I’m pointing to its composition — in the Zadian sense of the term. The main tributaries that flow into SLT (autonomists from the ZAD, members of the Confédération Paysanne union, and climate activists from XR and elsewhere) are distinct groups with their own histories, who have different political codes and advocate and engage in different, often conflicting methods of action. This, however, is precisely the movement’s

greatest strength. Neither violence nor non-violence, legal methods or illegal ones are fetishized. When different elements act differently but in solidarity, with equality presumed (in the Rancièrian sense) across all the different groups and demonstrated by those deciding to act together, it becomes complicated for the state to intervene, or to circumscribe or recuperate the movement — which is not to say that it doesn’t try, as we saw so vividly last year. Heterogeneity — the “complementarity of methods” that was born at the ZAD — favors flexibility and the ability to adapt to the realities of the terrain.

For a few years now, SLT has been amplifying and connecting particular ecological and *paysan* struggles throughout France. Motivated by the conviction that the recurrent call to “save the climate” was overly abstract and ultimately disempowering in its effects, SLT went about bringing the slogan down to Earth — in fact, to particular plots of earth, i.e., to specific, organized, pragmatic territorial interventions. Appropriate tactics for these interventions are not determined at a national or movement-wide level but instead made in response to local conditions by those inhabitants directly involved in the action. This year members of SLT published a book, *Premières secousses*, which will hopefully appear soon in English, recounting and critiquing their actions thus far, in view of thinking the future orientation of the movement.

But an “orientation” is exactly what they have already provided, in the short span of their exis-

**“The movement avoids the fixity of class or party but it is nevertheless organized.”**

tence. SLT is not a party, it’s not a social class — anyone can join. The movement avoids the fixity of class or party but it is nevertheless *organized*. Its members have managed to create something like a global ambition — an orientation — out of struggles whose reason for existing derives from the specific needs of the beings that inhabit particular regions. For this reason, I see them as the commune form for our time.

At the end of *Communal Luxury* (2015), I restage a number of discussions that transpired in the Jura mountains and other sites of exile, between Communard survivors like Reclus and Lefrançais, intent on analyzing and critiquing what had just transpired in the streets of Paris. For them and other survivors, the main problem they had confronted in building the Commune was the absence of any means of “federating” with other forces and populations, whether in the countryside or among other emergent communes in Marseille, Saint-Étienne, and elsewhere at the time. The extreme isolation of the Parisian Communards, ex-

acerbated not only by the Versaillais guns but by the lies told to country-dwellers about what the “partageux” (sharers), as the Versaillais called them, were doing in the city, was, to the minds of many survivors, the greatest problem they faced. This was a problem, needless to say, that I don’t believe the Internet or some other technological fix could have solved. The perils of isolation, of a little coterie or chapel of the like-minded, is a recurrent danger of the commune form, as Kropotkin and Reclus regularly point out. In the case of the ZAD at NDDL, such a danger was overcome by the highly porous nature of its boundaries, the constant stream of people, ideas, and vegetables that poured back and forth, as well as the care taken by its inhabitants to build and communicate with the various support committees that had sprung up across the country after moments of state intervention. The particular form and mode of organizing taken by SLT builds upon this history and benefits from the previous convivial labor that wove together a solid and quite vast tissue of supportive and pleasurable social relations. Much of the skill and energy of SLT now is devoted to demonstrating, to well-intentioned people who have never tried it before, that it is possible — even desirable — to work together with people whose political codes and identities differ from their own: political education, in other words, of a highly practical, pragmatic variety.

The commune form, as I see it, must be reanimated and made entirely contemporary if it is to be effective. The medieval commune, which had freed

itself from the lords but was busy serving the interests of the wealthy merchants within its walls, practiced a fiercely chauvinistic form of self-protection, defending its own regional site against any incursions from neighboring communes. SLT has effectively reworked the form, and rendered it available to confront the new social, economic and ecological conditions we face. Where the ancient commune was designed to defend its own regional site, the contemporary mode of the commune form manifests itself transregionally, in a number of territories that find themselves “federated,” as it were, by the actions of SLT. I do think that in many ways SLT has resolved the problem of “federation” that eluded the Communards of the 19th century. It has created a common horizon of situated struggles.

**IW:** You’ve argued that “defending the conditions for a dignified life on this planet has become the new and incontrovertible horizon of meaning of all political struggle,” and you’ve linked this axiom to a new style of political organizing that you call “defensive construction.” On the one hand, the inspiring struggles waged at ZAD in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, at Lützerath, in the Susa Valley or at Standing Rock appear to confirm your hypothesis. At the same time, these territorial defense movements have paradoxically sustained themselves through *offensive* forms of action, including mobilizations in nearby cities, sabotage, demonstrations at the homes of executives...to say nothing of the valve-turnings, the arson of construction equipment, and so on... Such offen-

sive tendencies seem to have even crept to the fore with the emergence of SDT’s campaigns, which — although spoken of as “disarmaments” — nevertheless involve activists determining the time, space, and nature of the conflict from their own initiative. How do you conceive of the relation between defense and offense in these new forms of struggle? Has this relation undergone notable shifts?

**KR:** There is, in fact, no paradox at all in the use of offensive measures by movements engaged in defending agricultural land, protecting resources held in common, or fashioning a shared social space. Defense does not imply passivity or the avoidance of direct action — quite the contrary. Sabotage, excursions into the territory of the enemy, what SLT calls “disarming” (“we have the right to attack that which is killing us”), and other forms of creative destruction have long figured in the panoply of methods used to combat privatization, the pollution of land and water, and the ongoing colonization of everyday life more generally. One need only return to the magnificent demolition of the Vendome Column — built to honor Napoleon’s imperial escapades — by Parisian Communards seeking to make their city more habitable. When the Communards blew up what William Morris called “that tired piece of Napoleonic upholstery,” they were creating a space of pure potentiality in their city. African-Americans and others in the Southern U.S. who turn to demolition to rid their social space of statues of Confederate generals and slavers do much the same. Rendering com-



mon places habitable for all, “producing” a space, both physical and social, that people fashion for themselves — what Henri Lefebvre called appropriation — is a necessary precondition for becoming political subjects.

Monuments, as Anne Boyer points out in *Garments Against Women*, are not interesting in and of themselves. They are interesting as part of an assemblage; they arrange space. They are interesting in the way in which they actively diminish all other aspects of the surrounding landscape. “Each highly perceptible thing,” she writes, “makes something else almost imperceptible.” Black southerners are lessened, literally *belittled*, when their everyday trajectories take them by the monuments to the Confederacy erected throughout the South.

The problem, as I see it, lies with monumentalizing as such, and relates to my own efforts in my writing to move certain icons or monuments dominating the stage in order that other questions and figures become visible in the history of the left — the better to “liberate” those figures and defend them. A certain amount of demolition is needed to rid the terrain of *idées reçues* that have congealed around past revolutionary events — like the idea that May ’68 was benign for the state, for example, or that the Paris Commune was jump-started out of a spasm of anti-Prussian republicanism. The political aim of reactionary and revisionist historical narratives is identical to that of the statues of slavers: to suppress the po-

tentials which still await, ready to be reawakened, in older moments. Demolition, literal or figurative, is a good first step.

The real opposition then, as I argue in *The Commune Form*, is not between defense and offense but rather between the act of defending per se and the other political act we are so frequently called upon to perform — that of resisting. I am very interested in the kind of solidarity we will need to begin to build a post-productionist world, and what struck me the most about Notre-Dame-des-Landes was the creation I experienced there of a form of solidarity that wove together extremely diverse groups and individuals. Defending — as a set of activities, processes, and social relations — seemed to me to generate a much stronger — that is, flexible and effective — solidarity than did movements or postures based on “resistance.” In defending, we set the agenda. We set the agenda by determining what we value, using criteria that may have little or nothing to do with existing measurements of value dictated by the market or the state. We begin with something we cherish and want to flourish. Resistance, on the other hand, lets the state determine the agenda. The game is already up, and the other side holds the cards.

### **Notes**

*To Those Who Marched at Sainte-Soline*

1. National Federation of Agricultural Holders' Union.
2. Another agricultural union that split with FNSEA in 1991.

## Additional Information

**[lessoulevementsdelaterre.org](http://lessoulevementsdelaterre.org)**

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**[illwill.com](http://illwill.com)**

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# Les Soulèvements de la Terre

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