

# The Long 1960s and 'The Wind From The West'

Kristin Ross

**Abstract:** Contemporary land-based struggles such as the zad at Notre-Dame-des-Landes and the NoTAV movement in Italy make prolonged battles such as the Larzac in France and Sanrizuka in Japan emerge as the defining conflicts of the worldwide long 1960s. Nantes plutôt que Nanterre.

**Keywords:** defense, territory, composition, dual power, commune, Commune de Nantes

What continues to give what we call “the sixties” their power is the way that any attempt to narrate those years, to commemorate them, curate them, or even allude to them in passing, functions, almost invariably, as a glaring indicator of *what is being defended now*. Last October, because of a book I wrote almost twenty years ago concerning the construction of the official memory of the French 60s, I was invited by the Macron government to come to the Elysée Palace to discuss President Macron’s intention to “celebrate,” throughout the entire upcoming year, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of May ‘68. What, precisely, I wrote back, did the President intend to celebrate? If the answer I received-- “the end of illusions, the modernization of France, the closing down of utopias”—was not a surprise, the angry breach of protocol on the part of Macron’s Counsellor when I declined the invitation, was. Apparently a summons to the Palace was to be thought of as a command performance.

Later I learned that a couple of other historians in France had received a similar invitation and that they, like me, had chosen to decline. Left with only his fervent supporter, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, in tow to function as the Master of Ceremonies of any celebration, President Macron chose wisely to abandon the idea and devote his commemorative energies to the centennial anniversary of the end of World War I and other more neutral topics.

Commemorations are killers. But they are a preeminently French exercise. President Sarkozy, who presided over the fortieth anniversary of May, had announced his intention to liquidate all existing memories of the upheavals as part of his presidential campaign. This, in the end, was an attitude on the part of the state to be preferred to Macron’s wish to absorb and celebrate, since it gave a bit of vim to the deadly ritual of the commemoration ten years ago. In Paris this year May ‘68 was everywhere: the date and accompanying images screaming out from kiosks, on posters announcing museum exhibits and competing colloquia, film series, memoirs, and special issues of everything from mainstream magazines to scholarly journals. Yet the commemoration framing and fueling the proliferation of references seemed to drain those references of any compelling interest.

There was one exception. Only once did some aspect of the '68 years break through the commemorative fog to enter directly, and with a high measure of political necessity, into the figurability of the present moment. This occurred early in the year when people found their attentions drawn to the sudden reinvoation in the media of the ten year struggle that began in 1971 in southern France—the battle by farmers in central France known as the Larzac. Suddenly, people old enough were dusting off their memories of summer evenings of solidarity spent on the Larzac Plateau, and young journalists were scurrying to bone up on the intricacies of sheep-farming. The Larzac was a ten-year battle that began when 103 sheep-farming families attempted to block the state expropriation of their land to serve as an army training ground. Over the course of the decade, hundreds of thousands of French people and others made their way to the Larzac Plateau to show their support for the farmers' ultimately victorious battle. This was the first time that such a large number of French people had displaced themselves and traveled such a long distance for political reasons.

The sudden re-awakening of interest in the Larzac struggle had everything to do with the victory in January of this year of what was the longest lasting ongoing battle in post-war France: the occupation of a small corner of the countryside in western France outside of Nantes whose purpose was to block the construction of an international airport. What had begun around 1968 when the site was chosen for a new airport with a few farmers in the village of Notre-Dame-des-Landes refusing to sell their land, had become in the last ten years a full-fledged occupation known as the zad: a motley coalition of farmers, elected officials, townspeople, naturalists and occupiers who had succeeded up until then in blocking progress on any construction. Like the sheep-farmers in the Larzac forty years ago, the zad attracted tens of thousands of supporters over the years to the site to help build their communal buildings and habitations, to share in collective farming and banquets, and to defend the wildlife and wetlands as well as the alternative and semi-autonomous, secessionary way of life that had developed there. And In January 2018 the zad won. President Macron announced a definitive end to the airport project. The state had, in effect, collapsed in the face of tenacious opposition. That fact alone caused the all-too-familiar feelings of fatality and powerlessness that so strongly permeate the recent political climate to be gloriously lifted. In the euphoric months following his announcement, the Larzac re-emerged to be parsed and examined as a possible precedent, a model of sorts, a way that the occupiers and farmers of the zad might continue to farm collectively in the manner they had become accustomed to, with the land remaining under their collective control. Suddenly the Larzac was understood as not just an afterthought or a waning moment of the long 1960s, but as a site whose deepest aspirations could only be fulfilled in the present, in the form of

the communist experiments at the zad. (The zad brought the Larzac back to peoples' minds, and not, for example, another significant struggle from the 1970s at the Lip factory in Besançon, in a way that made it clear that Lip now represented the closing down of a particular political strategy: factory occupation. While the Larzac—ironically, given the widespread perception of farmers as backward-looking, clinging desperately to the old—was from the future.) Since there was to be no airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes,, and the farmland and the wetlands had been preserved, why couldn't the Larzac serve as a precedent?

That hope was to prove very short-lived for reasons I will go into at the end of this essay. But what the new visibility of the Larzac early this year in turn made possible was a new perception of the decade of highly exemplary, even Homeric battles that began in 1966 when peasants and farmers outside of Tokyo, nimbly supported by the far-left members of the National Student Union, the Zengakuren, fought the state expropriation of their farmland to be used for the building of the Narita airport. It became possible to see that battle, together with the Larzac, for what they truly were: the most defining combats of the worldwide 1960s.

The zad and other recent land-based, territorial struggles, in other words, help us to see the Larzac and Sanrizuka (Narita) struggles as the battles of the second half of the twentieth century that reconfigure the lines of conflict of an era. Another way of saying this is that the 1960s, whatever else they were, are another name for the moment when people throughout the world began to realize that the tension between the logic of development and that of the ecological bases of life had become the primary contradiction of their lives. Henceforth, it seems, any effort to change social inequality would have to be conjugated with another imperative—that of conserving the living. What these movements of the long 1960s initiated and what the zad confirms is that defending the conditions for life on the planet had become the new and incontrovertible horizon of meaning of all political struggle. And with it came a new way of organizing, founded on the notion of territory as a praxis produced by space-based relations. '68 was a movement that began in most places in the cities but whose intelligence and future tended toward the earth/ Earth.

This is perhaps a major shift in the way we consider the 1960s, but I have experienced once before how a shift in the political sensibility of today can give rise to a new vision of the past. This was at the moment when the 1995 labor strikes in France, followed by anti-globalization protests in Seattle and Genoa, awakened new manifestations of political expression in France and elsewhere and new forms of a vigorous anti-capitalism after the long dormancy of the 1980s. It was this revitalized political momentum (and NOT any obligatory commemoration) that led

me to write my history of May's afterlives.<sup>1</sup>The workers' movements had dislodged a sentiment of oblivion, if not triviality, that had settled over the '68 years, and I felt the need to try to show the way the events, what had happened concretely to a staggeringly varied array of ordinary people throughout France, had not only receded from view, but had in fact been actively "disappeared" behind walls of grand abstractions, fusty clichés and unanchored invocations. The re-emergence of the labor movement in the 1990s jarred the 1960s loose from all the images and phrases put into place in France and elsewhere by a confluence of forces—the media, the institution of the commemoration, and the ex-gauchistes converted to the imperatives of the market. Today, when Bernard Henri-Levy, André Glucksmann, Bernard Kouchner and Alain Finkelkraut no longer dominate the airways with the ubiquity they still commanded even a mere ten years ago, it is difficult to remember the monopoly such self-appointed and media-anointed spokesmen held as lone interpreters of the movement. These men, and a few others (we have their equivalents in the States), all of whom could be relied upon to re-enact at the drop of a hat the renunciation of the errors of their youth, were those I called in my book the official memory functionaries or custodians. It was they who took on the pleasurable task of affirming, symbolizing and incarnating an essentially generational movement the better to criticize its goals and foundations. Using the movement as a target of opportunity, they in effect made themselves the guardians of the temple they were in the midst of destroying. By the twentieth anniversary of the May events—the peak of their power—they had successfully presided over a three-part effacement of the memory of the movement: the effacement of history by sociology, politics by ethics, and ideology by culture. The voice of the counter-revolution was taken in France to a remarkably homogenous degree to be the voice of the revolution.

But the labor strikes of the winter of 1995 not only succeeded in forcing a government climbdown over the issue of changes to the pensions of public sector workers, they also helped wrested control of the memory of '68 from the official spokespeople and reminded people what all the combined forces of oblivion, including what we can now see as a kind of Americanization of the memory of French May, had helped them to forget: that May '68 was the largest mass movement in modern French history, the most important strike in the history of the French labor movement, and the only "general" insurrection western, overdeveloped countries had experienced since World War II.

Rereading my book about May's afterlives, I was surprised to see that the seeds of the new argument I sketched out at the beginning of this essay was already there in its pages. In what was for me a very uncharacteristic venturing into the realm of prophecy, I found that I had

.....  
1 See Ross, 2002

suggested back then that there would come a day when an auto-didact farmer like Bernard Lambert would emerge as a far more powerful figure of '68 politics in France than Daniel Cohn-Bendit. And that what occurred offstage in Nantes that spring would someday be seen to be more significant, more powerful than what occurred center-stage in Paris. Nantes plutôt que Nanterres. The wind from the west. "The Wind from the West" was the name of a farmer's journal co-edited by Lambert published in 1967 and '68. It's not often that what emanates from the west can command our attention in a positive way, but I'll try in what follows to show why I think that the kinds of solidarities that developed in the Loire-Atlantique in western France and in analogous land-based struggles throughout the world are at least as interesting to consider, and possibly more, as any of the solidarities that come to mind when we talk, say, about "the global south." To return to my prophecy, I think that day has come, Cohn-Bendit's day is indeed over, and Lambert, with his call to "decolonize the provinces," his day has come, and it is only now, in the wake of the zad, that we can begin to measure the significance of that summer day in 1973 when Lambert, high atop the Larzac Plateau, addressing the tens of thousands of people who had come from all over France to support sheep farmers in their battle with the Army, proclaimed that "jamais plus les paysans ne seraient des Versaillais [never again will country people be on the side of the Versaillais]."

Lambert's reference to the Paris Commune is suggestive and appropriate, for the history I wish to trace in western France is in part nothing more than the continuing re-emergence of vernacular commune forms. Consider the events of May-June 1968 proper in Nantes, widely remembered under the name of the "Commune de Nantes." There the central strike committee was made up of a coordinated alliance between three distinct social groups—farmers, students and workers. It is not accidental that such a three-part alliance should occur only in Nantes and nowhere else in France. For the Loire-Atlantique region can lay claim to being the birthplace of a new agrarian left that had its origins in the Paysans/Travailleurs movement of the 1960s and 70s and its creation of new disruptive practices outside the confines of existing, nationally led unions. As Lambert put it in an interview, "We had lost the habit of asking our spiritual fathers in Paris how we were supposed to think about the actions we were taking."<sup>2</sup>This group, led by Lambert, was founded in response to the very direct and directed influx of industrial and finance capital into French agriculture after 1965, and it was they who were responsible for organizing the march of some 100,000 people, mostly farmers, in villages throughout Brittany and the Loire-Atlantique on May 8, 1968, behind the slogan "The West Wants to Live."

.....  
2 Bernard Lambert, cited in Lambert, Bourquelot and Mathieu, 1989, p. 6. Here and elsewhere translations from the French are mine.





Willemont, 2008

In this sense Lambert's 1970 text, *Les Paysans dans la lutte des classes*, which was the first to place farmers and urban workers in the same structural situation vis-à-vis capitalist modernity, and this amidst a general call for the establishment of "a real regional power," bears comparison with canonical revolutionary texts like Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre*, or de Beauvoir's *La deuxième sexe*, in its conjuring up of a genuinely new political subjectivity. A new subjectivization emerges in the pages of Lambert's book to accompany that of woman or the colonized in the form of the "paysan,"—or defender of the earth.

What I'd like to do now is return to the four movements and moments I've briefly evoked: the zad in Notre-Dame-des-Landes and its struggle that continues today, even after the airport victory; the two protracted land wars of the late 60s and early 70s—the Larzac and Sanrizuka in Japan--and the Commune de Nantes in May and June 1968, and consider them each, as well as the constellation they form, in the light of three practices they share, above and beyond their use of occupation as a form of direct action. The first such practice is the act of defending per se, embodied in the figure of the "paysan" whose name, etymologically, means "someone who defends a territory" and prominent in a word that has only just entered the French dictionary two years ago, namely zad, or "zone à défendre." Japanese farmers in Sanrizuka, taking a tip from North Vietnamese peasants in their war with the United States, went so far as to bury themselves in underground tunnels and trenches to prevent the entry of large-scale construction machinery into the zone. At a moment when the state-led modernization effort had made accelerated industrialization the sole national value in Japan, farmers countered with their conviction that the airport would destroy values

essential to life itself. In Notre-Dame-des-Landes, farmers who refused to sell their land, many of whom had been active in the Paysans-Travailleurs movement and who were among those who drove their tractors into the city center in May 1968, were joined by nearby townspeople and a new group after 2008: squatters and soon-to-be occupiers. With the arrival of the first squatters, the ZAD (zone d'aménagement différé) became a zad (zone à défendre)—the acronym had been given a new combative meaning by the opponents to the project, the administrative perimeter of the zone now designated a set of porous battle lines, and the act of defending had replaced the action we are much more frequently called upon to do these days—namely, resist. Why does the history of the zad show us that defending is more generative of solidarity than resisting? *Resistance* means that the battle, if there ever was one, has already been lost and we can only try helplessly to resist the overwhelming power the other side now wields. *Defending*, on the other hand, means that there is already something on our side that we possess, that we value, that we cherish, and that is thereby worth fighting for. African-Americans in Oakland and Chicago in the 1960s knew this well when the Black Panther Party of Self-Defense designated black neighborhoods and blackness itself as of value and worthy of defending. What makes a designation of this kind interesting and powerful is that it enacts a kind of transvaluation of values: something is being given value according to a measurement that is different from market-value or the state's list of imperatives, or existing social hierarchies. In the case of the Larzac, a spokesman for then Minister of Defense, Michel Debré, characterized the zone chosen for army camp expansion as essentially worthless, a desolate limestone plateau, populated, in his words, by "a few peasants, not many, who vaguely raise a few sheep, and who are still more or less living in the Middle Ages."<sup>3</sup> As for the land designated for the airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, it was regularly described in initial state documents as "almost a desert." These descriptions could only have been the echo of the familiar colonial trope indicating a perceived scarcity of population preceding invasion, since the area chosen in the latter instance was in fact wetlands, --an environmental category unrecognized as having any value at all in the 1970s.

So the gesture of defense begins frequently by proclaiming value, even and especially a kind of excessive value, where it hadn't been thought to exist before, in a manner I've discussed elsewhere that the Parisian Communards called "communal luxury."<sup>4</sup> In 1871 Eugène Pottier and the Artists' Federation under the Commune overturned the hierarchy at the core of the artistic world, the hierarchy that granted enormous

3 cited in Stéphane Le Foll, July 18, 2013.

4 See Ross, 2015, pp. 39-66.

privilege, status, and financial advantage to fine artists (painters and sculptors)—a privilege, status and financial security that decorative artists, theater performers, and skilled artisans simply had no way of sharing under the Second Empire. Why should the labor of artisans not have the same value as the work of fine artists? The Federation, which gathered together “all the artistic intelligences, in complete independence from the State,” produced a Manifesto that ends with this phrase: “We will work cooperatively towards our regeneration, the birth of communal luxury, future splendors and the Universal Republic.” What Pottier and the other artisans meant by “communal luxury” was something like the creation of “public beauty”: the enhancement of the lived environment in villages and towns, the right of every person to live and work in a pleasing environment. This may seem like a small, perhaps even a “decorative,” demand, made by a handful of mere “decorative” artists. But what they had in mind actually entails not only a complete reconfiguration of our relation to art, but to labor, social relations, nature and the lived environment as well. It means a full mobilization of the two watchwords of the Commune, namely decentralization and participation. It means art and beauty deprivatized, fully integrated into everyday life, and not hidden away in private salons or centralized into obscene nationalistic monumentality.

This was, in other words, a full dismantling under the Commune of socially determined and ancient categories of artistic practices that began by proclaiming the value of artisanal work and decorative art. Shoemaker Napoleon Gaillard, or rather *artiste-chaussurier* Gaillard, as he insisted on calling himself, reinvents himself as barricade strategist and architect, constructing both a knowledge and an art of street defense, just as he performed in his trade a knowledge and an art of the shoe. Anti-communards called Gaillard a “vain shoemaker,” spoke contemptuously of him as the “père des barricades,” and nicknamed the enormous barricade he had constructed on the Place de la Concorde “the Chateau Gaillard.” They complained that he considered his barricades “works of both art and luxury.” As indeed he did, arranging to have himself photographed in front of his creations—in effect, signing them. Communal luxury as practiced during the Commune (or on the zad) is thus a way of constituting an everyday aesthetics of process, the act of self-emancipation made visible.



Communal hangar and atelier built at the zad. Photo K. Ross

And from here we can now begin to track the development of something like the end of luxury founded on class difference and examine how such an idea opens out onto perspectives of social wealth that are entirely new, perspectives best amplified by the work of William Morris. What seems initially like a decorative demand on the part of decorative artists is in fact the call for nothing short of the total reinvention of what counts as wealth, what a society values. It’s a call for the reinvention of wealth beyond exchange-value.

Today, as we witness states redistributing wealth to the rich in the name of austerity, it is interesting to consider how much a phrase like “communal luxury” defies the logic underlying austerity discourse. By designating something that had no value before in the existing hierarchy of value to be of value and worth defending one is not calling for equivalence or justice within an existing system like the market (as in an austerity regime or in the demand for fairer distribution). One is not calling for one’s fair share in the existing division of the pie. Communal luxury means that everyone has a right not just to his or her share, but to his or her share *of the best*. The designation calls into question the very ways in which prosperity is measured, what it is that a society recognizes and appreciates, what it considers wealth.

And what it is that is being defended, of course, changes over time. To return to the Larzac, Sanrizuka, and the zad at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, these are what the Maoists used to call “protracted wars”—struggles that keep changing while enduring and whose strikingly long duration has everything to do with the non-negotiability of the issue. An airport is either built or it is not. Farmland is either farmland or it has become something else: housing developments, say, or an army

training ground. But where once what was being defended might have been an unpolluted environment or farmland or even a way of life, what is defended as the struggle deepens comes to include all the new social links, solidarities, affective ties, and new physical relations to the territory and other lived entanglements that the struggle produced.

And as new, creative ways are found to inhabit the struggle, it becomes apparent that the state and capitalism do not have to completely collapse in order to begin living relatively free lives. Alternative, collective and practical ways of going about satisfying basic needs, both material and social—housing, food, education, health care—can be created in a relative independence from the state, a kind of lived and livable secession that is frequently called “dual power”—the second of the practices or strategies I wish to discuss. Lenin used the phrase to describe the practical help offered on a daily basis by the network of soviets and workers’ councils in 1917 that coexisted with, and formed a kind of alternative to, the provisional government. He was describing what was in fact a transitional political conflict that had to be resolved, an unstable and temporary situation where workers councils competed with the State for power. But the term has also come to refer to working alongside state structures, becoming less and less reliant upon them, in an attempt to render state structures redundant. And this, of course, requires the active cultivation of new capacities and collective talents to adapt to new circumstances. In the U.S. 1960s, with their school breakfasts and other community grass-roots organizations, the Black Panthers, to all extents and purposes, turned their communities into dual power communes.<sup>5</sup> They knew that by operating at the level of everyday life and not ideology, by substantially transforming everyday life, in effect re-owning it by and through political struggle and becoming fully accountable for it, they were making revolution on a scale people could recognize. In France, the events of May and June, 1968 in Nantes, even if ephemerally, offer the best illustration of the paths opened by such a dual power strategy. After the Sud-Aviation workers outside of Nantes occupied their factory, providing the spark that ignited the general insurrectional strike across the country, links that had been established earlier by the Paysans/Travailleurs movement allowed farmers to feed strikers at cost or sometimes for free. A popular government in the form of a central strike committee in the town hall was set up in Nantes for several days at the end of May and the beginning of June. At the same time, in the neighborhoods, using networks already in place, an organization of collective food distribution from nearby farms sprang up to deal with the most pressing problems of day to day life.

5 See former Black Panther party member Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin’s 1993 text, ‘Anarchism and the Black Revolution.’ <https://libcom.org/library/anarchism-black-revolution-lorenzo-ervin>.

Everything began at the end of the second week of the strike in a Nantes neighborhood that was 95% working-class, les Batignolles, where the wives of the strikers met together in neighborhood associations (...) and decided to organize food distribution themselves. Walking through the neighborhood with a loudspeaker, they summoned people to an informational meeting. (. . .) After the meeting, a delegation of one hundred women went to the nearest factory to contact the strike committees. After that a food and provisions committee was created by uniting the three workers’ neighborhood associations. The committee made direct contact with the famers’ unions in the closest village: La Chapelle sur Erdre. A meeting made up of fifteen farmers from the union and a delegation of workers and students decided to form a permanent alliance to organize a distribution network with no intermediaries.<sup>6</sup>

These initiatives were in turn linked to the central strike committee which, operating from the town hall and calling itself “The Central Strike Committee for Managing Daily Life” could well appear as a kind of parallel administration. Forty years later the prefect of Nantes himself attested to the accuracy of a term like “the Nantes Commune” to describe the situation that had developed in the region.<sup>7</sup> “If, everywhere in France, the interruption in the functioning of large-scale public services tended to paralyze the action of the legal authorities, it seems to be the case that only in the Loire-Atlantique region did forms of parallel administrations appear, animated by the strikers.”<sup>8</sup> And as Yannick Le Guin, author of *La Commune de Nantes*, points out, “The influence of these parallel circuits was so considerable that the population wanted to prolong the experiment.”<sup>9</sup> This was particularly the case in the poorer areas of the city, where workers’ families were most effected by the strike and where a farmers’ milk cooperative distributed 500 liters of milk a day for free after May 26<sup>th</sup>. That the population should want the experiment to endure should come as no surprise. When questions of existence and subsistence are no longer being posed at the individual level, who wouldn’t want such a state of affairs to continue?

The power source in “dual power” is of the same type that abounded during the Paris Commune of 1871—power that comes not from a law enacted by parliament, but from the direct initiative of the people from below, working in their local areas. But the Communards in 1871 were separated by vast armies and what Marx called “a Chinese wall of

6 Extract from the journal “Les Cahiers de Mai,” special Nantes edition, June 1968.

7 Jean-Emile Vié, cited in *Ouest-France*, May 9, 2008.

8 Jean-Emile Vié, cited in Guilbaud, p. 97.

9 Yannick Le Guin, 1969, p.133.



lies” from any comrades they may have had in provincial cities or in the countryside. When Peter Kropotkin re-wrote the experience of the Paris Commune in *The Conquest of Bread*, he imagined the whole Ile-de-France and the surrounding *départements* given over to vast vegetable gardens to feed the revolutionary city. Proximity to and involvement with the means of subsistence is essential not only to establishing a lived intimacy with the territory, it is also essential to a movement’s duration. The active participation of a sector of Nantes farmers in May 1968, bringing food to the occupied factories and campuses, created the perspective, if not the reality, of a fight with duration. The farmer/student/worker coalition in Nantes enacted however briefly a kind of dual power that projected Nantes ’68 well beyond a riot or a general strike into well-nigh Kropotkinian dimensions, filling in the outlines of what life might look like if the infrastructure of a city and its surroundings were managed autonomously by an insurrectional commune.

The Nantes coalition is also an exemplary if short-lived manifestation of the process that the authorial collective at the zad, the Mauvaise Troupe, call in their book “composition,” – and this is the third aspect of these movements I want to highlight. “Composition” is a continuation of sorts of the relational subjectivity often said to be at the heart of 60s politics. Henri Lefebvre, for example, used to say that May ’68 happened because Nanterre students were forced to walk through Algerian *bidonvilles* to get to their classes. The lived proximity of those two highly different worlds—functionalist campus and immigrant slums--and the trajectories that brought students to organize in the *bidonvilles* and Algerian workers to worksites on campus, these precarious and ephemeral meetings, beset with all the incertitude, desire, empathy, ignorance and deception that mark such encounters, are at the heart of the political subjectivity that emerged in ’68. They are the laboratory of a new political consciousness.

A relational subjectivity of that sort clearly developed in the Chiba prefecture outside Tokyo, as a coalition came into being under skies criss-crossed by American domination, in the form of the encounter between farmers, who began by hunkering down to defend their way of life but learned in the process the true violence of which the state was capable, and radical urban students and workers who had never before given a thought to where and how the food they ate was produced. In the Loire-Atlantique region in the late 1960s, the central imperative motivating farmers in the Paysans/Travailleurs movement was the desire to break out of corporatism and achieve dialogue with other social groups. This was the moment when farmers in France began, perhaps for the first time, to consider the problems of agriculture and the countryside in global political, rather than merely sociological, terms. They wanted to self-affirm as a social group, but in a non-corporatist manner, to respond to problems that the whole country, and not just farmers, confronted:

C  
R  
I  
S  
I  
S  
&  
C  
R  
I  
T  
I  
Q  
U  
E  
/

Volume 5 /  
Issue 2

the problem of the use of space, of alliances with workers, of weapons production, of the fate of the land—land ownership and land usage-- in general. The movement organized long marches (including a march to the Larzac), in reaction against the national Paris-based Farmers Union, the FNSEA, that had demanded that their march on Paris be stopped at Orleans, so that they didn’t “stir up any shit” in the capital. And, equally importantly, so that they didn’t come into contact with the “urban riff-raff”—i.e. revolutionaries.<sup>10</sup>

The force of the Larzac movement lay in the diversity of people and disparate ideologies it brought together: anti-military activists and pacifists (conscientious objectors), regional Occitan separatists, supporters of non-violence, revolutionaries aiming to overthrow the bourgeois state, anti-capitalists, anarchists and other *gauchistes*, as well as ecologists. But where the Larzac movement indeed gathered together a diversity of social groups and political tendencies under its umbrella, at no time was the fundamental leadership of the farmer families who had spearheaded the movement ever in question. Sympathizers who supported the farmers politically and financially, usually from afar but sporadically in vast demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people who had voyaged to the plateau, were supporting the visceral attachment of the farmers to the same land and the same métier. At the zad, with its improbable assortment of different components made up of old or historic farmers, young farmers from the area, petty-bourgeois shopkeepers in nearby villages, elected officials, occupiers, and naturalists, however, no such group was or is in a leadership position. This has created a very different kind of movement, one that in its desire to hold together the diverse but equal components that make it up, requires, as one zad dweller put it, “more tact than tactics.”<sup>11</sup>

Composition, in that sense, was born with the zad. The kind of social base it creates is distinct: essentially a working alliance, involving mutual displacements and disidentifications, that is also the sharing of a physical territory, a living space. Composition is the mark of a massive investment in organizing life in common without the exclusions in the name of ideas, identities or ideologies so frequently encountered in radical milieux. If the zad is perhaps the best example of an open conflict that has managed to endure, to build for itself duration in the midst of struggle, then it has everything to do with this process.

Composition is really nothing more than the fruits of an unexpected meeting between separate worlds, and the promise contained in the becoming-Commune of that meeting. It is thus a space or process where even antagonisms create an attachment. “Composition” could be said to

.....  
<sup>10</sup> Lambert 1989, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Mauvaise Troupe Collective, 2018, p. xxii. For an extended discussion of how “composition” worked at the zad, see pp. 87-115.

C  
R  
I  
S  
I  
S  
&  
C  
R  
I  
T  
I  
Q  
U  
E  
/

Volume 5 /  
Issue 2

be the way that autonomous forces unite and associate with each other, sometimes complementing each other, sometimes contradicting each other, but always, in the end, dependent on each other. When it works, these different elements strive to recognize each other and work together to pursue common desires that surpass each of them, rather than trying to resolve their differences. Rather than trying, that is, to convince each other or convert the other to the superiority of one's ways, whether this be sabotage, filing legal briefs, cataloguing endangered species, or frontal violence with the police. This is especially important in a movement whose enemies try ceaselessly to divide and conquer by setting one group up against another. The strength of the movement derives precisely from its diverse makeup, which in the case of the zad has allowed it to express itself through various kinds of actions, from highway blockages using tractors to legal maneuvering to violent demonstrations.

Composition creates and maintains *solidarity in diversity*, solidarity among people of disparate ideologies, identities and beliefs whose coming together and staying together adds up to no final orthodoxy, just a continuing internal eclecticism.<sup>12</sup> That eclecticism and the disagreements it produces can be exhausting, often aggravating. So why make the effort? Because the power of the movement resides in a certain excess—the excess of creating something that is more than the sum of ourselves—something that only the composition between our differences makes possible.

The goal is not to make the whole territory over into one's image. Elisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin knew this well when they wrote of the dangers of self-enclosed, intentional communities, withdrawn from the world and made up only of the faithful. "In our plan for existence and struggle," wrote Reclus, "it isn't a little chapel of like-minded companions that interests us—it's the world in its entirety."<sup>13</sup> The goal, as the naturalists might say, is to conserve diversity. To conclude by returning to our earlier discussion, it is the diversity of the territory that is now what is being defended.

## AFTERWORD

Within months of abandoning the airport project at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the Macron government, whose agenda this spring was nothing short of smashing all political opposition of any kind, whether it be from the universities, the postal service, the SNCF or the zad, ordered, at the cost of 400,000 euros a day, a military-style invasion of 3000 police

.....  
<sup>12</sup> At the end of 2017, the Chilean Supreme Court brought a victorious end to another ten-year battle, declaring illegal the permit granted by the government to build an immense shopping mall over the entire historic port neighborhood of Valparaiso. In this instance the composition involved dock workers, artists, urbanists, neighborhood associations, and students.

<sup>13</sup> Reclus, cited in Ross 2015, p. 119.

and soldiers in tanks into the zad, destroying numerous dwelling-places and communal buildings.<sup>14</sup> Government intransigence, combined with the military occupation of the zone that has still not completely ended to this day, created an insurmountable division among the occupiers between those willing to negotiate with the government to find a way to stay and continue in some form the collective experiments of the zad, and those who brooked no dialogue whatsoever with the state. These latter were forcefully expelled by the government from the zone. For those occupiers who remain, a different phase of the struggle has unfolded, as they try to secure the different habitations and practices they developed over the years. Among these practices is one whose roots in the Commune de Nantes of 1968 could not be more explicit. La Cagette des Terres is a network operating from the zad since 2017 to "feed the struggles" of the Nantes region quite literally, using vegetables, bread and cheese produced collectively from the zad. Whether these movements be more punctual, like the strike by postal workers in the city, or more long-term, like the occupation by students of buildings at the University of Nantes they demanded to be turned into refugee housing, or the various migrant squats or workers' cantines in the area, the network has already made its presence and solidarity known. Besides the immediate goal of simply helping movements to endure at the day-to-day subsistence level, the goal of La Cagette des terres is to strengthen the links between the city and the countryside, to reinforce the circulation *between* struggles more generally, and, beyond that, to experiment with forms of food distribution other than those dictated by capitalist economy.<sup>15</sup>

.....  
<sup>14</sup> As I write, a similar military-invasion of the *zone à défendre* in the Hambach Forest has begun in western Germany, where occupiers dwelling in sixty treehouses for the last six years had successfully protected what remains of a 12,000 year-old forest from becoming an open-pit soft coal mine.

<sup>15</sup> Those interested in joining the network as a farmer, deliverer, or subscriber, see LA CAGETTE DES TERRES – Réseau de ravitaillement des luttes du Pays nantais, <https://lacagettedesterres.wordpress.com/>



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ervin, Lorenzo Kom'boa, 1993, 'Anarchism and the Black Revolution,' <https://libcom.org/library/anarchism-black-revolution-lorenzo-ervin>.
- Guilbaud, Sarah, 2004, *MAI 68 Nantes*, Paris: Coiffard Editions.
- Lambert, Bernard, 1970, *Les Paysans dans la lutte des classes*, Paris: Seuil.
- -- and Françoise Bourquelot and Nicole Mathieu, 1989, 'Paroles de Bernard Lambert: un paysan révolutionnaire,' in *Strates* 4.
- Le Foll, Stéphane, July 18, 2013, 'Les Paysans cultiveront le Larzac jusqu'en 2083,' in *Le Monde*.
- Le Guin, Yannick, 1969, *La Commune de Nantes*, Paris: Maspero.
- Les Cahiers de Mai*, edition special Nantes, June 1968.
- Mauvaise Troupe Collective, 2018, *The Zad and NoTav: Territorial Struggles and the Making of a New Political Intelligence*, ed., trans. And with a critical preface by Kristin Ross, London: Verso.
- Ross, Kristin 2002, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- -- 2015, *Communal Luxury*, London: Verso.
- Willemont, Jacques, 2008, *L'Autre Mai* (film).

C  
R  
I  
S  
I  
S  
&  
C  
R  
I  
T  
I  
Q  
U  
E

/

Volume 5 /  
Issue 2