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How the non-human turn challenges the social sciences

The case of environmental struggles at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, France

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The chapter reviews recent theoretical debates in the so-called ‘ontological turn.’ The new approach is important but it also runs the risk of missing important dimensions in the logic of political mobilisation, which both social movement studies and a pragmatically-inspired political sociology are better equipped to account for. The case study analyses the environmental struggles at Notre-Dame-des-Landes in France. Squatting started in 2014, and more intense debates took place after the eviction carried out in 2018.

Mid-twentieth-century territorialology first offered a specific vision of the possible collaboration between the social and the natural sciences; today, in current times of climate crisis, it offers new topics for research and knowledge, spurring innovative work (Brighenti and Kärrholm 2020). Recent literature has explored the interweavings of different forms of territorial life, understood not only in terms of life environments, but as ‘acting’ environments. Territorialology thus joins the trajectory of other sciences, all of which appear transformed in the age of Anthropocene and Capitalocene. In similar research approaches, non-humans appear to be key players, capable of challenging the separation between nature and culture. ‘Nature defending itself,’ animals, even shamanism and spirituality, are all part, not only of life environments, but of a theoretical space that has expanded its domain of enquiry beyond social and normative criticism. The so-called environmental humanities question anthropocentrism and criticise the Western idea of Nature. They resonate widely across human geography and urban planning, science history and the arts, as well as in the public discourse. In environmental struggles, for instance, multiple living collectives are evoked, such as forests and animals, who appear as agents or ‘actants’ in the environment, and even actors in a series of struggles. New theories and ethnographic methods emphasise participation in the modes of existence so as to create new alliances and new controversies.

By contrast, sociology, a classical science, has so far made limited use of the relation between humans and non-humans. Is this an oversight, or does it respond to a necessity to keep at a distance from a perhaps too enthusiastic relational ecology? Questions indeed arise about the

robustness of the ontological turn: Are these neo-vitalist currents apt to gain a fuller scientific knowledge of the Anthropocene, where, after all, the human presence remains central?¹ In this chapter, I analyse the anthropological and philosophical limits of the new ontological approaches. In doing so, my central concern is that these approaches, highlighting connections and non-social qualities, often result in polishing the world and erasing conflict from it. First, I look more closely at the ontological turn in terms of its epistemology, as it appears deployed both in the anthropological literature and in concrete political engagement. Next, I move to consider what this turn might mean for sociology and for local political mobilisations. On this point, I consider the example of the ‘Zones to defend’ (*Zad*) in France. In the third part, I set out to image a sociological model that could be in dialogue, but also in productive tension, with the emerging approaches mentioned above. I evoke a form of ‘critical pragmatism,’ capable of integrating human–natural relationships without erasing social conflict and the specificities of human social action.

The ontological turn in the environmental humanities

The Anthropocene provides plenty of opportunities for the social and territorial sciences to participate in the debate on the possibilities of inhabiting the earth. In this context, two main political and philosophical positions about the place of humans in the ecology can be outlined. The first position, widely shared by economists and environmentalists, asserts that a crucial difference between humans and non-humans is needed in order to better respond to the global climate emergency. This literature evokes a ‘Capitalocene,’ an age of ecocide perpetrated by large economic and state actors. The second position questions anthropocentrism, enlarging political participation to the whole community of the living, well beyond human beings alone. In this case, the objective is to deconstruct the traditional division between nature and culture, which is responsible for the loss of vital relationships between humans and other beings. The latter perspective rejects any dualism between nature and culture, as well as between living things and objects. In this vein, over the last three decades, scholars such as Philippe Descola (2005) and Bruno Latour (2012) have critically examined the modern Western episteme and the ‘Great Cleavage’ between Nature and Culture it has instituted. Around the Great Cleavage, a number of additional dichotomies – such as matter *vs* spirit, object *vs* subject, primitive *vs* modern, non-human *vs* human – have appeared. Modernity has thus been described as an

¹ On this, we concur with Brighenti and Kärholm (2020): vitalism is, per se, not sufficient to renew territorial sciences – it is rather the modes in which different forms and materials come into relation that it is important to analyse.

ontological coup-de-force that has degraded, if not spoiled, the ways in which non-modern societies used to integrate non-humans into their way of functioning.

The environmental humanities, a new area of study across the human and the natural sciences, appear to have largely integrated a philosophy and an anthropology of non-humans, often relegating classical sociological and political-science approaches to the background. As put by Ballaud and Chopot (2021), who are enthusiastic supporters of the new turn, in the Anthropocene ‘we are all likely to be confronted, at one time or another, and in reality at each moment, with the choice of “becoming-Indian” – living on the margins, living on the edge ... as opposed to remain in our strongholds.’ Before examining how new relations to the environment can be built upon these assumptions, let us unpack more in depth some underlying epistemological foundations, which are best visible in anthropology. Here, one should keep in mind that anthropology is a discipline that even traditionally has never really endorsed the nature–culture dualism, unlike history and sociology. Being mainly concerned with non-modern societies, which did not consider themselves apart from nature, anthropology has subsequently been able to bring a unitary gaze onto Western societies. Another aspect to be kept in mind is the preponderance of cultural anthropology within the field, with its emphasis on language and symbolism, as opposed to the emphasis on institutional and statistical realities in sociology (Boltanski 2009). Central authors of the ontological turn, such as Haraway (2020) and Stengers (2020), propose to redefine relationships with other species (animals, plants, microbes and bacteria), so as to reconstitute a kinship, and forge new alliances. The anthropologist Viveiros de Castro (2009) lays emphasis on indigeneity as central to challenging our way of seeing the world. Similarly, Escobar (2018) emphasises how Amerindian shamans establish bridges across species, as they are capable to understand the point of view of other beings, of their different corporealities and affects. Another anthropologist, Kohn (2017), claims that today we must learn to live with an ever-increasing variety of life forms, including weeds, pests, pets, wild animals, as well as technoscientific mutants: this fact alone pushes us to regard the human being as part of a larger whole formed by other beings who think. This, in turn, invites us to develop modes of knowledge to fully join the political depth of the environment.

Such a perspectival epistemology mirrors Bruno Latour’s ‘symmetrical’ epistemology. Earlier on, in *Science in Action* (1989), the French philosopher-sociologist argued that knowledge does not so much represent the unknown, it interacts with it. Accordingly, science in action is not about contemplating, reflecting or communicating, as it is about creating new environments. As Latour writes in a more recent essay entitled *Enquête sur les modes d’existence* (2012), it

is a question of multiplying the agents and populating our world. On this account, a political or ecological experiment can dispense with practices, insofar as it is limited to asserting equivalences between an Indian, a virus, an activist, or a bird, all living together in a grove. Ontological pluralism becomes the key: it is a kind of scientific ‘subversion’ enabling us to take possession of hitherto unknown or unseen territories. What matters is the deployment of different relationships between beings, which are not based on hierarchy, and which allow us to develop a radical otherness (even aesthetically).

Subversion is not only epistemological, but also political, insofar as the exterior of societies and the relations they maintain with heteronomy are called into question. It is in this sense that the philosopher and anthropologist Pierre Clastres, a pioneer of political anthropology and an inspirer of anarchist currents, is regularly cited in current essays on indigenous peoples and emancipation. An ethnologist of the Amazonian Indians, in his *Society against the State* (1974), Clastres pointed out the existence of collectives who do not recognise any separation between nature and humans. In pre-state Amazonian societies, collective identification with non-human beings ties people to the earth and turns into a factor of solidarity and integration. Viveiros de Castro (2009; 2019) goes one step further: he postulates that the political and the cosmological non-separation of beings are parallel processes. If, in other words, collective life takes the form of a multiplicity of relationships between human and non-human actors, then the possibility of any transcendent political authority is reduced. We have already pointed out that this paradigm is now central in the anthropology of nature, and entails a shift away from a causal and social vision, focused on human responsibility and human institutions. Such a shift easily accommodates the – non-human, in-human – ‘other’ in a new metaphysics of knowledge which replaces traditional empirical approaches (Tsing 2015, 2020; Coccia 2020).

To sum up, the method of non-separation is the herald of a relational ecology; accordingly, it is not surprising to find it in the environmental sciences (Ferdinand 2019), the sciences of territory (Duperrex 2019; Ait-Touati and Coccia 2021) and the study of ‘dwelling’ (Ingold 2011). But the approach has also become common in architecture (Rahm 2020; Ait-Touati et al. 2019) and is spreading among activists and artists.

Becoming-animal, becoming-indigenous: tools and devices

Being a Forest, To Live as a Bird, On the Animal Track. The titles of some recent books evoke forest life (Vidalou 2017), terrestrial life (Latour 2017), animal life (Morizot 2017; Despret 2019) and indigenous life (Escobar 2018). How can these approaches be related to the social sciences? Perspectivist and symmetrical approaches, and more generally the ontological turn,

propose to revisit not only the foundations of the human and social sciences, but also their relationship to normativity and the world. Indeed, the theorists of connectionism and perspectivism want to be the designers of new environments as well as mediators between beings. A vivid example is provided by Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). Haraway's erudite and fascinating story is set in the Chtulucene and tells the story of an imaginary migratory people called the Children of Compost, who shape their own worlds through connections with other actors in order to heal the world and make it habitable again. Their reproduction is not biological, but symbiotic, and results in the birth of hybrid beings, half humans half animals, capable of saving endangered species (such as certain species of butterflies) as well as slipping into the folds of the Anthropocene traversing its migratory corridors.

While Haraway does not explain the mechanisms leading to the ecological catastrophe, her critique operates by conjuring up an imaginary way of living where the borders between biological creature and machine are blurred, and where the historical dimension of existence is erased. Haraway therefore invents semi-real, semi-fictitious characters, highlighting the entanglement of humans, non-humans and artefacts within a shared environment. Haraway's characters do not occupy any clearly recognisable economic or social position, as they are fully and simply 'natureculture' itself. Ultimately, Haraway's speculative approach evokes a universe populated by beings who overthrow human exceptionalism to make the earth habitable again. These fascinating silhouettes neutralise all social functions and traditional categories (people, nation, territory, state) and yet remain quite material, inscribed in recognisable environments such as, for instance, urban environments. Haraway's Chtulucene is cut across by territorial struggles – not by chance are the Children of Compost also called Camille, a generic name quite widespread in territorial struggles, suggesting that all indigenous and civilised lands must be freed from colonialism.

The new ethnography of nature in the Anthropocene: a blurred category?

To the anthropologist of 'natureculture' the world appears as a bundle of connections, intensifications and networks. Perspectivism and the ontological turn are not interested in the meaning of social activities. The stake lies elsewhere: their interest goes indeed towards the new agents or actants, such as nature, the shamans, etc., capable of defining new hybrid arrangements. The innovative works of Baptiste Morizot (2016), devoted to tracking wolves, offers an illustration; another one is Anna Tsing's (2020) exploration of the frictions of

capitalism; still another is Emanuele Coccia's (2020) reflection on poetic pantheism. Just like Haraway, all these authors seek to upturn the modernist episteme, granting importance, not to practices, but to the new perspective of a gigantic web of interrelationships, which can be related to the Deleuzian rhizome and its becoming.

The critics of these approaches, such as Chandler and Reid (2020) and Holbraad and Pedersen (2016), have attacked the ontological turn, characterising it as a form of exoticism that runs the serious risk of consolidating the Western colonial stance, rather than challenging it. In this respect, the question we must address is whether the ontological turn may inadvertently end up devaluing the tools of the social sciences. Whereas sociology analyses the operations carried out by acting human collectives, the symmetrical anthropologies distribute beliefs to all beings, and may largely overestimate the possibilities for dialogue between them. In regard of this, it is also interesting to observe how the new approaches reconsider empirical objects that were traditionally tackled by sociology: for instance, patterns of dwelling, health crises, local political mobilisation, and the emergence of new political actors. Whereas the new terminology includes 'socio-hydraulic maps' (Duperrex 2019), 'extractionism' (Ferdinand 2019) and 'animal diplomacy' (Morizot 2016), substantively, such methods of enquiry seem quite close to descriptive sociology, whose aim is to explain the contexts and the reasons of the involved actors.

One clear shortcoming of the ontological turn, I suggest, is its disregard for the power of the social reality to shape the perceptions of the actors. The anthropologists of nature emphasise that the relations to non-human beings, too, can be symbolic: different beings are seen as communicating – through songs, rituals and dreams – with animals, plants and spirits. This way, relations which we used to regard as social, become symbolic: in the case of the Achuar tribe, notes Descola (2005), kinship extends to the hunter's prey as well as to the cultivated plants. Similarly, animism recovers some of its authority, notably through shamanism, which names the enemy to be hunted or, on the contrary, a creature that enables one's connection to further entities. Whereas the sociologist sees social properties and belonging, dispositions and reasons to act, the new notions of 'composition' or agency emphasise the connections that bodies and objects can establish. These new connections are as wide as 'Gaia' (Latour 2015). Here, practices are no longer simply social, but represent many starting points for revealing infinite interconnections. To build a different relation to the living thing, the new anthropologists are thus led to minimise social conflict and classic economic relations, in favour of larger 'frictions' between animals, territories and humans.

But, is this not a way of forgetting the specificities of human social relations? Attributing beliefs to all beings and establishing infinite possibilities for dialogue between them; isn't this approach overestimating the power of relationality? And, what remains of specifically human action, endowed with logos and faculty of judgment? What is the sociological meaning of such 'de-anthropisation of politics' (Plumwood 2001; De la Cadena 2015)? The question needs to be addressed in more detail.

Challenging the ontological turn. The case of a *Zone à défendre (Zad)*

To do so, we can consider an emblematic case: the *Zone à défendre (Zad)* of Notre-Dame-Des-Landes (NDDL), located in western France. In 2012, when the project for an airport to be built in the area encountered growing opposition from eco-activists, the *zone* was occupied by various groups. Local residents, environmental activists and local farmers who already lived there saw the arrival of new neighbours: anti-authoritarian and anarchist-revolutionary collectives. With the arrival of the latter, active resistance increased: farms were occupied, and the land started being cultivated. Geographically, the *Zad* covers an area of 200ha, with a few hundred occupants installed in houses or timber buildings. In 2018, after various cycles of police repression, support mobilisation, and extensive media coverage, the State abandoned the airport project. Since then, with the consent of the authorities, part of the area has remained occupied, and still is today, a precarious example of self-organisation and commons-oriented economy. In 2020, about 50 squatters remain in place, although the most radical elements have left in order to avoid having to negotiate with the State, who is the landowner.²

Rarely has a place produced so many stories about the role of nature in social struggles (Schaffner 2019, Lindgaard 2018). Scholars such as Descola, Latour, Starhawk, Shiva and novelists such as Alain Damasio all have contributed texts to celebrate the liveliness of the *Zad*. The 'Zadists' have become central figures of the new epistemology, with emphasis on their plural relationship to the world. In the stories about the *Zad*, multiple beings are summoned: 'We are Nature defending itself'; 'Be the territory': the forests, a pond, or a population of newts are recognised as characters invested with specific interests and values. Shamans speak with

² The analysis presented here is based on a case study conducted in NDDL from 2014 through 2018. The fieldwork explored the different political and ecological sensitivities of the occupants, and the ensuing internal antagonisms in the articulation of their project of political autonomy. The research's aim was to put the *Zad* back into a normative and political framework, taking into account the points of support (anarchism, political autonomy, anti-authoritarianism) of the actors beyond the mere register of vitalism and links with the land. The survey mentions the risks of generalisation or over-interpretation of the ecological 'fact' and the difficulties of objectifying social relations (history of the occupants, normative points of support) insofar as the actors themselves resist sociological objectification (Bulle 2020).

the occupants during dreams and hallucinatory trances.³ All these creatures feature in the drawings, the stories and the songs of the *Zad*, not to mention the violent confrontations with law enforcement (Pignocchi 2019). Masks of newts and owls are used to express animism as a lifestyle, a way of being in the world, where everything is entangled on common soil. The questioning of the separation between nature and culture, between beliefs and realities, translates into stories in which the grove and its animals are credited with an interiority similar to that of humans, and are given the floor to freely express themselves.

A ‘partition of the sensible’ [*partage du sensible*] is, according to Rancière (2000), that division signalling an order of places and activities – but it can also be understood as the capacity of certain beings to upset the ways of perceiving, to modify the order of the visible and the invisible, to consolidate the common space of politics. This definition can be applied to the case of the *Zad*, whose mission is to rearrange the political order, so that all species can participate. To this effect, some have proposed to make the struggle ‘autochthonous’ (Glowczewski 2019). To peacefully manage coexistence on the same territory, the Zadists evoke the metaphor of diplomacy: getting to know the other and his/her/its perspective so as to communicate better. In the Zadists’ stories, the newts become creatures who clash with the police and forge alliances with other beings. Similarly, the grove is endowed with intelligence and the capacity to understand human intentions. In this context, humans are neither superior nor special.⁴ Re-enchantment is key to produce artistic effects, but also to talk to anthropologists.⁵ The *Zad* is presented as a sweet experiment, where different actors can make a new politics of nature together. The milieu becomes the central element in a community of struggle, around which all the other figures revolve.⁶

³ ‘For me, taking a substance that changes my state of consciousness, I felt like it changed the lives of everyone – that we had to go through this, that we rediscover an Indian thing that is essential for life, for it to go well. I felt it, powerfully.’ (Interview with squatter, February 2016, transcribed by Pablo Carroyer, doctoral student in Political Sciences).

⁴ ‘What I would also like to convey, besides knowing what to eat, is a certain way of walking on the earth. Slowly, patiently, carefully. This is not incompatible with guerrilla. On the contrary. We become more precise, we waste less, we destroy less.’ (Tract on harvesting, quoted by Pablo Carroyer, *Tritons crêté-e-s contre béton armé. Du Maquis à la Forêt, des formes de cohabitations révolutionnaires sur la ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes*. Master’s thesis, Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris, 2015.)

⁵ See the film *Composer les Mondes d’Eliza Levy* (Amigo Icecream Productions, 2019) where Descola talks about the *Zad*, advancing a parallel between the Zadists and the Achuar people.

⁶ More information about the *Zad* can be found in *Notre-Dame-Des-Landes, ou le métier de vivre* (2018) by Patrick Bouchain and Christophe Laurens (Loco Éditions); *Habiter en Lutte* (2018) by Collectif Comm’un (Passager Clandestin); *Contrées* (2016) by Collectif Mauvais Troupe (Éditions de l’Éclat). Raoul Vaneigem, one of the co-founders of the Situationist International, wrote a text in support of the Zadists. (available at <https://zad.nadir.org/spip.php?article5679>). Films have also been shot in the *Zad*, such as *Le dernier continent* (2014) by Vincent Lapize, and *Les pieds sur terre* (2016) by Baptiste Combret and Bertrand Hagenmüller.

Bushes and swamps speak. But does this not lead to desocialisation and depoliticisation?

What is the deeper meaning of this movement? To understand it better, we must analyse the political implications of its theoretical tenets. Grignon and Passeron (1989) would certainly describe such tenets as a form of ‘epistemological populism’ that pushes for the rehabilitation of non-scholarly and native ways of thinking. For its part, sociology is attentive – even more than to objectification – to the conflictuality that shapes society. In this respect, the ontological turn neglects the fact that the relations between humans, and between humans and non-humans, are not the same. There is no chance that ‘non-human spokespersons’ can take a human point of view, since they have no ‘logos’ for joining politics. The invisible actors, the spirits, cannot account for the critical operations carried out by the social actors, nor for the various political sensitivities of the latter. Since sociological description must ban undue generalisations, in the case of NDDL the sociologist must first of all seek to clarify the peculiarly *political* character of the struggle. The ideology of the Zadists is grounded, first, in the critique of capitalism and the capitalist state (Polanyi 1982; Gorz 1975), second, in the critique of the transformation of nature into commodity (Jappe 2017). True, the Zadists aim to be less anthropocentric than other traditional struggles, but they cannot avoid issues of governance: their main concern is with political autonomy and the self-institution of society (Castoriadis 1975). Even when it evokes stateless peoples (Clastres 1974; Graeber 2014; Scott 2013), their ideology remains deeply political.

The blurred limits of ‘subjectivism’

As a project of social transformation, the *Zad* is premised on an articulated critique of the social order and its institutions, challenging hegemony and domination with a set of grammars of autonomy (Castoriadis 1975). The Zadists are concerned with the inequalities produced by market capitalism, and do not cease to relate themselves to elements such as the law, eviction notes, company profits, etc. The squatters also employ various methods to counter the legal and institutional order, commissioning reports and appeals to their lawyers and economic consultants. At the same time, it also matters to them that such elements get translated and transfigured into mythopoietic narratives. The *Zad*’s political priority, however, remains opposition, resistance and self-organisation. The underlying model of political autonomy argues that societies and communities can redefine their own standards of existence and redesign themselves by appropriating their own times and spaces. As the squatters engage in

local practices, divergences between groups also emerge. Some are more interested in social ecology, others in the revolutionary project. The question, for the sociologist, is how these different groups can hold together. Besides the biotic community, we encounter an irreducibly human world, with its inner political antagonisms and its various battle fronts. The ontological turn runs the risk of diluting and neglecting these aspects: far from being an undifferentiated immanent whole without, human societies have political characteristics that make them distinctive (see also Demeulenaere 2017).

A final question follows from the previous one: is the ontological turn compatible with political responsibility? Political ecology earlier on raised this issue, and the same question is interestingly also to be found at the heart of the *Zad* collectives as they reclaim for themselves neo-Marxist revolutionary roots, or more vague communitarian visions. Notably, the nature-society dualism is accepted by the political ideologies the Zadists appeal to. Marxism, anarchist socialism, and political ecology, all connect nature with the material conditions of its production (Bookchin 2014). As early as 1977, the New Left theorist André Gorz warned that the ‘deification of nature’ by some activists led them to overlook the criticism of commodities and industrial production. Similarly, today we have philosophies such as ‘sobretism’ (self-limitation) that reduce ecological concerns to individual ethical choices. A more robust criticism is made by revolutionary currents, such as Comité Invisible (2007), that plead for insurrection and the rejection of market capitalism. Other exit options range from impeachment to desertion, and are sometimes inspired by the notion of idleness (Agamben 2015).⁷ The importance of these nuances within the *Zad* cannot be grasped by a simple concern for ontology, but must be appreciated at the level of practical activities. Accordingly, in the next section we move on to examine how sociology could try to make sense of a territorial struggle by taking seriously the idea that human actors – rather than generalised actants – are the real movers of the process.

For a sociology of contentious milieus. Elements for analysis

How can sociology equip itself to grasp a complex plurality of collective modes of being-in-the-world, such as those present in the *Zad*, taking into account both the materiality of the events and the cognitive skills of the actors? What type of sociology is adequate to capture the

⁷ In Agamben (2015), idleness is what makes it possible to put an end to ‘the most miserable action that man can do: perform tasks.’ In this sense, autonomist and neo-Marxist currents call for the suspension of all functions serving predetermined functions, and getting rid of all objects that maintain social reproduction. The aim is to drift away from all capitalist and control functions to affirm the ethical foundations of autonomous life.

political and social lines of force running through the *Zad* experience? Whether we consider situated, experiential, logical and discursive factors, a framework of analysis is needed that is capable of integrating affects and emotions as an intrinsic part of radical criticism. In the *Zad*, speech, emotions and bodily gestures become critical (signifying self-defense, appropriation of the land etc.), while also being the support of ordinary activities (such as agriculture, repair and maintenance work etc.).⁸

Pragmatic sociology at the time of the Anthropocene

The study of a territorial struggle raises two issues in the representation of social reality. The first is a meta-critique of institutions, such as the state. The force of the state, as we have seen, is present on the ground through its legal framework, but also more directly through police repression. The second is an ordinary critique of Zadists' commitments. The territorial defence they perform is grounded, as we have noticed, in common attachment and joint action. Activities including agriculture and mutual aid are proposed as gestures of self-defence and of resistance against institutional domination (police, justice, education). Since the squatting of the *Zad* proceeds through a mutual adjustment of perception and action, its living milieu can be investigated by pragmatic sociology (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) as well as by critical pragmatism (Bulle 2020). Indeed, a struggling milieu such as a *Zad* is characterised by critical gestures meant to disengage themselves from the state, so as to emphasise local commonality. The pragmatic approach illuminates how the critique conducted by the actors does not stop at the production of narratives, nor at placing humans and non-humans on the same level – for indeed human action occupies a key place in the production of political subjectivities.

A few examples can support our claim. Let us consider the role of the territory, in its different dimensions. First, the territory facilitates the gathering of actors with the same sensitivity, attached to the land and its biodiversity. External supporters who come to the *Zad* for festive moments and major resistance events live territory in this way. But, for the anarchist squatters, the territory comes to coincide with an 'occupation-form' (Bulle 2018) designed to build new forms of life. The occupation-form encompasses cognitive and material levels. In the foreground, the main front of action mobilises to defend buildings the authorities want to evict; in the background, the resistance base is made of wild squatting, free-shops, canteens, food

⁸ We notice that, symmetrically, emotions are absorbed by the commodity and production system, and even by capitalist language. Emotions and affects are indeed increasingly present in the system of consumption, and in respect of this Eva Illouz (2019) speaks of 'emotional goods.' While the capitalist mobilisation of emotions criticism is impossible for ordinary consumers, the Zadists seek to initiate a critique of the world from ordinary gestures and emotions in deep connection to the environment.

distribution points, anti-fascist meeting points, etc. In other words, the occupation-form engages with ‘offensive withdrawal,’ which seeks to part ways from capitalist society and the State through an active defence of the territory. In the second place, then, the territory becomes a living support where it becomes possible to build new milieus.

Objects in the struggle

Opacity is an important resource for this type of struggle (Bulle 2020): tactics of concealment and disguise are amply employed.⁹ The use of objects is revealing: very few new items can be found in the *Zad*, as there is a clear preference for used, worn and marked out objects. Discarded and devalued objects here receive renewed appreciation. The Zadists stay clear of new objects as much as possible and, accordingly, learn new bodily skills with re-crafting stuff. A bottle can be used to mix the ingredients for a cake or a cocktail, or as a candle carrier; an empty gas tank can be made into a wood-fuelled cooker, or a dummy bomb to be displayed in the event of an eviction; cardboard can be used as a food tray, an old engine as a barricade, a garbage-can lid as a shield against the police; gardening tools can turn into weapons for barricade defence, just like tractors, pallets, tires and abandoned cars for roadblocks. All these objects become part of a strategy of invisibility. A reused object is put in circulation and opened up to new stories, new practices, new experiences. In a sense, objects also function as ‘mediating devices,’ as actor-network theory holds, joining humans to non-human artefacts. However, the emphasis here is on human intervention, not as a physical gesture but as a faculty of judgment which enables a change of use by breaking away from industrial society.

On the epistemological level, therefore, two aspects of knowledge are brought together: the first is pragmatic (situated experiential actions), the second is critical (resignified, talked-about objects). Contrary to an indistinct sacralisation of nature, politicisation here passes through a precise human handling of objects: the more objects that are brought out of the consumerist orbit, the better.

Beyond ontology: multiple views of nature

Enacting multiple re-appropriations people become reflexive about their relationship to the industrial, commercial and institutional world. Squatters themselves are not univocal about this, and a simple ‘diplomacy’ of relations between different beings does not suffice to explain

⁹ See also Brighenti (2010), who distinguishes visibility from the visible, evoking social and relational qualities as recognised by specific actors.

how a common world is practically attained and managed. As we have stressed, intentionality and deliberation, rather than spontaneity, are prerequisites for a politics of resistance. Of crucial importance is, in particular, the *gradation* of different commitments along a continuum from local resident, to farmer, to barricader. A political sociology of a milieu of resistance thus invites us to distinguish between various ways of embodying ‘natureculture.’ We must take care to identify the heterogeneity of actors and the terms of their commitment to the cause: for these may range from the reformists, who aim to slow capitalism down, to the radicals, who want to break free from it at once. Within the same occupy movement there are power struggles, points of disagreement and conflict, according to the different positions about how to relate to the outside world and to the collective project of emancipation. Three different and only partially overlapping sensibilities emerge: first, libertarian anti-authoritarianism with a specific ‘primitivist’ bent, second, ecological realist-utopians, third, insurrectionalists-revolutionaries. These three groups have distinct ways of practicing eco-activism: only some of them believe in an integral, self-determined environmental ethics, similar to the deep ecology approach (Næss 2009):

There I take mushrooms. Well, it’s my power-shamanic discovery ... I take mushrooms with people at a party, and I start getting revelations. I see myself as an Indian, I have the impression of living with Indians, elves, fairies... I tell myself it’s a crazy thing, that we are connected to the earth... And there I start to think that life, it must be beautiful and magical, beyond activism ... People who based are in the West sector ... we couldn’t have enjoyed a psychotropic experience with them, they turn everything into a militant affair, without anything beyond that.¹⁰

People based in the *Zad*’s Eastern sector,¹¹ in particular, have banned all petrol and electric devices:

I want to be aware of what I use: you realize what you use, what 30l of water is like. In the water I drink there is the effort I made to get it, rather than the effort of people I don’t know in an area I don’t know have made to pump it, draw it, transport it ... and with minerals it’s even worse. So my choice goes towards reclaiming my energy use

¹⁰ Interview by Pablo Carroyer. The interviewee is an Eastern-Sector inhabitant (male, 30-year-old, with precarious job).

¹¹ The Eastern sector was dismantled by the police in 2018. In contrast, other parts have been saved thanks to negotiations with the Prefecture (the local office of the central government).

completely. Even if afterwards you can come back to mixed use, it is necessary for me to go through a total deconstruction, no longer having access to the button at all.¹²

Great attention is paid by them to the life of trees:

I accept one chops wood only for really valid reasons. I criticized the sawmill workshop because they cut wood all too easily. Some projects seemed completely out of scale to me, large useless projects, you see. Do you really need that barn, all that space? Couldn't you cut half the trees? There's a bit of 'To prove that we're not just squatters who don't give a damn, we're doing this crazy thing.' That can be a fallacy.¹³

Such view is minoritarian, though, since the majority promotes a diversification of activities, including parties and celebrations open to the public. The latter type of events are denounced by the more intransigent as themselves polluting. In this respect, the subscribers to radical autonomy accept parties only if they facilitate the revolutionary project, which remains focused on land appropriation first.

Be the territory, or be productive? Ways of inhabiting the struggle

Slowdown, withdrawal or idleness, deep ecology: different relationships to environments become source of internal conflict in the NDDL *Zad*. Let us return, for example, to the area which was partially destroyed in 2018, the one which hosted the most anti-authoritarian and ecological fringe. In its origin, and its way of functioning, this sector embodied a perfectionist tendency: the collectives based here were not productive (neither farmers nor artisans), and avoided all technical and economic mediations. Maximising their separation from a destructive outside, they also avoided taking part in collective work, meetings, promotion etc. Their utmost authenticity was to be testified only by their own intimate experience with the vital elements of the environment. One notices here that the source of conflict lies in the qualification of the forms of life (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). The lifestyles based on the appreciative 'valuation' (Dewey 2011) of scarcity do not depend on strategic interests, nor upon functions in a struggle, but on an overall preservation effort. Consider the conflict over the presence of visitors. The refusal of certain groups to see neighbours and onlookers come to the area is

¹² Interview by Pablo Carroyer. The interviewee is an Eastern-Sector inhabitant (male, 25-year-old, former employee).

¹³ Ibidem. The average length of residence in the Eastern Sector varies between 2 and 4 years. The first squatters arrived in 2012.

justified by the value accorded to the *Zad*'s enclosure and its creatures. While parties may help finance the struggle, they also cause a lot of damage: crowding, unrestrained behaviour, and a caricaturisation of autonomy. Accordingly, deep-ecology squatters consider parties as forms of an undesirable 'anarcho-tourism.' Similar examples abound: as said, the 'integrationists' reject the use of recycled materials, which they regard as a form of unwanted exchange value, while the protection of the grove has similarly led to numerous conflicts with traditional tenant farmers who cultivate the land with standard modern techniques and economically depend on the industrial system.

'Nourishing the struggle:' Opposing visions

We are now better positioned to see that, under the banner 'weaving alliances with the living world,' there hide diverging interests. Indeed, some collectives who prioritise political strategy have not completely broken with the industrial and commodity world: they travel by car and carry on revenue-generating activities to finance the struggle. Such is the 'Feed the fight' stance. Efficiency and realism are presented as political weapons by these groups. With reference to them, others raise the concern that running economic activities turns some occupants into de facto 'merchants with newt masks.' The latter, however, retort that the utter rejection of capitalist system's 'Babylon' leads the former but into a condition of objectively increased dependence. Since 2018, the cleavage between different collectives in the *Zad* has become apparent: endorsement vs rejection of productivity turned into a main issue for the *Zadists*. Choices were clearly guided by one's positioning within the front of the struggle: so, the same figure of the 'fighting newt' can convey different strategies, alliances and degrees of authenticity. Only subject consciously fashioning a political culture can achieve this. Issues such as emancipation and attachment to the environment remain specific to human persons, as shown by the different conceptions of dwelling.

Just like the relationship to objects, different ways of living also evoke different imaginaries and plural worlds in their vision of autonomy. The most 'alternative' and strategic occupants have installed permanent buildings located in the centre of the settlement. Others, more isolated, live in movable huts, with no other project than that of establishing a direct relationship with the living world. These differences became particularly exacerbated in the second phase of the NDDL *Zad*, when the most anti-authoritarian and anti-productivist group explicitly dissociated from the others. But the groups who have pursued a strategy of normalisation and settlement are those who have lasted the longest. In 2021, with the arrival of some newcomers, the current occupants have agreed to be part of an agro-ecological project

coordinated with the State. The new main objectives has become to make ecological choices as visible as possible: slowing down the use of land, employing manual methods, and pooling equipment. All these practices provide an ecologically governable space based on Do It Yourself philosophy. For the supporters of the formula, this proves that a realist ecological utopia is achievable. The other squatters have had to leave the premises. Their shacks have been razed by the police. This proves that the ‘composition of a common world’ is far from being a harmonious process. Here again, a sociological perspective, such as in particular the perspective of critical pragmatism, makes the nuances.

Towards interactional territories

‘Becoming-native,’ ‘becoming-animal,’ ‘becoming-environment:’ these formulas are at the pivot of current ecological upheavals, in a context where social movements reclaim the land for themselves, against its capitalist exploitations. Such an effervescence does not at all imply a de-politicisation nor, for that matter, a demise of social relations. Accordingly, the ‘natureculture’ turn should not lead us to obfuscate the specificities of the relations between humans. The construction of common worlds beyond the human being is not indifferent to economic determinations and societal arrangements, which collide or intermingle with beliefs and imagination. It is not enough to simply overlook the boundaries between body and mind, North and South etc., to push forward a territorial and environmental agenda. Since new relationships with non-humans are forged without dissolving the notion of humanity, neither the sole criticism of capitalism, nor the sole plea for the ‘actor-network’ seem sufficient to envision a more-than-human sociality.

In the context of global ecological crisis, concern for the environment offers vital avenues to the social and territorial sciences. These, however, cannot content themselves with a simple ‘Gaia ontology.’ Territorial science can successfully explore emerging arrangements and compositions in the new socio-ecological worlds only if it goes beyond the simple postulate of immanence. In this sense, a non-deterministic approach to ‘animated lands’ (Brighenti and Kärholm 2020), just like a renewed ‘terrestrial’ approach (Latour 2017), interweave the notions of local and global, environment and system, crisis and regulation. The new earthly order calls for special attention to be paid to the transformation processes through which different visions are articulated, superimposed or confronted. This is evidenced by the processual nature of environments and social struggles, made of interactions and rhythms. An interactionist sociology is particularly suited to grasp this. Neither the local nor the terrestrial per se should be fetishised, any more than nature itself. In each case, we have to go back to the

intersection between a history of ideas, the historical paths of actors, and the intimate as well as collective visions expressed locally or within a given environment, albeit in different temporalities. Finally, we need a theoretical modelling of the ‘critical takes’ (Chateauraynaud 2011), namely, those processes of attention and enhancement of ecologically sensitive topics. A renewed social science must proceed alongside the actors. This is also what the history of the NDDL *Zad* suggests. As we have seen, the Zadist front encompasses different currents, ranging from anarchism to wilderness, to real utopias. Philosophy and critical theory are needed to describe alienation and emancipation, but a context-sensitive sociology is helpful to capture how objects interact within specific social formats. It involves grasping political legacies, rules of life, and overcoming the classic oppositions between theory and empiricism, constructivism and realism, vitalism and determinism. A careful ethnographic observation of a social-territorial environment such as a *Zad* discourages hasty generalisations. Understanding the peculiarity of a lived political regime does not necessarily lead to a ‘sociologisation of politics’ (Rancière 2005), but might rather lead to a case-based theory that is ‘limit-aware’ (Pellizzoni 2021).

This type of approach, we have pointed out, requires opting for sociological pragmatism. The latter can answer to two basic requirements. First, pragmatism excludes a predetermined knowledge of social categories: indeed, in contentious situations, the actors are ahead of the sociologists. To understand a world-in-the-making, we must go beyond the tools of objectification routinely mobilised by sociologists, attaining a more ambulatory and fragmentary work. Second, pragmatism avoids the naturalistic temptation and the flattening of levels and actors, as it happens for instance with the ‘mother nature’ metaphor. Far from opposing emotional-psychological and objective dimensions, pragmatism as a theory of action indeed allows two elements to be brought together: a critical process, and a cognitive apparatus which allows actors to orient themselves. This, in the case of *Zad* NDDL, is what we have described as ‘offensive withdrawal’ and ‘critical capture.’ Critical pragmatics makes it possible to articulate formats of criticism without ignoring the reflexivity of the actors. In the occupied milieu of the *Zad*, immanence constantly rubs shoulders with strategy, dialogues with tactics. To tackle these, a radical empiricism (James 2007) is recommended. This type of sociological exploration may also apply to other cases. A science of territories must now take into account new adventures, located on the threshold where one world can become another.

(translated from the French original by Andrea Mubi Brighenti)

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