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Disputed Lands and the Seeds of Utopia: Rethinking Development in the Context of Climate Change

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of the 2010s, there have erupted throughout France and elsewhere in Europe local conflicts based on a common cause, the defense of farmlands. Local populations, farmers, citizen collectives and associations of activists have mobilized against projects involving urban development, infrastructure and trading or business areas, and taken issue with the political choices regarding the redevelopment of the territory in the name of the preservation of biodiversity and adaptation to climate change. In this article, we present the results of a qualitative sociological survey focused on the conflicts over the defense of farmlands in the southeast of France. We show how are constructed, at local scale and following a militant territory-based dynamic, citizen collectives and environmentalist associations which are vectors of social transformation. This mobilization is not only related to the defense of farming but embodies alternative development projects that involve the occupation of lands, such as the *Zones à Défendre (ZAD)* movement. Through the current defense of farmlands, one of the key components of the renewal of environmental protests is at issue and is expressed, by which the deployment of alternative local experimentation is a vector of a transformative utopia

Keywords: Environmental mobilization, climate change, defense of farmlands

INTRODUCTION

In France, since the end of the 2010s, there has been an upsurge of protest movements related to the defense of farmlands, contesting their urbanization and artificialization. At the scale of *Région Sud*, this issue is particularly pressing given the very rapid progression of the process of urban development of the hinterland of the Mediterranean area. These rural and agricultural spaces, which historically have seen the development of irrigated agriculture with high added value, are today subject to contradictory real estate development priorities. Although they are valorized, including within the policies of the regional council and the *Métropole Aix-Marseille*, on the basis of their environmental, climatic and food security functions, these farmlands are nonetheless in reality subject to very strong economic pressure which results in their being urbanized and an increase in the number of speculative wastelands.

The current mobilizations for the defense of farmlands can be understood in today's context of a renewal of political and militant engagement regarding environmental issues. Since the

emergence in the 1970s of environmental causes as the focus of a questioning of the industrial mode of development [1], they have been integrated and institutionalized within public policy as a support for economic development. While the protests and causes of the 1970s may seem distant, and to have been appropriated by the mainstream mode of development, the past few years have been marked by a renewal of protest: movements for the climate, actions of civil disobedience, court cases regarding the climate and legal proceedings deployed by new NGOs, the spread of participation in citizen activism, tribunes and actions by scientists. In this context, the campaigns for the defense of farmlands play a particular role.

From the *Zones à Défendre*¹ of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, Testet, Bure² to the numerous local conflicts which have erupted throughout the territory, these actions denounce the same 'land grab' by the urban expansion of business and industrial areas, the increasing power of speculative interests linked to the concentration of industrial agriculture, the artificialization of the land with the major redevelopment projects described as 'unnecessary' by opponents. These campaigns do not only take the form of opposition to urbanization or redevelopment projects, they also and above all embody, in various forms, utopian projects for the transformation of societies. The occupation of farmlands for the purposes of a protest campaign goes well beyond the simple appeal for a different type of agriculture, which is not in itself novel. One of the best examples is the occupation of the Larzac plateau in the early 1970s against the planned extension of a military base. But fifty years have passed and if the forms are similar, they are not expressed in the same societal context. Environmental issues are today central and, at least in principle, broadly shared by most French people³.

In the first part of the paper, we shall show how the current campaigns for the defense of farmlands have in common with the historic campaigns of the 1970s the same desire for a utopia which is expressed by the deployment of alternative experiences, experiments that derive their meaning from the rural society. In the second part, on the basis of the field survey we have carried out at Pertuis, we shall analyze how what is at stake in the protests that emerge at local level is the construction of transformative utopian projects, which involve experimenting with peasant farming and self-sufficient forms of community life. Finally, in the last part, we shall analyze how these utopias spread and become meaningful in a present-day context where environmental and climate issues represent a key focus and priority for citizen engagement.

¹ The term 'ZAD' (*Zone à Défendre*) is a neologism that emerged during the occupation of the site at Notre-Dame-des-Landes (NDL) in 2012. The use of this term is a militant repurposing of the acronym ZAD '*Zone d'Aménagement Différé*' which is a legislative measure for local authorities to pre-empt land 'to give them control over their land' with a view to future redevelopment schemes.

² The first '*Zone à Défendre*' was the one at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, installed in 2012, situated 20 km from Nantes, against the planned construction of a second airport in the Nantes region. After the victory of this campaign and the abandoning of the airport project, some of the occupiers stayed at the site. In the follow-up to what the occupation of NDL achieved, numerous ZADs appeared to oppose dam construction projects such as that at Sivens in the Tarn where the project was abandoned in 2015 following the occupation of the site and the tragic end to the eviction which caused the death of a young activist, Rémi Fraisse, or the burial of nuclear waste such as at Bure in the Vosges, where the occupiers were evicted by the police in 2018, but remain very active and continue to occupy part of the site to this day.

³ ADEME, Climat : des français mobilisés et en attentes de transformation de la société, janvier 2022, <https://infos.ademe.fr/lettre-strategie-janvier-2022/climat-les-francais-mobilises-et-en-attente-devolutions-de-la-societe/>

THE DEFENSE AND OCCUPATION OF LAND AS A SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE AND A CRUCIBLE OF UTOPIAS: AN OLD STORY

In many respects, the present-day protest movements and campaigns for the defense of farmland may be seen to echo the first ecological campaigns of the 1970s. The installation of the first *Zone à Défendre* (ZAD) in France at Notre-Dame-des-Landes in 2012, to combat the planned construction of a second airport for the Nantes conurbation, conceived in the 1960s, is somewhat reminiscent of another emblematic battle, the occupation of the Larzac plateau. Furthermore, we find the same ingredients for virtually all the cases of land occupation. At Larzac as at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the occupation of the site gave rise to experiments in community living, a different relationship with work, politics and social relations [2,3,4]. These occupations were also the focus of a power struggle with the State, generating theoretical and political reflections and debates going far beyond the local actions. Finally, these two conflicts took on a symbolic value, bringing together during the large-scale assemblies and festive occasions heterogeneous protest movements which saw in these places the opportunity to envisage an alternative model to the dominant social relationships and economic model.

From 1973, the Larzac campaign (against the expansion of a military site) became the "showcase of protest"⁴, bringing together every summer up until 1977 between 50 000 and 100 000 people from a wide range of backgrounds, forming a heterogeneous protest movement. Larzac represents an emblematic combat, but above all was the occasion of a historic encounter between the defense of farmland, based on the values and ideology of peasant farmers [5,6,7], finding expression in the mobilization of 108 Larzac farmers and the protest movements descended from May 1968. For those who played a militant role during these assemblies and beyond, in the support committees, or more broadly by their declared support for this struggle, Larzac is a symbol, a symbol of a certain conception of the world. The motives for their commitment are varied (democracy, non-violence, ecology, anti-militarism, etc.) and were to gradually broaden the focus of the farmer's struggle, going beyond the defense of their land alone [8].

If the Larzac campaign handed down and represented a vision of a utopia, it was above all because this space neglected and deserted through the development of production-focused and mechanized agriculture could offer an opportunity and could allow room to imagine the construction of a new world. These lands, difficult to mechanize, hit by rural exodus, are considered in the territorial redevelopment plans as possessing "poor agricultural richness" and thus could be destined for other uses. *"Whether we like it or not, the potential agricultural richness of Larzac is after all extremely poor. So, I think that it was logical to consider that the expansion of the Larzac military zone presented minimal disadvantages. Whereas on the other side, there is the fact that there are nonetheless a few peasant farmers, not many, who were raising a few sheep, living more or less like in the Middle Ages, and that the land had to be expropriated"*⁵. This part of the rural space, not suitable for mechanization, abandoned in favour of the development of industrial agriculture in other places, was firstly a place for the renewal of utopias. "These desertified regions could constitute a space of projection and social experimentation because these areas were left out with regard to the economic, social and

⁴ "Le Larzac : vitrine de la contestation", *Le Monde*, 25/08/1973

⁵ André Fanton, Secretary of State for Defense, archive pictures, documentary 'Tous au Larzac', director Christian Rouand, 2011.

political relations which structure the 'dominant society'. It was the wasteland (the 'desert') that served as a support for community projects. And for those involved, the fact of knowing that this state of abandon was not the result of geological or climatic conditions, but the direct product of capitalist industrialization gave from the outset a 'political' dimension to these projects" [9]. The farmland at Larzac as in the regions 'left behind' by the modernization projects of the agriculture industry were held aloft as a symbol of resistance to the dominant development model, characterized by the increase and intensification of production, in support of the consumer society. Territories such as Larzac became places for the construction and experimentation of an alternative form of development in opposition to this dominant model.

At the core of the flurry of protest in the 1970s, the defense of Larzac represented an emblematic meeting place for a collective project that was utopian, ecological, feminist, anti-nuclear, regionalist, which provided fuel in the following years for a "return to the land" movement [10]. These "immigrants of utopia", as Danièle Léger called them, mostly came from the big cities (Paris, Lyon, Marseille) and were for the most part students or young graduates starting their careers. *"What were these 'urbanites' looking for, these teachers, organizers, social workers, paramedics, architects who turned their backs on the professions they had been trained for to become goat or sheep farmers, market farmers, potters or weavers?"* [9]. Their utopian project was transformed into a range of practical alternatives, choices of agricultural production, barter, social relations which still today mark the dynamic of the rural spaces occupied by this community movement [11]. The activists who stayed and settled introduced social innovations which played a role in providing a new dynamic for these 'deserted' farming and rural spaces. The utopian dimension of the Larzac campaign did not come to an end in 1981, when the battle was won. It resides rather in the deeper movement that it accompanied, that of those who settled, took over abandoned farms, repossessed the rural space with values that are socially their own. From this point of view, the parallel with what happened at the Notre-Dame-des-Landes ZAD is striking. Since the victory in 2018 against the planned airport, people occupying the site have stayed, and have continued their activity by setting up creating a land-based society to continue with the farming and artisanal activities that had been started during the occupation of the ZAD.

Today, the campaigns for the defense of farmlands are a continuation of these historic battles of the 1970s. Firstly, because they carry forward the ideal of alternatives as a utopia. Whether at the sites of the various occupied ZADs or more generally in the numerous conflicts that have emerged, the question of experimenting, transforming modes of organization, the relation with time and with work, modes of consumption remain central in the campaigns that are carried on. The link between these two moments of protest is also based on the relation with rurality. Yet over the past fifty years, the rural spaces in France have undergone profound changes, whether in their redevelopment or in the perceptions associated with them. The city center of Nantes is twenty kilometers from the Notre-Dame-des-Landes ZAD, a space of twenty kilometers with an alternating succession of agriculture, roundabouts and business areas. The newspaper Reporterre⁶ has since 2019 inventoried the campaigns against "unnecessary

⁶ <https://reporterre.net/La-carte-des-luttes-contre-les-grands-projets-inutiles#1> On this evolutive map, France appears as covered in local conflicts. The tally that can be made for the whole range of categories of conflicts (construction, transport, energy, industry, agriculture, waste, business) gives about 500 collectives that are opposed

major projects: airports, motorways, storage facilities, dams, shopping centers, nuclear waste disposal sites, are included on a 'map of protest campaigns'. At national scale, more than five hundred collectives have been counted. Of the hundred or so projects referred to as construction, the vast majority come within this geographical configuration, and even more are projects undertaken for the sake of economic and social development: sports complexes, residential leisure parks, surf parks on the Atlantic coast near Bordeaux and Bayonne, eco-technology and science parks in the outskirts of Nantes and Paris, business parks, etc. These campaigns also concern the transport infrastructures which service urban development (motorways, TGV high speed train projects, ring-roads, bypasses, etc.), and the planning for expansion or the creation of business and commercial parks.

The world of agriculture has also changed as has the social and economic composition of the so-called 'rural' municipalities, which have for the most part become peri-urban. Finally, what has today changed in the construction of causes and experiments is related on one hand to the increasing role of environmental issues in the definition of rural spaces and their preservation, and also the expectations of society as a whole regarding the farming sector, in particular after the COVID-19 crisis.

FARMLANDS TO DEFEND UTOPIAN ALTERNATIVES

This historical comparison with the Larzac campaign highlights how the protest campaigns against current redevelopment schemes extend this history and cannot be reduced to simple phenomena of 'Not in My Backyard' or the defense of a living environment 'threatened by urban construction'. In a broader context of political involvement in environmental issues, they offer proposals for alternative societies. The criticisms these campaigns convey question from a new perspective the link between the transformation of the rural environment and the reconfiguration of protest movements, of a desire for social transformation.

Farmlands at Pertuis: Highly Coveted Land

Since 2018, in the municipality of Pertuis in the Vaucluse, there has been a conflict between on one hand the local elected representatives led by the mayor and the *Métropole d'Aix Marseille*, and on the other the local inhabitants, citizen and farmers' collectives and associations for the protection of the environment, concerning a planned *Zone d'Activité Commerciale* (ZAC) (business park) covering 87 ha of farmland, 80% of which is currently cultivated. We have developed for this context a qualitative sociological survey method designed to take into account the various components of the conflict. The collection of documentary data enabled the constitution of a corpus of texts (texts written by collectives and activists, petitions, press articles, local and regional press, social media pages from the collectives), which provide a basis for analysis of the issues, the actors involved and the arguments deployed. A second stage was the collection of discourse by means of semi-organised interviews prior to the establishment of a ZAD among the associations and citizen collectives opposed to the project, during the occupation of the ZAD among the 'Zadists' that we followed up with participant observation of the various high points of the occupation and the actions carried out in relation with the occupation since April 2021. Finally, we have also carried out interviews with farmers in the

to projects referred to as 'unnecessary'. The conflicts related to the three categories construction, transport and business, are in the majority.

area concerned, and representatives of the *Confédération Paysanne* involved in supporting the campaign against the business park project.

In *Région Sud*, although the issue of the preservation of farmland is presented as central in regional development policy⁷ and in the local town planning schemes⁸, the current land use dynamic shows a different reality. In this region, the process of concretizing the land is far more extensive than the national average and is progressing more rapidly than the population increase [12], with wide regional disparity and a concentration around the conurbations (Aix-Marseille, Toulon, Nice, Avignon-Orange). It is within these spaces that the conflicts over the defense of farmlands are emerging. As in other zones, the planned business park at Pertuis is the extension of an already existing urbanized business area, encroaching on land with high agricultural value, which is irrigated and capable of providing market garden products with added value. Justified on the grounds of economic development, the plan for this ZAC is to provide sites for new businesses in relation with the technological development of the Durance valley and the *Pays d'Aix*. "*The priorities of the economic development agenda of the Métropole have settled on 1500 ha for the real estate requirements that need to be mobilized for the industrial economy and employment in our territory. (...) Opposing the development of hi-tech industries with the companies of the future in the environment and renewable energies and sustainable agricultural development makes no sense as the municipality's land should be able to benefit all these sectors equitably*"⁹. The justification for the redevelopment schemes planned by the local authority refers to a repurposing of the space defined according to 'metropolitan' requirements, that is what is generally referred to as the *Pays d'Aix* and the *Marseille Métropole*. The economic and social development of the town of Pertuis, formerly structured around its agricultural activity and the businesses related to it, is today largely dependent on its economic and institutional integration within the surrounding major urban centers (Aix, Marseille and Manosque).

Strongly correlated with the renewal of the capitalist mode of development, the influence of the metropolises has a 'colonizing' effect on the space, notably the agricultural space by the construction, ever further removed from the center, of the infrastructure needed for their functioning (transport, logistics, offices). The economic transformations that have been seen over the past fifty years have induced structural alterations, one of which is the concentration of economic activity, power and resources within the major conurbations. "*The bolstering of the metropolitan regions since the last three decades of the 20th century is related to the rebuilding of capitalism. More specifically, the metropolises are both the drivers and socio-spatial systems resulting from the three main present-day modes of accumulation of wealth: the production of and trade in goods and services, financial deeds and real estate deeds*". [13].

The metropolises are from this point of view the pivots of a "*new social grammar of space*" [14], since they concentrate the resources needed for the development of cognitive capitalism

⁷ The preservation of the farmland is a priority goal of the *Schéma Régional d'Aménagement et de Développement Durable du Territoire* (SRADDET) of *Région Sud*. Goal 1: Reduce by 50 % the rate of consumption of farmland, natural spaces and forestry areas 375 ha/year by 2030.

⁸ *Plans Locaux d'Urbanisme*, compulsory at municipal scale, which may include several tools for the protection of farmland such as the *Zones Agricoles Protégées* (ZAP).

⁹ Pertuis Mag', journal of the town of Pertuis, n°50, pp.10-11, July 2021.

characterized by the rapid spread of activities involving technological, commercial and logistical innovation. This mode of development finds its ideological *raison d'être* in the idea that "*territories should be economically competitive*" [15], favouring the development of innovative enterprises and sectors which require a concentration of "*highly qualified people, with talent, creative, creators of start-ups with a declared preference for very dense spaces which enable them to be sure of finding the jobs to which they aspire, to be connected at global scale, to interact face-to-face, to grow in the process the full range of knowledge available and to dispose of the best amenities*" (idem). Thus, as Gorz writes, "*the provision of services, non-material work, becomes the hegemonic form of work, material work is dispatched to the periphery of the production process or is simple outsourced*" [16].

This mode of development, mobilizing essentially the non-material resources of the economy, has as a consequence a disconnection within the Western countries from the material production of the goods consumed. Deindustrialisation in France has also meant a different mode of land use, consisting no longer of workshops and factories, which were also widespread in the rural space, but of hangars and transport and logistics infrastructure, supporting the development of ways of life and the consumption of goods which are now produced for the most part in developing countries [17]. The consequences of these transformations of the mode of production and consumption take material form today in the increasing dominance within these agricultural and rural spaces of the infrastructure needed for its development.

Local Agriculture in Search of Land

The first circle of protest against this planned extension of the ZAC was firstly that of the inhabitants who were expropriated along with the farmers. Among the farmers, it was in particular those who had recently settled there who were at the forefront of the campaign, with the support of the networks of unions and associations campaigning to defend the preservation of farmland in the name of the defense of peasant farming (*Coordination Rurale, Confédération Paysanne* and *Terres de Liens*)¹⁰. These movements are representative of a current dynamic within the farming community related to the defense of farmland, in particular that situated in proximity to conurbations and the development of farming on small and medium-sized areas, working in local, organic and mainly market gardening production. Among the farmers who are today mobilized against this ZAC project, most are those who have recently arrived and are not for the most part from a farming background. On the agricultural plain at Pertuis, which saw in the late 1990s a constant decline in the number of farmers, in particular those with medium-sized farms, local market producers of potatoes (with the label IGP: *Indication Géographique Protégée*) or asparagus (Pertuis '*asperge verte*'), or fruit farmers, there have nevertheless been signs of an upturn in farming activity. In this district, the number of farmers who arrived in 2019 increased for the first time since the end of the 1990s. There were 69 practising farmers

¹⁰ The *Confédération Paysanne*, a farmworkers union founded in 1987 for "peasant farming and the defense of farmworkers". A union that is opposed to a hyper-productivist vision of agriculture and supports local, organic agriculture.

Coordination Rurale, a farmworkers union founded in 1991 by farmworker in the Gers in dispute with the majority farmworkers union, the FNSEA, and opposed to the Common Agricultural policy.

The association *Terres de Liens* is an association founded in 2003 to support farmers in setting up by buying through the intermediary of a collective finance company financed by the inhabitants of agricultural areas.

in 2008, 42 in 2013 and in 2019, 97¹¹. At the core of these protest movements for the defense of farmlands, we may detect a trend towards a gradual renewal of local agricultural production. The current period is marked by a structural transformation of the model of agricultural production. The first consequence is the constant decline in the number of farmers, but above all the concentration of agricultural land in large expanses, which at national scale has diminished very little¹². The second consequence is the bolstering of the industrialization of agriculture by the development of agro-industries. Far from disappearing, agriculture over the past fifty years has changed its model of production. After the decline of the peasant farmers, it is 'agriculture without farmers' which is emerging inasmuch as the current development of agriculture is strongly correlated with a process of capitalist investment in agricultural real estate and a mutation of the modes of organization of farming work [18]. The decline and the gradual disappearance of the agricultural model of small and medium-sized farms is used as an argument in the framework of territorial redevelopment policy to justify the development of other economic activities. Yet it is these same public policies that support the 'relocalizing' of sustainable agriculture by proposing, as a follow-up to the EGALIM legislation¹³, *Zones Agricoles Protégées* and policies for the conservation of agricultural real estate. The current period is thus characterized by a contradictory movement, a "race between two competing agricultural models" [19]. The first, supported by the European and national policies of the Common Agricultural Policy, favours the development of capitalized businesses which are the vectors at international scale of highly intensive agriculture destined for international markets. The deployment of this agricultural model, which accounts for most of the European funding, plays a role in the disappearance of small farms where might be envisaged sustainable and agro-ecological agriculture such as that promoted in public legislation and discourse, without any actual measures of institutional or financial support being implemented today¹⁴ [20].

In the course of our observations in the field, the vast majority of the farmers we met were these new peasant farmers, who played an active role in this campaign, most of them young people from the city, who were engaged in this movement as the result of their social but also political itinerary. One of these farmers who had been a leader of the 2018 campaign, a graduate in agronomy settled here since 2016, described her itinerary as follows: *"Several of us came to live here, we met on our course, and then we thought of this idea of setting up here. The land belongs to my father, but we work on it collectively, and that has made it possible for some of us to settle here. For example, there is the work in the nursery, which is done by a farmer who's just arrived, and on the other side we develop the market gardening on short supply chain basis, we have an AMAP (Association pour le Maintien de l'Agriculture Paysanne, involving arrangements between local farmers and consumers for the supply of locally-grown produce) and direct sales. The idea of this project is really to show that we can do an alternative kind of farming, here we do organic, of course but the main thing is to work the land differently"*. Farmer, 32 years old, graduate of the *École d'Agronomie*, market gardener in an AMAP.

¹¹ INSEE, 2022, agricultural census, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2011101?geo=COM-84089#chiffre-cle-1>

¹²<https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/282981-recensement-agricole-comment-l-agriculture-evolue-depuis-10-ans>

¹³ LOI n° 2018-938 of 30 October 2018 seeking an equilibrium in commercial relations in the agricultural and food sector and healthy, sustainable food accessible to all.

¹⁴ Tribune on the absence of support for organic agriculture

"This campaign against the ZAC, I see it as a political battle. It's true, there is also the problem of finding land, of being able to set up here, the price of land is really very high in this region where there's a lot of tourism, but for me it's above all a political choice. I think we can't plan our future without getting back to hands-on work on the land. I couldn't go on working and living in town, I couldn't do it, here I do things that before I had only believed in a very abstract way". Farmer, 39 years old, fruit farmer, Masters degree in Humanities.

By way of illustration, the association *Terres de Liens* is currently supporting farmers setting in the Pertuis area, including a young cereals producer. *"In the Pertuis agriculture plain, where land plots are very much a patchwork, the average surface area of the farmed plots is low and the farm plots widely dispersed, this problem of access to land is more acute"*. Nicolas' project is supported by *Terres de Liens* which acquired 5, then 10 ha of land to enable him to develop his business activity as 'peasant farmer - miller - pasta maker'. *"These land plots will give him the means to increase his production, diversify his crops and have better rotations. So the idea is both to maintain the already existing farming activity and to protect high priority land. The plain of the Durance, in particular around Pertuis, is subject to strong pressure"*¹⁵. These newly installed farms, supported for access to land by community associations, constitute today a characteristic feature of the local redeployment of agriculture, facing not so much the lack of agricultural projects but rather the difficulty of access to land for a generation of farmers outside the framework of the family and bearers of 'micro-projects' related to a professional reorientation. In the interstices of the reconfiguration of the rural environment marked on one hand by a withdrawal from agriculture of medium-sized farms and on the other the concentration of farmland, there have emerged at local scale projects involving the 'repossession' of an alternative model of development of agriculture.

The locally-driven agricultural projects are rooted in organic agricultural practices, or permaculture, and are based on traditional knowledge and know-how. This type of farming on small farms, practised by the 'new farmers', represents a pathway, a perspective which might in due course constitute a sustainable alternative to the development of rural territories. The increase in the numbers of new farms outside a family framework, the redeployment of this small-scale agriculture, is today the issue among the political demands of ecologist and associative movements which make these 'returns to peasant farming' a core issue in a utopian project. The community associations supporting local agriculture, such as *Terres de Liens*, have spread over the past few years, giving this marginal dynamic a utopian and political dimension. Recently, the network InPact, *"a committed and militant network for peasant agriculture"*¹⁶, has been coordinating the mobilizations of the community and has launched a campaign *"to support the installation of 400 000 farmers"*, with the slogan *"We need a France with a million peasant farmers"*. *"The successful systems of production in sustainable agriculture are those that make use of the know-how of the peasant farmers, well placed to understand the complexity and the global nature of the environment. Since the agro-ecological transition and securing good quality food are necessary, 'only the determination of a more numerous and more fulfilled*

¹⁵<https://terredeliens.org/provence-alpes-c%3%B4te-dazur/fermes-de-la-r%3%A9gion-provence-alpes-c%3%B4te-dazur/saint-domingue/>

¹⁶ <https://www.agriculturepaysanne.org/InPACT>

farming population can meet these huge challenges"¹⁷. Like the dynamics deployed by the protest movements of the 1970s, in their 'back to the land' drive, the current support offered to young farmers, including by the first generation of these neo-rurals, constitutes a key element for enabling these utopian projects to take root.

The social and political background of these farmers who are setting up is fairly similar, or at least close, to that of other militants, issued from networks of activism, who are engaged in the campaign against the Pertuis ZAC, the campaign against the *Zones à Défendre* and the occupations of the site. There would appear in fact to be a generational movement, in particular for the fringe of young graduate urbanites, for whom the question of the meaning of work and career choices today represents a key issue in the utopian forms of commitment. It is difficult to assess statistically the scale of this phenomenon, and no doubt its social and its political dimension are more related to the utopian value that it represents for a generation of militants a majority dimension.

The Pertuis 'Zone à Patatoes' (Pertuis Potatoes Zone): Autonomy as A Political Value

Echoing the choice of lifestyle and political orientation adopted by these young urbanites who are returning to the land to engage in peasant farming, the defence of the farmlands today mobilises another militant fringe, which by the construction of the *Zone à Défendre* seeks in the autonomous zones to experiment with an alternative form of communal life. In our study area, part of the land earmarked for the construction of the business activity zone were occupied by a ZAD which took the name '*Zone A Patates*' (ZAP). The first action of this occupation was to replant certain wasteland areas to produce potatoes, a time-honoured crop of the Pertuis area, today in decline because of competition from countries of the north and east. In April 2021, more than 300 people came together at the behest of local community organizations and farmers mobilized against the project to "plant potatoes" on part of the site. On this planting event, the call of the '*Soulèvements de la Terre*' organization which had just been set up¹⁸, with peasant farmer organizations, individuals and movements for the defense of the environment and for the climate¹⁹ called for this planting campaign. It was following this demonstration that about a hundred 'occupiers', mainly young urbanites, from the region or other ZADs, and who at this site as elsewhere made the relation with the land a crucible of social, cultural and utopian experimentation. The occupation was also made possible by the existence in this area of several houses whose occupants had been paid compensation and ordered to leave the premises. This evacuation had been made possible by the 'financial partnership' of the EPF (*Établissement Public Foncier*).

In the interviews carried out with 'Zapists', the relation with the land and work on the land is valorized in the name of the construction of autonomy, and planting crops as an action that is at once material and symbolic of this quest. In the occupied area, the replanting of wasteland,

¹⁷ Blog managed by the network InPact in the paper Médiapart, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/pole-inpact/blog/050221/la-france-besoin-de-ses-paysan-nes>

¹⁸https://lessoulevementsdelaterre.org/?fbclid=IwAR2PU9GWOqGrmlj_j8VyoICYRYF6mKxZFXhdItaKhJ2nbE6Men5SyNdZnFM. This goal of this movement is to relay and support at national scale the movements for the defence of farmlands, a follow-up to the "spirit of the BDL ZAD".

¹⁹ Members of *Soulèvements de la Terre* : *Confédération Paysanne, XR, Alternatiba*

the development of a market garden in a ZAP constitutes an action that highlights the construction of an alternative model. Many of the 'Zapists' that we met were not particularly familiar with the agricultural matters or the different production techniques but had made local agriculture a symbol in support of other causes. The act of cultivation thus took on a symbolic dimension for enhancing local solidarity.

During the occupation of the ZAP, the planting phases were times of collective action, providing the basis for developing relations between the occupiers and the other collectives and individuals mobilized. The planting and harvesting of potatoes in April and August 2021 were described on the ZAP's blog as follows: *"There have been a lot of us during this first season of campaigning which saw the planting of potatoes and five big get-togethers. There were more than five hundred of us for the planting in spring. Despite the summer heat, more than a hundred of us came to take care of this crop and organize the next stage of the campaign. It's interesting to think up various projects for this land and these houses. Such as subsistence farming, orchards, having spaces to develop alternative types of medicine (herbal medicine, acupuncture, shiatsu, etc.). Organizing cultural events. Feel free to come down here and talk about it and organize workshops for inspiring and implementing ideas like these"*.

These experiments were seen by the people we met as an apprenticeship in autonomy. Clochette who *"arrived right at the beginning, when we planted beans, corn, to take back the land"* said that she came to seek an experience that was somewhat different from what she had known before. *"I was trained to work in business, I worked a bit in organic, then I changed track, I trained as a baker in Brittany and I had quite a bit of experience on the farms of peasant bakers, but it wasn't very political, but here I've come to look for something else. I had my heart set on being in at the start of a collective: meeting up, how to organise the campaigns, to see the human relationships, the huts in the trees, the zip lines, to experiment, learn, and also to offer what I am, in a nice big life-size laboratory"*.

The occupation of farmland is thus a vector for the deployment of a communal utopia based on the quest for autonomy in relation to the dominant mode of development. Distancing oneself from 'the habits of urban life' is a recurrent theme in our interviews, as is an apprenticeship in a certain kind of simplicity, the ability to live in a disconnected world.

"I gave up my studies to come and live here, to get involved in the campaign. In fact, I don't think it's really a 'campaign', it's more a way of life that becomes a campaign. Here we are trying to construct something new, something different, in our relations, to really be at the intersection), to do things together but in such a way that everyone can find their place, to feel they belong. In the end, it's still a way to campaign, this way of living, we don't forget the combat that's out there, but for me it's in the background". Gully, 23 years old.

"I arrived here at the end of February. I came because I knew that it was a 'Zone à Défendre', and personally I'm a 'gilet jaune' ('yellow jacket' protest movement), so through other 'gilets jaunes' I was told that planting potatoes and actions there'd been earlier at Pertuis, there was first the occupation of the land, which interested me more than planting potatoes. So, in the end, here, I've learned to live without using a smart-phone, I've started living again. It's true it's a bit complicated without the GPS, we haven't got Internet and there are lots of things we can't do, but in the end

it's better like this than to miss out on life. I really like the pace of life it gives us; I get the feeling it makes us stronger". Le J., 34 years old.

The ecologist utopia expressed in the ZADs and the movements for reclaiming the farmland reflects what we were able to observe in the course of our previous surveys on the fate of students in environmental sciences [21]. Among the previous generation, who graduated between 2016 and 2019, some of them preferred to give up the professions and the jobs their training had destined them for (mediators for the environment, agricultural development managers, agronomists), to try out other pathways which they refer to as alternative. During internships, travel or woofing²⁰, but also periods of varying duration spent in ZADs, they have sought to discover experiences and ways of life that are on the fringe of the dominant model of production and consumption. Through this quest, their goal was to construct and make a success of their own projects while thinking that the multiplicity and accumulation of these alternative actions would make a social transformation possible.

The occupation of the *Zones à Défendre* plays a part in these social trajectories and the political socialization of a generation who, by their demands for autonomy call into question established norms of work and professional careers. The utopian dynamic inculcated by the installation of a ZAD is thus presented in a limited time-frame, partly because of the evacuations which they are subjected to, but also because of the intermittent nature of their frequentation. But these short stays are also intended to be the vectors of a more distant future, formative moments which through the aggregation of individualities may federate other future possibilities. Places to pass through or living spaces for others, these spaces also represent 'refuges' for the self in the face of a model of constrictive salaried work [22].

The Pertuis ZAP was evacuated by the police in June 2022, and the site was razed to the ground, with the destruction of the huts and the occupied houses, and also of the cultivated plots and gardens that had been installed. The occupants of the site left, in certain cases to occupy other places (squats at Marseille, other ZADs), and others "*settled in the vicinity*". The occupation was over but not the battle, since today a collective has launched legal proceedings and the extension project had been frozen by the *Métropole*²¹. The presence of the ZAD in this conflict was decisive in the positioning of the *Métropole*. Furthermore, a new network has emerged, which remains mobilised, occasionally also invading the former market gardens of the ZAD to go and harvest certain vegetables and seeds that are growing there again.

IN THE FACE OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS, CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN QUEST OF UTOPIAS

One of the major transformations that has occurred in French society since the 1970s is the role of environmental issues in the construction of social and political demands. These mobilizations for the defense of farmlands may today be supported by a wider militant citizen

²⁰ 'Woofing' is a combination of travel practices which consist in sharing life and work on an organic agriculture farm. The term comes from the acronym 'WWOOF', meaning World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms. The first experiment dates from 1971 in England, but its development within the international network's dates from the end of the 2000s.

²¹ Nomination of an assessment commission for the project in June 2022 by the *Métropole* which put its realisation on hold. The Association *Terres Vives* made a formal request to be recognised as 'competent' to be heard as a representative of civil society by this commission.

network of associations, inasmuch as the preservation of farmlands has also become an issue of the preservation of biodiversity and of adaptation to climate change.

The defense of farmlands is today led and relayed by the associations working for the defense of the environment on account of their environmental and ecological value. In the text of the petition launched by the Pertuis citizen collective *Terres Vives*, which was formed to oppose the project, the preservation of farmlands is presented as an element that is essential in terms of the possibility in the future of adapting to and combating climate change. *"At a time when the IPCC is calling for "working actively for the reoccupation of the land, by campaigning against their artificialization", the priority is no longer to build commercial zones or road infrastructures or develop urban areas"*²². Similarly, the Chair of the association *SOS Durance*, an association for the preservation of the environment, also strongly engaged in the defense of farmlands, gave pride of place in his speech to the ecological importance of these endangered spaces. *"We have no clear answer regarding the projects, their ecological impact, what might justify such a concretization of the land. How the land could continue to play their ecological role for biodiversity, the absorption of water, the maintenance of cool temperatures. There is no serious argument to allow us to believe that this project would not be destructive for biodiversity. If we wish to live in peace with nature, it is more important than ever to give these wild spaces and farmland back their role and to call a halt to the artificialization of the land"*²³. In the face of the increasing artificialization of the land, which gives rise to a wide range of ecological and climatic problems, the farmlands represent spaces that enable not only improvement of the mitigation of climate change, but above all to envisage adaptation to its effects.

On the common ground of the struggle, at local scale on the 'land under threat', different militant networks and traditions, or farmers and local inhabitants and associations for the defense of the environment and Zadists transform the forms of expression of politics and citizen engagement. The campaign against the Pertuis ZAC has enabled actors from different social milieu, militants of various persuasions and different generations to meet and get together around a common goal. It has mixed demands and fuelled social new social and political aspirations. This experience of the occupation farmlands has given present day campaigns and demands a broader capacity for transformation. Through the synergy that these campaigns generate between different social worlds, they construct a new relation with politics.

Within the ZAD, the issue of the relation with politics and the political education of the occupants has been a core element of its functioning and organization. Meetings and decision-making are carried out both as experiments in self-management and direct democracy processes. Beyond the internal organization of the living space that the ZAD represents, the organization of actions, artistic and cultural events or debates and demonstrations have constituted supports for a renewal of forms of political socialization and also for the utopian expansion of the citizen engagement. *«Certainly, it's not easy every day to get organized, to do at least the minimum in terms of respecting a mode of functioning, it's a source of conflict too, and that takes up a lot of time in discussions, to take decisions. At the same time, it's the whole point of this kind of experiment, in any case for me it's been a bit upside-downside, I'm a bit lost in too much engagement in the ZAP but that also gives me so much". Martin, 24 years old.* The space of

²² Petition calling for the withdrawal of the project.

²³ Interview, Chair, Association *SOS Durance*

the ZAP has constituted an important place of political socialization for its occupants, but also more broadly as a 'place of encounter and exchange'.

Even though the occupants of the ZAD were relatively few (about thirty people on average), and focused on the occupation of the site, they brought to the territory of Pertuis modes of action and engagement that were different from those that derived from the citizen collectives engaged in the campaign against this project. The meetings for the preparation of actions and demonstrations, which we attended, were open to all, and brought together both local residents, representatives of associations and farmers. These meetings were sometimes also the occasion for a collective meal when students from Marseille or local 'XR' groups from Aix or Marseille or other sympathizer associations were expected. The organization of an event such as the *Charivari* which brought together at Pertuis more than 1000 people in a kind of 'demo - carnival' was the occasion for numerous exchanges and also for an apprenticeship on each side of the different forms of engagement.

In the course of these exchanges, the 'Zadists' were brought up to date on the 'ecological and climatic issues' related to the project. The installation of a ZAD, as we have stressed, is not necessarily motivated by environmental concerns. The issues are rather related to questions concerning the conditions and meaning of work, inter-person relations and communal living. Nevertheless, by coming to live on this site, the Zadists also acquired knowledge related to cultivating the land, and through exchanges with the local associations for the defense of the environment, or the farmers at the site, they learned about the climate and ecological issues in the region. Because of the generational character linking these movements of the ZAD with other forms of present-day environmental protests, XR or Alternatiba, they together fuelled the construction of a utopia integrating the local ecological issues.

The presentation of the demonstration on an autonomous and anarchist Marseille information blog, describes the process in these terms: *"One part of the 86 ha of land under threat from the project, a rotation of a field cultivated with cereals and hay, hedges, fallow land, irrigation channels and workers' gardens, rich in biodiversity"* ²⁴. The experiments carried out at the Pertuis site, such as the environmental valorization of farmlands in a local development project offer, for the militants, most of them urbanites, mobilized around climate issues or for the environmentalist milieu an alternative to the discourse of urgency, anxiety and the irreversibility of the climate crisis. On the contrary, these mobilizations around the farmlands offer an experience of the possible by the construction, if not collective, at least common, of a way out of the current climate crisis that is both ecological and social.

The presence of the ZAD has thus extended to the more traditional forms of militancy of associations or community and citizen collectives, modes of engagement valorizing an alternative relation with everyday life, with work, also linking the environmental demands to questions of the choice of society and possible alternatives. Thus, it is that an activist from the association SOS Durance describes the ZAP as a movement which has provided the means to 'unblock' the situation: *"When we heard that there was an occupation, to begin with, we wondered what that would lead to. But we need this type of combat. We stayed with legal things, very legalistic, but after a while that didn't work anymore. And then what happened at the ZAP,*

²⁴ <https://mars-infos.org/recit-et-communique-des-6365>

that also meant the local population could show that it's no longer possible, that things have to change. In fact, that did make us think about what we wanted to do with this land. The people who came, we have the right to live there".

Like the association militants, this mobilization locally led certain scientists and academics to engage in active support for this campaign. Some by offering their expertise, others by providing visibility within the scientific and media milieu for the campaign under way at Pertuis. It was these networks of naturalists at local and national scale which brought their expertise, playing a role in making visible species which could be protected, the measures envisaged and putting their expertise at the service of the campaign. In the continuation of these mobilizations for the defense of farmlands a collective of 200 natural scientists was set up to provide systematic support for these campaigns. *"At Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the campaigning naturalists have had strong influence on the victorious outcome of this resistance, by discovering species that had not been detected during the impact studies, and above by making common cause in the struggle with non-humans. In their wake, we are organizing a network of campaigning naturalists on the whole territory, 'Les naturalistes des terres'. We seek by this action to give our action a political orientation and to lay claim to a necessarily anti-capitalist dimension"*²⁵. Finally, the issue of farmlands, because it can be constructed as a collective project offering the protection of an alternative way of life, of social organization linking up social, political, ecological and economic issues, today focuses a utopian project based on two historical trends which have fuelled environmental protests, political ecology and scientific ecology. And this is no doubt a factor that helps to explain the victories that the majority of these campaigns achieve.

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