

Building food self-sufficiency from a territory of conflict

Alessandra Miglio

Marseille National Higher School of Architecture (Master degree obtained in 2023)

alemiglio.virgilio@gmail.com

Diverse local initiatives of resistance arise against the land grabbing by the agro-industrial complex and the land artificialization. These struggles often lead to a collective process of setting up peasant farms, and sometimes they succeed in subtracting large areas of land from the capitalist production system - in the case of this study, 1650 hectares of hedged farmland threatened by a new airport project near Nantes. This study first analyses how the inhabitants of the Notre-Dame-des-Landes 'zad' deal with the issue of food subsistence. Then it examines the relationships between zad's farming activities and the agro-industrial system, based on field observations on land, technological, epistemological, economic and normative issues. The zad is a complex reality with conflicts and interdependencies, where neo-peasant farms aiming for economic profitability coexist with subsistence agricultural practices. The survey reveals a collective and multi-scalar conception of self-sufficiency, giving rise to a vast network of material interdependencies among territories in struggle. Given its history and specificities, I will bring to light that the zad is not a model to be generalized. Rather, it is an experiment in otherness, overturning some self-evident truths that underlie our relationship with agricultural and food issues.

Keywords: collective subsistence; food self-sufficiency; resistance against agro-industrial complex ;

Introduction

In our Western societies, agriculture has never been so far removed from the daily lives of most of the population as it is today¹. In response to this disempowerment about agricultural and food issues, local protest movements emerged in the last decades for the reappropriation of the means of subsistence and for the defence of agricultural land against land grabbing by the agro-industrial complex or against what activists call Unnecessary Imposed Mega Projects of artificialization (airports, highways, etc.). Sometimes activists occupy the lands and work collectively for the food subsistence of the struggles, giving rise to a profusion of alternative neo-peasant experiences.

My research focuses on these forms of struggle known as 'zad' (French acronymous meaning 'zones to be defended'), and on the ways they take collective responsibility for agricultural and food issues. How these communities deal with the issues of subsistence? How do their farming activities emancipate themselves, if so, from the productive framework imposed by the dominant model? On what scale is food self-sufficiency conceived?

My research field is the Notre-Dame-des-Landes (NDDL) zad, in north-western France. Because of its historical depth and spatial extent, the NDDL struggle is considered as paradigmatic of the history of land-use conflicts (Rialland-Juin, 2016). On this area of 1,650 hectares of hedged farmland [fig.1], grassroots movements have been fighting over forty years against an airport project. It has a complex history, with several turning points such as the abandonment of the airport project in 2018 which led to strong internal conflicts (Comm'Un, 2019). Today, under pressure from the central government, most of the squatters are regularizing their presence and the very purpose of the struggle has changed: this community of around 200 inhabitants is now fighting to maintain a collective management of the land, to prevent it from being grabbed by the nearby industrial farms, and to defend the collective semi-secessionist way of life that emerged during the illegal occupation (Comm'Un, 2019). This article, taken from my Master's dissertation², will first describe the organization of zad's food system (the agricultural projects and their interconnections, productions and distribution modes). The second part examines the emancipation strategies of zad's farming activities from the agroindustry. Finally, the third part examines the zad's conception of self-sufficiency and its political implications, trying to nuance the representations that people might have about it.

¹ Before the industrial revolution, over 60% of the French population made their living from agriculture while today only 1% work in this sector (Les Greniers d'Abondance, 2020).

² MIGLIO, A. (2023). *Resisting the agro-industrial system. Investigation into the forms of collective self-sufficiency on the Notre-Dame-des-Landes zad*. Master dissertation in architecture, Marseille National School of Architecture.



[fig.1] Friday 3rd February 2023. The hedged farmland after the rain. Source: elaborated by the author.

Conceptual framework

I choose to structure the analytic framework of the emancipation strategies of the *zad's* peasants using the notion of 'new enclosures' which I borrowed from the Anthropocene specialist Bertrand Valiorgue. Valiorgue explains that the organization of our food systems is locked because of the control of large agro-industrial companies on the production chain upstream and downstream of farms. This was made possible by the multiplication of 'enclosures', a socio-political phenomenon of privatization and concentration of collective resources by a small number of actors who legally manage to obtain an individual and exclusive ownership over them. If this phenomenon of 'enclosure' began in England in the 16th century with the privatization of communal land (Verdier, 2021), it is now extended to genetic resources, knowledge, technologies and other vital resources (Valiorgue, 2020). As a result of this enclosure, agro-industrial actors can manipulate markets and create dependence among conventional farmers, locking their choices of agricultural practices. This is how the material conditions of our food security are getting more and more beyond the control of institutions and civil society. In the light of this notion, the second part of my work is an investigation on the compromises and means implemented by the peasants of the *zad* to overcome these 'new enclosures' in the fields of land, technology, knowledge, economic and normative issues.

Methods

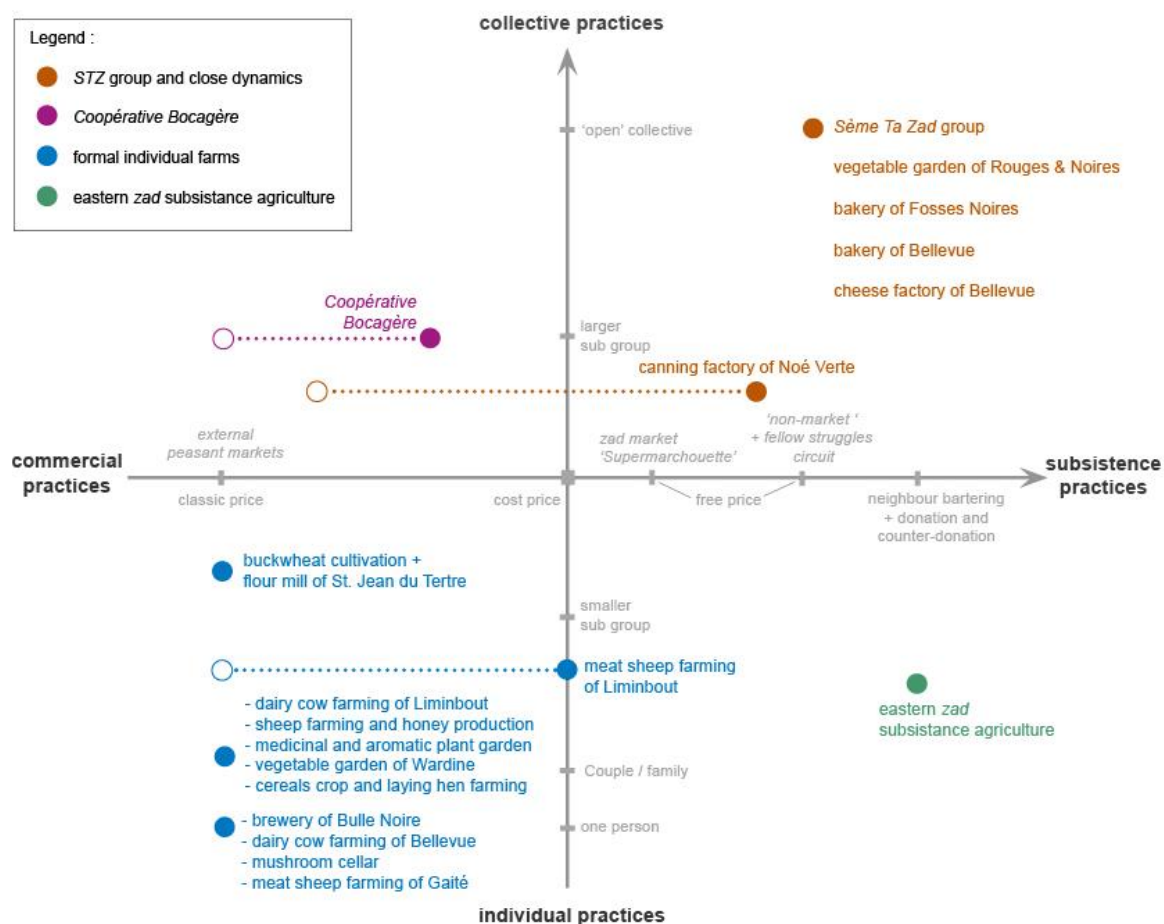
In terms of methodology, my research was based on the bibliographical study of scientific and non-academic literature, and on an ethnographic survey with fifteen local peasants. Since autumn 2022, I have made two fortnight-long field trips, the second of which involved a critical re-reading of a first version of my writing by the residents concerned. The revised text is accompanied by drawings describing practices, people and technical objects encountered. After defending my Master dissertation in June 2023, I concluded this research experience with a public presentation at the *zad's* library, where I left some copies of my work. During the whole survey I was led to question myself about the ethics of research in an activist environment. I particularly reflected on non-extractivism issues, on transparency towards the

people being surveyed, on the challenge of reporting on the complexity of the situation, on the security issues in disclosing some information, and finally on the search for a correct position as a researcher but also as an activist having personal links with some of the people observed.

Results

A portrait of the zad's agri-food systems

The farmers of the *zad* carry out a wide range of agricultural activities including horticulture, cereal growing, honey production and sheep and bovine rearing for meat and dairy production. Local peasants have also developed some processing equipment such as a canning factory, a cheese factory, a flour mill, several bakeries, and brewery. In addition to food production, forestry and sawmill activities provide wood for heating and for building. All that enable the *zadists* to satisfy their needs in a semi-autonomous way from traditional food circuits. But how are these productive activities organized? Taking stock of the *zad's* agricultural production systems was a complex task because of the absence of any unifying logic, which reflects, by the way, the libertarian attitude of this community. Nonetheless, I defined four production and resource-sharing systems using a four-quadrant diagram [fig.2] in which I sorted the peasant activities by their degree of collective action (vertical axis) and by their relation to market (horizontal axis, from strictly subsistence practices to the ones integrating the market system).



[fig.2] An attempt to diagram the *zad's* agricultural activities. Source: elaborated by the author.

What I have called the 'formal individual farms' are neo-peasant installations resulting from the individualisation of farming projects imposed by the government after the abandonment of the airport project. They aim for economic profitability and sell their products on farmers' markets outside the *zad*, sometimes maintaining non-commercial exchanges with other agricultural initiatives in the area. The group named '*Sème ta zad*' is a collective, purely subsistence

farming initiative, which cultivates land to nourish the movement and the fellow struggles. Here, the practice of the free price proves the absence of any injunction to economic profitability. Hybrid forms exist, between non-monetizing and integration into classical economic schemes: the *Coopérative Bocagère* combines a subsistence economy at the scale of a sub group as well as short-circuit sales on peasant markets. For its members, this partial integration into the market allows to develop technical infrastructures, in particular in the wood sector which benefits to the whole movement, as well as the possibility to distribute resources at lower prices or even freely within nearby militant networks. There are also more experimental forms of subsistence agriculture in the eastern part of the *zad*, bartering between neighbours, and unconnected from the other forms of collective organizations. The occupants of this area have historically rejected motorization as well as speciesist practices, and their activities remain outside any regulatory framework.

This diagram is to be considered as a kind of compass to navigate the complex reality of the *zad*. However, such a categorization should not erase the porosities and interdependencies between these different organizations, nor the internal complexity of each system.

Paths to emancipation

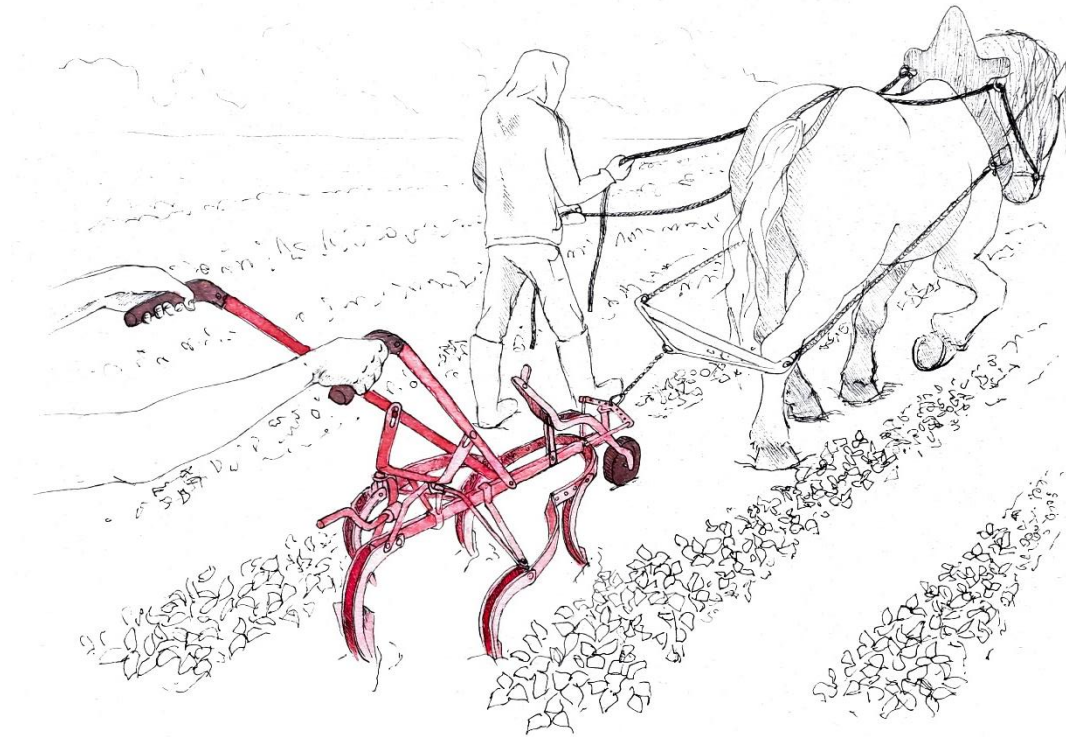
The strategies built on the *zad* against agri-food system 'enclosures' are many and varied.

- Land strategies.

We have seen that the grabbing of agricultural land is the oldest form of 'enclosure'. On the *zad*, the struggle has enabled several dozens of new peasants to get access to land, which is otherwise extremely difficult for anyone wanting to start a farm activity outside the family framework. Since 2018, these neo-peasants have signed individual agricultural leases covering 310 hectares of land. The movement against the airport has succeeded in securing the use of almost 800 hectares of land, including the forest parcels and the 360 hectares belonging to farmers who have refused expropriation by occupying their own land. The area has also undergone a re-division of land parcels which runs against the trend of land consolidation since the 1950s. Farmers in the *zad* have developed customary practices such as common crop rotations and collective hedgerow management, which counter the traditional regime of individual land ownership and management. As a result, this area is characterised by the superposition of different land uses and a mix of activities regulated by a collective governance. Despite this shift away from the dominant regime of private land ownership, the *zad* still faces persistent administrative uncertainty. Concerning the use of land, and so agricultural leases, negotiations with the Departmental Council are still in progress in order to get the activities and houses of the inhabitants out of their precarious status. This land struggle is confronted to the State's categorical refusal to legally recognise any collective entity emerging from the movement. In terms of land property, an endowment fund was created in order to buy the land and 'dilute' individual private property into a collective fund, but the Departmental Council still refuses to sell the land. If these obstacles lead, on the one hand, to increasingly individualistic behaviours, on the other hand a large part of the community still organize agricultural activities collectively in a fictitious compromise with the administration.

- Technological autonomy strategies.

Within certain groups of *zadists* I observed a noticeable reappropriation of pre-industrial techniques, such as animal traction for plowing fields [fig.3]. These techniques are defined by the 20th-century thinker Ivan Illich as 'convivial' (Illich, 1973), as they are tools that humans can master both intellectually and practically. Nevertheless, there is a constant negotiation between the ideal of technological conviviality and the utilization of motorized machines for certain tasks. The quest of technological autonomy is notably supported by the Curcuma collective, which organizes workshops for the maintenance and repair of communal agricultural machinery. This facilitates the sharing of technical knowledge about mechanics and the driving of such machines, without resorting to professionals. The blacksmith is also central in the *zad's* technical autonomy, as he can fix also 'non-convivial' tools, in a non-commercial perspective. Finally, it is crucial to note that there is no dogmatism in the *zadists'* search of technological emancipation, and that moreover this ambition is not uniformly shared or pursued with the same level of commitment by all the peasants.



[fig.3] Monday 31st October 2022. Animal-drawn hoeing of beans. Source: elaborated by the author.

- Epistemic enclosure.

On the *zad* I observed the breaking down of barriers between disciplines and know-how that oppose the compartmentalization of knowledge, the professionalization of practices, and the standardization of tasks (Wittorski, 2008) typical of our productive system. According to some anthropologists, the end of peasants due to agricultural modernization in the last century (Mendras, 1967) inevitably led to the loss of peasant knowledge (Sallustio, 2020). On the contrary, the *zadists*' search of subsistence has led to a certain 're-vernacularization' of knowledge: my field observations show that subsistence processes required the nuanced understanding of ecosystems and interdependencies, and so a complex and interdisciplinary knowledge. Concerning the know-how, the paradigm of 'poly-activity' (Pruvost, 2021) prevails: most *zadists* have skills in agriculture, animal rearing and care, raw material processing, tool maintenance, dwelling self-construction, machines operation, etc., and the collective mutual aid allow access to skills not yet mastered individually.

- Economic and regulatory issues.

The question of economic viability is still debated among the *zadists*. For the farmers engaged in subsistence agriculture, the choice of a non-commercial approach has significant counterparts. With the exception of some formal farmers and certain members of the Cooperative, peasant work is not financially remunerated. It is integrated into a subsistence economy that allows individuals to considerably reduce their financial needs. The study highlighted some strategies allowing to shield agricultural activity from productivity obligations dues to farming status. There is a shift in values from profit and efficiency towards the satisfaction of the primary needs of the collective and caring for living beings. The pursuit of this ideal has some impacts the comfort of farmers' work and their ability to make investments in agricultural equipment: scavenging and recycling are very common practices, as is the need to plan longer working hours due to on-the-job learning. Although several practices indicate a rethinking of dominant conceptions of work and economic value, it remains difficult for *zad* peasants to fully emancipate themselves from the regulatory constraints linked to the CAP agricultural subsidies, such as inspections related to organic certification or the prohibition of on-farm slaughtering. Without going into more detail, the four categories described have different relationships to economic and regulatory issues, which crystallize persistent conflicts.

Collective self-sufficiency: towards a freedom rooted in interdependence

This final section of the article returns to the notion of self-sufficiency as embraced by the zadists. First, the *zad* is not autarkic. Its inhabitants obtain certain food items from supermarkets or through a network of exchanges with other fellow alternative realities. My interviews with the zadists revealed a conception of collective and multi-scalar self-sufficiency exceeding the boundaries of the *zad*. The vast network of material interdependence and solidarity between struggling territories, of which the *zad* is part, provide the means of this collective subsistence on the margins of the capitalistic system, allowing to transcend the limits of small local ecosystems. For the zadists, material self-sufficiency is essential for the political autonomy of protest movements. Unprecedented in Europe in our generation, this territory has become a material base for a large number of anti-capitalist struggles. By developing the skills and material infrastructures I described, the inhabitants of the *zad* are able to make a true political rupture (Morel and Darrot, 2018), opening the perspective of a new freedom conceived as the abolition of dominations based on material dependence on a industrial production system and salary relationship to work. Consequently, the fieldwork shows that 'seceding' from the capitalist system and the State (Comm'Un, 2019) does not lead to rejecting all forms of interdependence, but rather to the rejection of so-called 'asymmetrical dependencies' (Berlan, 2021). By establishing chosen interdependencies with other fellow territories in struggle, the zadists emancipate themselves because they take back the control over their dependencies.

Conclusion

I will conclude by reflecting on the scope of this work and the ongoing experience of the *zad*. At the end of my investigation, it becomes apparent that the *zad* hosts very diverse stances towards agricultural and subsistence issues, that generally manage to coexist despite the absence of common lines engaging all inhabitants. The *zad* keeps being crossed by numerous unresolved contradictions and conflicts, leading us to detach ourselves from a certain naive vision of what we call 'alternatives'. Moreover, *zad* peasants are constantly seeking compromises in their organizations within this unprecedented land situation which followed the abandonment of the airport project. This leads to a state of permanent change that makes pointless any attempt to represent the complexity of what is taking place on this territory in a univocal and fixed manner. Given its struggle history and specificities, the *zad* does not represent a generalizable model, nor does it wish to be one. With its great internal complexity, the hedged farmland of Notre-Dame des Landes rather represents an experience of otherness, daring to question and overturn in practice certain assumptions that underlie our relationship to agricultural and food issues. In my view, the experience of the *zad* is particularly valuable as it involves a significant area of land that has been partly set free from the influence of the agro-industrial system and in which it is possible to put into practice some property, production, and exchange relationships that escape the injunctions of economic rationality of the market.

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