

France: The ZAD: between utopian radicalism and negotiated pragmatism

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The ZAD's years-long confrontation with the French state harbors many lessons about the role of unity in radical struggles and the effectiveness of land occupation strategies.

The global coronavirus pandemic has brought into sharp relief the many failures of contemporary capitalist states around the globe. These include the failure to ensure social and economic justice and to provide basic protections for the most vulnerable individuals and communities, from refugees to the houseless. Consequently, it has also made clear the need for social movements to not only resist the violence of the state and its facilitation of global capitalism, but to simultaneously and actively build a prefigurative politics toward an alternative society. Carving out autonomous spaces for mutual aid and radical politics is more important than ever.

Among the multitude of ways movements engage in prefigurative politics, land occupation struggles have long been central — from the historic Maroon communities formed by fugitive slaves throughout Latin America, the long-standing *Acampamentos* of the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil to the short-lived Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle in the aftermath of the uprising in response to the murder of George Floyd.

One such movement, relatively unknown outside of Europe, is the *Zone à Défendre* (Zone to Defend), the ZAD, in western France. Located in the commune of Notre-Dame-des-Landes outside the city of Nantes, the ZAD is the largest of dozens of occupation zones in France. It originated as an anti-development project opposing the construction of an international airport and it survives to this day despite repeated efforts by the state to crush it.

The struggles of la ZAD illustrate both the potential and the many challenges faced by today's radical occupation movements. History shows that when radical movements push the limits of global capitalist hegemony, states will respond with brutal repression. Examples, among many, include the Bloody Week that ended the 1871 Paris Commune, Turkey's military attacks on autonomous Kurdish towns and repeated massacres of Landless Workers' Movement activists by police or private militias in Brazil.

In addition to the use of all-out force, however, contemporary states have also increasingly turned to other tactics. As public opinion and human rights regimes pressure states to use "legitimate and proportional" means, they utilize legal-bureaucratic and ideological repression, to seduce, manipulate and forcibly incorporate movements into the system. We have seen this at work against urban squatters and rural land occupations around the world, where states employ a broad repertoire of tactics — from co-opting leaders to promoting gentrification. Ultimately, though, it is the threat of violence that makes such legal-bureaucratic strategies viable. The story of the ZAD repeats many of these patterns.

The ZAD also raises questions about the role of unity in radical struggle, as well as the effectiveness

of specific land occupation strategies. Is it enough to share a common enemy — in this case an airport development project — or must members share the same vision of prefigurative politics? As the French state attempts to incorporate the remains of the ZAD into a vision of rural capitalist development — as always, with the backing of police violence — how do members continue their struggle? Where are the cracks within the repressive state-capitalist system that radical activists can use to their advantage and for their survival?

To seek some answers to these questions, we made several visits to the ZAD over a few years, the last one being in early 2020. As sociologists and activists with a long interest in resistance and prefigurative politics, we shared sympathies with the movement and developed a more intimate understanding of the struggle by talking with residents and taking a closer look on the ground. What we saw indeed diverged from the dominant narrative, which had declared the end and defeat of la ZAD.

A successful coalition

Nearly 50 years ago, local opposition emerged to a plan for a major international airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, to be owned in part by private capital heavily subsidized by the state. Opposition began with the formation of associations, organizing meetings, publishing articles and discussing the project with elected officials. Over the ensuing decades, it developed into a unique coalition of farmers and anti-corporate and environmental activists, mobilized in the anti-airport struggle and gradually becoming more radical in their rejection of the project.

In summer of 2009, after a week-long Climate Action Camp held at the site, activists initiated the land occupation in solidarity with the few farmers that were refusing to move out. At its peak in 2012, the movement drew over 40,000 demonstrators from around the country against “the airport and its world” and in defense of the territory as a communal project. Over the last decade, the ZAD’s few hundred occupants — resident farmers and squatters alike — defended the territory of 1,650 hectares as a collective autonomous zone, while also building a prefigurative politics, practicing freedom and resistance in their everyday lives.

On the occupied territory, a new utopian society based entirely on shared participation and a collective sense of ownership eventually emerged. It included dozens of housing collectives comprised of make-shift dwellings, a bakery, a cheese factory, farming cooperatives, a hip-hop music studio, a library, the local radio station Klaxon, the ZAD’s own local newspaper, as well as venues for social gatherings that have drawn political activists from around the world.

Residents organized work as volunteers and through cooperatives, whether in the sawmill or art studios. They mapped the fauna in the area and formed a group to manage internal conflicts. They organized their plans in a General Assembly, making decisions as unanimously as possible, meanwhile enhancing their support network, which included several NGOs throughout France. The ZAD is an experiment in self-organized socialist living, with the aim of limiting its participants’ relationship to capitalism.

Since the start of the territorial occupation, residents have lived with the near-constant threat of violent evictions. Under *Opération César* in 2012, 1,000 riot police bulldozed their infrastructure and gardens and attempted evictions. But the state eventually gave up on this strategy due to the combined pressure from a massive resistance movement of thousands of activists on the one hand and a national critique of police violence on the other. As such, the attack from the police only emboldened the movement, leading to the collective rebuilding of structures and a genuine flourishing of communal life. By 2018, with growing national criticism of the airport project and its potential ecological consequences, the state accepted defeat and announced the cancellation of the

development. Instead of witnessing the marriage of state and capital, *ZADistes* and their supporters at last joyfully celebrated the victory of a people's struggle.

Hegemony through bureaucracy

However, the victory soon turned out to be bittersweet, as the project's cancellation was accompanied by expulsion orders against the *ZADistes*. The eviction operation of April 2018 was one of France's largest domestic operations since May '68. Approximately 2,500 gendarmes were ordered to evict the 300 residents, firing 11,000 grenades and injuring 270 people, among them residents and their supporters. This operation — which destroyed half of all the buildings and of course traumatized many residents — prompted some to leave the ZAD, while others resolved to rebuild their homes and vision anew, even if it meant working within and around the state's terms and conditions.

Anti-capitalist occupation struggles like the ZAD each have their own dynamics as they deal with police repression and evictions on the one hand, and on the other hand try to bring to life radical principles that reject capitalism while existing within it. At some point, they all grapple with the question of how to realize their revolutionary ambitions while confronting the necessity of compromising with the state and its bureaucracy.

Italian Marxist philosopher and militant Antonio Gramsci argued that Western capitalist states exercise domination through hegemony, or a combination of force and consent. Consent to the system is organized through the structures of civil society, which in turn become the site of ideological struggle. In France, as in many other places today, the state cannot only rely on the "iron fist" of the gendarmes but must also generate consent to capitalist ideology within broader society, thereby achieving success in their struggle to contain or erode the vision of a different world thrown up by the ZAD. Generating consent is even more important in this case, where a sustained resistance movement over time led the larger public to become unsympathetic toward the airport, as well as the use of police violence.

With the threat of force still lurking in the background, bureaucracy became the primary weapon of a regional government geared toward generating consent. At the end of spring 2018, in the midst of violent evictions, the state offered to negotiate with the *ZADistes*. It would allow them to stay, under the condition that they lease plots of land for the purpose of "economically viable" projects. These would be only agricultural, from sheep rearing to snail farming, and oriented toward market production. Residents would have to go through the long process of acquiring approval from the regional government agency.

From the state's perspective, these are concessions that do not "touch the essential," in Gramsci's terms. In other words, they avoid distributing land for free or permitting the existence of a socialist commune. Importantly, they are also techniques that facilitate the legal-bureaucratic power of the state.

This would usher in tremendous changes which the *ZADistes* tried to resist. Prior to the evictions, residents pooled resources, distributed food for free, established a "non-market" exchange and held weekly assemblies. With an intimate knowledge of the land itself, they had successfully challenged capitalist conceptions of both time and space and found alternative ways of existing in relation to nature and to each other. They aimed, as many utopian projects do, for a harmony of the individual and collective.

Instituting a system of individual leases and marketization could profoundly disrupt and corrupt the ZAD's vision of an anti-capitalist collective and undermine the diverse ways of life that constitute its

prefigurative politics. The new legal requirements would force people to work all day in a specialized agricultural field under the hierarchy of one owner, undercutting the leisure and freedom that they value and their principled rejection of specialization. Bureaucratic codes requiring “proper” construction for homes would obstruct the artful cabins and yurts that occupants had lovingly constructed — and reconstructed — over years. Above all, the concept of individual tenancy clashed with all that the ZAD had stood for. Reinforcing the principle of individualism is arguably the key to the state’s hegemony.

Apart from undermining everyday structures of life and anti-capitalist values, the state’s imposition of these legal-bureaucratic requirements played its part in sewing divisions among residents as well as within the larger movement that had supported the ZAD. Occupants had never really been unified by a singular political vision or lifestyle. Rather, they shared a common enemy in the form of the planned airport. Some came from professional backgrounds, while others had been part of urban, anarchist squatter communities. Veganism and the relationship to animals, whether dietary or in terms of ownership, were other divisions that cut through the ZAD.

When the overwhelming violence of 2018 forced them to make decisions over whether to negotiate with the state in order to remain, these internal divisions came to the fore. Through the General Assembly, the *ZADistes* tried to form a collective strategy to deal with the state. But the pressure to act fast, the threats of further evictions, demolitions of their buildings and strong differences of principle made it hard to unify.

Eventually the decision-making process broke down — divisions over everything from compromise with the state to practices of animal-rearing proving too much for the collective at that moment. Some decided to leave the commune altogether, while a few others tried to sabotage the negotiated agricultural projects. Max, a 30-year-old man who had lived at la ZAD for eight years and was taking refuge at a proposed sheep farm, felt that individual plans by *ZADistes* to legalize their plots betrayed the promise of the collective. For him, it was “the end of a dream.”

Erecting legal requirements around private property and agriculture also indirectly weakened the external alliances that had once sustained the ZAD and drawn thousands of supporters. These supporters had united in the mass movement against the airport, but with the cancellation of the project, the basis of the ZAD’s legitimacy became ambiguous in the eyes of the wider movement. The state could take advantage of this moment, using a repressive and divisive strategy that has been tried and tested in the approach to squatter movements everywhere. Now, only residents of the zone who accepted the state’s conditions would be considered acceptable. Those who rejected the state ideologically — or those who refused to play the legal-bureaucratic game — would be branded as criminal anarchists. According to Max, the NGOs and ecology activists who had opposed the airport would cheerfully support peasant agriculture, thus becoming legitimate in the eyes of the state. Why, he asked, would they continue to support the larger anti-capitalist, prefigurative politics and its association with anarchists?

The state’s combination of concessions after a brutal eviction of “criminals” was clearly a shrewd move in the struggle for hegemony, though not unfamiliar to land occupation movements ranging from Brazil’s Movement of Landless Workers to Freetown Christiana in the Danish capital Copenhagen.

A dual strategy of resistance

How have the *ZADistes* responded? What strategies are they using to defend their political visions? To be clear, after the evictions they faced little choice but to accept concessions: seven out of 70 housing structures that refused to sign agreements with the state were bulldozed within weeks.

In light of this, the *ZADistes* transformed their resistance into a dual strategy of occasional confrontation on the one hand, and circumventions and manipulations of the law, bureaucracy and the individualist logic of capitalism, on the other. They therefore combine disguised forms of resistance with continued acts of civil disobedience and public displays of protest. This dual strategy represents a shift from emphasizing the building of barricades and open confrontation with police toward new and subtle forms in the domain of everyday resistance which call for creativity and flexibility, looking for potential in the spaces between force and consent in the state's bureaucratic arsenal.

An example of this can be seen in how they seek to hold onto their dream of a commons, via some clever legal manipulation. Since the *ZADiste* vision of economic life was always based on a solidarity economy of cooperatives, one of the strategies under consideration is to sign individual property contracts as demanded by the state but then donate them all to a collective endowment that residents would democratically run. This is similar to what occurred in Freetown Christiania. A massive collection of land donations would transform the ZAD into a commons, once again. In other words, residents would superficially participate in the sacred capitalist institution of property rights — only to abolish it within their own territory.

But alongside the obedient signing of forms and contracts is the occasional confrontational tactic: in 2019, some residents occupied a town road, demanding that the government commission charged with determining the regional zoning include them in their discussions. At other times, they engage less in confrontational civil disobedience actions but rather, symbolic manifestations that frame their collective struggle. In January 2020, approximately 25 members made a public event of their formal submission of agricultural project applications for approval at the Notre-Dame-des-Landes mayor's office. As they cycled together from the ZAD to the mayor's office, it was significant that they acted collectively, even as they were submitting individual applications. Local media covered the small but important event, drawing attention to the issue and placing gentle pressure on the government office to approve their applications.

Perhaps equally as important as their clever navigation of the legal-bureaucratic system is a vibrant program of political education and the forging of links to anti-capitalist struggles around the world. We shared numerous conversations with residents about the danger of the ZAD becoming so immersed in the world of ecology and farming that they lose sight of their radical political imagination. Guarding against this requires consciously maintaining the solidarity actions they embraced over the projects' many years. This includes donating meals to migrant workers and those on strike and welcoming refugees and those denied asylum — an act that prefigures a society based on solidarity and challenges the laws of citizenship and borders.

Their collective construction of *l'Ambazada*, a beautifully designed gathering space, supports the goal of political education and international coalition-building among activists. In the last few years, they welcomed comrades from the Zapatistas, the Landless Workers' Movement and Basque independence activists.

Political education as a means of resistance is a far cry from building barricades. Yet it also serves radical goals — in this case, mutual learning and support among revolutionary movements. In the words of one longtime *ZADist*, "As long as the goals remain radical, you use the tools you have, even if they are the master's tools. We can sign contracts and use the law, as people have to all around the world. And then we resist in other ways."

Towards a convergence of struggles

Although members of the ZAD have practiced a prefigurative politics based on mutual aid, horizontal

power sharing, freedom and solidarity, much remains to be developed and reevaluated. In her [recent essay on the ZAD](#), French researcher and filmmaker Amandine Gay writes of the “crisis of a white utopia,” pointing out the ways in which French leftist movements have remained blind to the dynamics of racial domination, no matter how deep their political commitments run. Based on her history with leftist ecological movement spaces and her own visit to the ZAD, she notes the lack of ties with communities of color in surrounding towns as well as lack of attention within the ZAD to Black agricultural workers from Martinique and Guadeloupe or to Indigenous land struggles in French Guyana. The result is a reproduction of a “diffuse, ancestral violence.”

As one young *ZADist* from North Africa confided to us, he felt the effects of racism even among his fellow residents: “The way they look at us, they’re scared of us. They don’t understand their white privilege.” Still, he remains at the ZAD “in order to resist!” “We are ready,” he said. “We’ve been fighting the police all our lives.”

To be sure, *ZADistes* endeavor to and express support for diverse struggles from Rojava to Palestine, and they embrace undocumented migrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa. But in our own assessment, there is much work to be done in terms of actively undermining white privilege and whiteness more broadly.

In the few conversations we had around such matters, residents were certainly aware that the reality of police violence, for example, was only popularly condemned when they — white activists (from the ZAD or the Yellow Vest movement) — were the targets. They admitted that the decades of police violence against working-class youth of color scarcely drew public concern. But it was less clear how central these concerns were to their political activism, let alone other issues such as the stigma and increasing persecution of Muslims in France. This type of color-blind and “religion-blind” racism, originating in the state, in fact permeates French social movements and political organizations, whether the Communist Party or the [Yellow Vests](#).

Our own hope lies with the younger generation of activists of color who are shifting the conversation in France, so that with greater consciousness around racial injustice and domination, predominantly white occupation movements can expand their vision of justice to one that grapples more directly with racial and cultural difference and a decolonial perspective. We join Gay, asserting with love and solidarity with *ZADistes*, that only when white militants reckon with the centrality of white privilege can there be a true convergence of struggles.

Renewal of the ZAD and its vision

In January 2019, residents celebrated the one-year anniversary of the airport’s cancellation, in a forest feast enjoyed by 500 people. Forty people helped animate a moving puppet of a gigantic newt — a type of salamander — which they chose as their symbol. Artists and friends of the ZAD with architectural talent had designed and fabricated it the year before. A newt, as one of the *ZADistes* who was involved in its construction, Camille, explained, has the miraculous ability to regrow a damaged heart almost entirely. Less than a year after suffering devastating losses and wounds, a newt was a fitting symbol to grace their celebratory feast.

The general public seems to believe that the ZAD is over. But what we saw painted a very different picture. And there are reasons to be hopeful for the renewal of the ZAD’s revolutionary ambitions.

The ZAD has suffered a severe blow through the forced evictions and destruction of half of its new society. Yet those who remain have resurged with new tactics and a new awareness, displaying the resilience of the ZAD. Over several years now they have shown the possibility of creating a different society locally and, through a broad alliance of support, of withstanding the repression of the

militarized police. Now, they travel down a new road, trying to maintain the core of their radical vision through the adoption of other tactics.

The struggle at the ZAD is far from over. Only time will reveal to what extent their current strategy of everyday resistance and legal manipulation will work and thus enable the ZAD to be something other than what the state has in mind. This will depend on the movement's ability to create and expand existing cracks within the repressive state-capitalist system. However, some things seem clear, and there are lessons we can draw for future struggles.

Any radical community that takes the form of a prefigurative project that also resists domination must, as long as the present world order prevails, face the imperative of shifting their tactics. Large mobilizations enabled by a common enemy can indeed be powerful but depend on the potential for mobilization by the condemned enemy or a temporary weakness of the state. What united the larger mobilization around the ZAD was not "capitalism" or the "state" but the airport, as a mega development project that would destroy the ecology and social fabric of a local society. Thus, the thousands that mobilized in the defense of the ZAD — before the cancellation of the airport project — did not necessarily share the same radical vision of the *ZADistes* that inspired a new world on the territory. The common enemy in this case was limited to a certain kind of project within the state-capitalist system. It did not enable a wider coalition of groups and activists that would continue the struggle beyond the airport's cancellation.

Without the mobilization of a broad social coalition, the French state may not perceive the pressure to appear "reasonable and proportional" in its dealings with the ZAD. And the underlying fear of any state, that one struggle would inspire a spread of rebellions, could be laid to rest. Therefore, we argue, with changing circumstances, periods of mass mobilization and confrontation with repressive forces will end at some point, giving way to a much more subtle form of combat between the remaining activists and the state. This is no surprise, if we look at the history of other radical prefigurative movements, it is all the more pertinent for radicals to prepare in advance for a situation that forces some kind of coexistence with the state and capitalism.

This does not signify that utopian or radical autonomous initiatives are without value by any means. Indeed, they can be the lifeblood of a mass mobilization that goes on to achieve important victories and garners enough people power to have strong standing in negotiations with the state when the moment arrives. Even when they seem to fail, mass mobilizations might inspire the spread of similar rebellions, much to the fear of the state. And if their prefigurative development of new ways of living and relating are robust and inspiring, they have the potential to connect to similar attempts elsewhere, becoming part of a global counter-cultural and prefigurative alliance of radical communities.

But ultimately, any radical prefigurative struggle must transcend the goal of fighting a common enemy. While a common enemy leads to alliances that are sometimes necessary and useful, it also risks overshadowing the prefigurative vision. With a firm anchoring in prefigurative politics, radical struggles must continually revisit, nourish and expand their shared vision for a different society. Those of us in solidarity with radical prefigurative rebellions against the contemporary imperialist world order hope that the ZAD will be one of many that expands and secures its vision and continues to show us a way forward.

Massachusetts, Amherst.

Stellan Vinthagen is an activist-scholar, professor of sociology and Director of the Resistance Studies Initiative at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and active in War Resisters International.

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