

The War of the Worlds in France

Kristin Ross

In the past two years Les Soulèvements de la Terre, a network of ecological activists and groups, has used direct confrontations with polluters and developers to threaten industrial agriculture's monopoly on the French countryside.

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Pascal Lachenaud/AFP/Getty Images

Police officers facing off against protesters at a demonstration called by the collective Les Soulèvements de la Terre and other groups to protest the use of mega-basins in industrial agriculture, Sainte-Soline, France, March 25, 2023

For many months, the neoliberal government of Emmanuel Macron has confronted a population that rejects its politics en masse. Macron's proposal to raise the retirement age in France provoked opposition across the board—from far right to far left, and pretty much everyone in between—that united squabbling unions, inspired high-profile work stoppages across major labor sectors, and launched demonstrations in cities and towns that set the rhythm of daily life all winter and spring. Antipathy to Macron's austerity politics, which erupted dramatically in 2018 when the *gilets jaunes* protested a fuel tax hike, reached a pinnacle in March when Macron, realizing he would lose the parliamentary vote on the retirement reforms, relied instead on executive fiat to push them through. A new wave of uprisings began on June 27, when the police murdered Nahel Merzouk, an adolescent of North African descent, in the streets outside Paris.

In the face of such widespread unpopularity, Macron's government has resorted both to militarized police repression of protesters and to subtler strategies of diversion. When on June 21 Macron's minister of the interior, Gérard Darmanin, pronounced the "dissolution" of Les Soulèvements de la Terre (SLT), or the Earth Uprisings, a network of ecological activists and groups, it might have seemed only another tactic to divert attention from the government's unpopularity and the unchanging colonial situation in the *banlieues*. There was, Darmanin claimed, a new figure of terror wreaking havoc, not in the cities but in the countryside: the ecoterrorist.

But while targeting so-called ecoterrorists may well have been a useful diversionary strategy, the government had other reasons for wanting to dissolve SLT. In its brief two-year existence, through its theatrical, direct confrontations with polluters, developers, and infrastructure, the network has become a real threat to industrial agriculture's monopoly on the countryside. The administrative dissolution of groups suspected of antistate violence, the ultimate political weapon in the government's arsenal, had until recently been used primarily against Islamic terrorists and neofascist groups. Now it is being deployed against ecological activists. On Friday France's highest administrative court, the Conseil d'Etat, temporarily suspended the dissolution while it considers the merits of the case.

Les Soulèvements de la Terre is neither a declared association nor a party and has no proper legal status. The term preferred by its members to describe the shape of their activities is "constellation." Dissolving such a nebulous entity ("A social movement cannot be dissolved" is one of SLT's slogans) is proving far more difficult than in the 1960s and 1970s, when the state targeted Trotskyist and Maoist political cells. The government stalled for two months between announcing its intention to dissolve the group and doing so. It soon emerged that Macron was strong-armed into getting off the dime by Arnaud Rousseau, the head of the FNSEA, a powerful agro-industrial syndicate of big landowners frequently responsible, from SLT's perspective, for deciding from on high how land is allocated and used. "Today," Rousseau said in an interview in *Le Point* on June 15,

there is total impunity which will lead everyone to civil war. Farmers are not second-class citizens, they must be protected and their rights reaffirmed. The FNSEA, which acts responsibly, urges everyone to be calm and measured. But I am obliged to add that I cannot be sure of holding back my troops for much longer.

Rousseau had best be taken literally. His "troops" are fighting in what the journalist Nicolas Truong has called "a war between worlds." On one side, in the words of the anthropologist Philippe Descola, is "a small group of producers" engaged in intensive agriculture and monoculture farming, who either refuse to accept that agribusiness has any ecological consequences or simply don't care if it does. On the

other are partisans of an agriculture built around smallholdings and ecologically sustainable methods who recognize that climate change requires us to completely transform what we grow and how we grow it. Out of the many ecological crises confronting us, SLT has chosen to prioritize defending agricultural land from developers and agro-industrial encroachment. The overly abstract call to “save the climate,” in their view, must be brought down to earth, in fact to particular plots of earth. Their actions have included occupations, blockades, and what they call “disarming,” a form of sabotage conducted not by a few shadowy figures late at night but by thousands of people in broad daylight. In June 2021, for example, occupiers of the Lafarge cement factory poured sand in the gas tanks of machinery to keep the site disabled after their departure.

I first joined an SLT action in March 2022, in the Deux-Sèvres region of western France. It was a demonstration against mega-basins—huge pits that stockpile groundwater for some 7 percent of the region’s farmers, large landholders who grow thirsty crops like cereals and corn to feed livestock in factory farms. Groundwater is pumped into the mega-basins in the winter and stored for spring and summer, but its yearly replenishment is far from guaranteed in this drought-prone region, still less so due to climate change. The filling of the mega-basins with what was once a resource shared in common—like the land enclosures of an earlier era—has depleted the local water supply. Despite evidence that mega-basins allow agribusiness to consume more water than the natural environment has to offer while leaving small farmers at a loss, the government continues to approve their construction and lets illegal ones continue to operate. Half of the agricultural land in France is destined to change hands over the next ten years as farmers age. SLT’s actions in carefully chosen, mostly rural conflict zones like Deux-Sèvres have put the question of that land—its access and use—both at the center of political debate and at the center of a war.

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A recent issue of the magazine *L’Obs* contains a useful list of some of the casualties of that war: the pressures, insults, attempts at intimidation, and even physical aggression that defenders of agribusiness have directed against journalists, antipesticide militants, and opponents of destructive projects like artificial-snow ski parks. A young antibasin militant coming home from his daily jog was attacked by two men in his front yard who fractured his ribs, broke his nose, and put him out of work for a month. On January 30 Paul François, a farmer who successfully sued Monsanto by demonstrating to a court that he had been poisoned by one of its products, was violently assaulted in his garage by three men who tied him up and threatened him with a knife. “We’re tired of hearing you and seeing your mug on TV,” they told him.

Les Soulèvements de la Terre attacks infrastructure and property but not people. Its disarming actions might include digging up and dismantling pipelines used to fill mega-basins with newly privatized water. SLT views such actions—the primary basis of the government’s decision to dissolve the group—as self-protective, in that they seek to destroy what is destroying us: pollution and the capitalist system itself are weapons of mass destruction directed against our liberty, our health, and the land and other natural resources that sustain us.

The movement originated in a decades-long occupational struggle that came to be known as the Zone à Défendre, or ZAD. It began in the mid-1970s, when farmers refused to sell a pocket of land outside Nantes that was designated to become the site of an international airport. For years the state tried to no avail to wait the farmers out. In the early 2000s the state resumed the project, the farmers called for help, and a few hundred activists, younger farmers, and naturalists arrived. By the end of the decade a communal occupation had taken shape: participants constructed cabins and other buildings and devised alternative ways of satisfying basic needs—a kind of lived and livable secession from the state. What began as a defense of agricultural land over time came to entail protecting the very collective life project that took shape during its defense. After many years of legal wrangling, referendums, armed invasions by the state, and the destruction of homes in the zone, the ZAD won the battle: the airport, the Macron government decided in 2018, would not be built. Some of the occupiers who stayed at the site to continue experiments in collective farming later helped brainstorm and organize SLT.

I believe that resentment for the loss of the airport battle is in part what fuels the violence now being directed at SLT. Scratch the surface of the ecoterrorist caricature the government has manufactured and you’ll find its earlier manifestation: a Zadist. Days after Darmanin announced the government’s intention to dissolve SLT, he proclaimed the founding of an operation of “anti-ZAD jurists” designed to make sure that a ZAD, which a previous minister of the interior compared to a cancerous cell, would never again be allowed to put down roots in France.

The Zadists’ skill at building and maintaining broad alliances created panic among the elites. The Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre believed that this kind of alliance-building across wide social and ideological divisions was a feature of all battles over land. Though the ZAD’s battle was with “the airport *and its world*,” it was able to mobilize people—including conservatives, shopkeepers, and elected officials—who were not necessarily anticapitalist but who simply did not want to live near an airport. Zadists call this solidarity between people of disparate ideologies, identities, and convictions “composition.” The diverse makeup of the movement allows it to express itself through various actions; at the ZAD, these included filing legal briefs, building and maintaining communication with distant

support groups, confronting the police, cataloging endangered species on the zone, and sabotaging machinery. No one method was presumed superior to another; neither legality nor illegality was fetishized. Proponents of one method refrained from arguing the superiority of their way. The emphasis, as one friend put it, was on “tact, not tactics.”

After the victory over the airport, the enemy was ever-present but less tangible. Now that the airport was gone, how best to continue the fight against “its world”? The large, well-behaved pre-Covid climate marches in European capitals and elsewhere were deemed largely ineffectual, in part due to their abstract goals. What was needed was a rootedness in pragmatic local struggles, an attention to particular communities and their histories, and a way to unite these efforts into a common front with global ambition, unfixed and flexible but still organized.

In January 2021 SLT came into being when a hundred or so activists of different strains and persuasions—among them members of Extinction Rebellion, Youth for Climate, Amis de la Terre, and ATTAC—met with ZAD occupants and members of *paysan* unions like Confédération Paysanne to coordinate their activities and, as one friend put it, “link up the earth of the *paysans* with the planet of the ecologists.” They carefully orchestrated a series of actions: against a Monsanto factory in Lyon, in defense of workers’ community gardens in Besançon, and against sand extraction for cement manufacturing near Nantes. The group now has over 150,000 members across the world, including Noam Chomsky, the entire Zapatista community, and me. Over 50,000 people have joined since the dissolution; Greta Thunberg stood with members of the movement at the press conference held in Paris on the day of the government’s announcement and expressed her support at a summit days later.

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At the first SLT demonstration I attended, in Deux-Sèvres, there were a few thousand people—a crowd that seemed enormous to me and others then accustomed to the solitude of Covid confinements. A year later, at Sainte-Soline on March 25, again for a demonstration against mega-basins, we were 30,000, a testament to SLT’s talent for directing the gaze of urbanites onto the crimes being committed in the countryside. That day, police in armored vehicles surrounding the perimeter of the basin launched, by their own estimate, over five thousand grenades at demonstrators in under two hours, causing two hundred injuries and leaving two people at death’s door. Some of the grenades they used, not authorized anywhere else in Europe, are deemed military-grade weapons of war. The police blocked emergency crews attempting to reach the wounded.

In his analysis of the police violence at Sainte-Soline, the historian Christophe Bonneuil began by asking why the government was willing to go to war with its own citizens to protect a hole in the ground. First, he suggested, it felt the need to present a show of brutal force as a warning to the demonstrators in the cities, increasingly enraged by the use of executive privilege to pass the retirement reforms. But the government was also doubling down, he added, on its wholehearted support for productivist agriculture. It was in his view ready to kill its own citizens to protect capitalism's "unjust social order."

It was also clearly panicked by the sheer visibility, the public nature, of the mounting discontent—an anger so widely shared that it could cause thousands of people from all over the country, many of whom had not known of the existence of mega-basins a few weeks earlier, to travel hundreds of miles to a place city dwellers might describe as the middle of nowhere. A crowd that size moving slowly through cultivated fields is a strange, and strangely moving, sight. The last time so many French people felt the need to displace themselves for a political reason was fifty years ago, to support sheep farmers in the Larzac region in their (ultimately victorious) attempt to defend their land from expropriation by the government for use as an army training ground.

France's government—or our own, for that matter—doesn't care how many studies are written about capitalism's destruction of the lived environment. They aren't bothered by statistics or data or treatises or academic roundtables. They pay no attention to predictable, well-intentioned marches in the capital. But 30,000 people in the fields outside Melle in the middle of the Deux-Sèvres is something else.

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