

## "The Sweetness of Place": Kristin Ross on the Zad and NoTAV struggles

Kristin Ross, 14 June 2017. <http://www.versobooks.com/>

*Two struggles have come to define the ground of activism in mainland Europe: the zad (Zone À Défendre - or the zone to defend), and NoTAV (the No to Treno ad Alta Velocità rail line). Despite these struggles being little known in the English-speaking world, each offers a continuation of the kinds of localised, spatial conflict whose genealogy can be traced from the Paris Commune, through Sanrizuka in Japan, the Zapatistas in Mexico and Standing Rock in America, a form of struggle which has been analysed most forcefully in the work of David Harvey. In this extract from the introduction to the new ebook [The Zad and NoTAV](#) by the French collective Mauvaise Troupe, which offers English readers the first and most comprehensive narrative of the interlinked stories of the two movements, Kristin Ross offers an introduction to this "never-ending process of soldering together black bloc anarchists and nuns, retired farmers and vegan lesbian separatists, lawyers and autonomistas into a tenacious and effective community".*

In recent years the rise in the number of occupations and attempts to block what have come to be known as 'large, imposed, and useless' infrastructural projects bears witness to a new political sensibility. It is as if some time toward the end of the last century, people throughout the world began to realize that the tension between the logic of development and that of the ecological bases of life had become the primary contradiction ruling their lives. And, in many rural and semi-rural regions throughout the world – in the Larzac in France, for example, or at Sanrizuka (Narita) in Japan – struggles sprang up against state-control of land management. These were movements whose particularity lay in being firmly anchored in a particular region or territory . . . From the 1988 opposition to a large-scale dam on the Xingu River in Altamira, Brazil, through the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, to the Standing Rock Sioux's recent resistance to the North Dakota Pipeline, situated movements of this kind in the Americas have tended to be characterized by an indigenous base and leadership.<sup>1</sup> The two most emblematic and ongoing European territorial movements, the zad and NoTAV, however, whose intertwined stories are recounted in this book, differ from the American examples in that each holds together and is held together by people of vastly different cultures and practices, with no one social or ethnic group in charge. But by trying to block what the book's authors call 'the inexorable extension of a nightmarish world', they unite with their American counterparts in reconfiguring the lines of conflict of an era. In so doing, they make visible the silhouette of a new political grasp on the everyday and a way of managing common affairs. Henceforth, it seems, any effort to change social inequality will have to be conjugated with another imperative – that of conserving the living. Defending the conditions for life on the planet has become the new and incontrovertible horizon of meaning of all political struggle.

The occupation of a small corner of the countryside outside of the village of Notre-Dame-des-Landes in western France is the site of the longest lasting battle in the country today. For forty years the construction of an international airport on that spot has threatened to destroy 4,000 acres of agricultural land, wetlands, and woods. In the Susa Valley in the Italian Alps, the quasi-totality of a valley inhabited by 70,000 people has battled for over a quarter of a century the construction of a high-speed train line (Treno ad Alta Velocità or TAV) through the Alps between Turin and Lyon. While it is frequently said of indigenous peoples that they 'stand in the way' of progress, in each of these regions in Europe a heterogeneous but highly efficient coalition of people has effectively done just that. They have succeeded in delaying, obstructing and perhaps, ultimately – time will tell – blocking, the progress of construction and the destruction of their regions. In the first chapter of this book readers will find the most thorough chronology of the two movements available in English – here, though, is a brief sketch of the two projects that generated the opposition.

## **The Airport and the Train**

Justifications for, and sponsors of, a new airport on the outskirts of the city of Nantes in western France have changed over the years since their origins in the dreams and magical thinking of a regional bourgeoisie entranced by the booming developmental rhetoric of the peak years of the Trente Glorieuses. At one point, the airport was slated to be the departure and landing point for the Concorde, in an attempt to relieve Paris of the massive noise pollution this ill-fated technological wonder produced in its relatively brief life. After this, promoters of the project billed it as the third airport for the Greater Paris region. In recent years, it has been rebranded to become instead the 'Great Airport of the West', a kind of bid for prominence in the fierce regional competition over accessibility, tourism and commercial opportunities. But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the project was first floated, one of the earliest (and still worth reading) critiques of the developmental rhetoric promoting it likened the project to the cargo-cults of New Guinea, where simulacra of airport runways were carved out of the brush to attract airplanes. Nantes businessmen believed that 'if you build it, they will come': they had decided the industrial destiny of their region was one that could soon make Germans and Japanese tremble. A new airport would transform the Nantes region into the next 'airian Rotterdam of Europe.'<sup>2</sup> The sum spent on studies designed to give a scientific veneer to the project far exceeded the purchase price of the land needed for its realization – an area regularly described as 'almost a desert.' This description could only have been the echo of the familiar colonial trope indicating a perceived scarcity of population preceding invasion, since the area chosen was in fact largely wetland – an environmental category virtually unrecognized in the 1970s.

And so, an area of some 4,000 acres containing several dozen farms was designated in 1974 as the site for the future airport. The area was decreed by the state to be a ZAD, or 'zone d'aménagement différé', a zone of deferred development. This administrative status allowed the state time to begin buying up land from farmers willing to sell out or, in the familiar pattern of rural exodus, to buy whenever a farmer died and his children sold out. Yet while the slow process of expropriation was continuing, the energy crisis sunk the overall project into one of the intermittent long naps that mark its history. This one lasted throughout the 1980s and 1990s – the airport was forgotten, not entirely dead but not entirely alive either. In the meantime, though, the zone profited from what could only be called a secondary gain from the illness of having been destined to be one day covered over in concrete: much like Cuba during the Special Period, it had inadvertently been transformed, *de facto*, into a protected agricultural zone. Developers were hesitant to build near a future airport and no one wanted to live next door – the suburbanization that was befalling much of the area around Nantes was held at bay in Notre-Dame-des-Landes.

Opposition to the airport by farmers who refused to sell their land, some of whom were active in the Paysans-Travailleurs movement and had supported striking workers during the 1968 insurrection in Nantes, and townspeople living near the zone had gotten underway as soon as the project received administrative approval back in the early 1970s. But it was not until the new century, when the Socialist government under Prime Minister Lionel Jospin pumped life back into the construction agenda that something resembling the current coalition made up of farmers, townspeople and a new group, squatters and soon-to-be occupiers, began to take shape. With the arrival of the first squatters around 2008, the ZAD (zone d'aménagement différé) became a zad (zone à défendre) – the acronym had been given a new combative meaning by opponents to the project and the administrative perimeter of the zone now designated a set of battle lines.<sup>3</sup> One of the most peculiar aspects of the two infrastructural projects is their redundancy vis-à-vis existing services. An international airport exists already in the city of Nantes and a train line already runs through the Alps (usually operating at less than half capacity) between Turin and Lyon, in central France.

Nevertheless, in 1991, a new high-speed line was planned in Italy to be added to the current one as a key element of the east–west corridor linking Lisbon to Budapest initially, and ultimately to Kiev. The initial goal of the project, a joint partnership between French and Italian governments and the European Union, was to enhance the movement of passengers and tourists, while also facilitating the integration of managers and corporate executives, between Italy and the Rhone region in France. Subsequently, the future train has been refunctioned to be used mainly for the transport of freight, despite the fact that the flow of goods between France and Italy has declined steadily since the beginning of the new century.<sup>4</sup> The project elicited little opposition on the French side of the Alps. On the Italian side, however, in the Susa Valley, an area with a complex economy based in industry, agriculture, and tourism, and a historically united population known for its anti-fascist resistance and earlier opposition to infrastructural projects, reaction against their Valley being transformed into nothing more than a transit corridor was swift, with the first coordinated group of citizen opposition organized in 1994.

Space-specific, geographically defined struggles have a kind of refreshing flat-footedness about them. David Harvey has suggested this is because the fact of being bound to a particular space creates an either-or dialectic – something quite distinct from a transcendental or Hegelian one.<sup>5</sup> Demands, concerns, and aspirations that are place-specific in kind create a situation that calls for an existential and political choice – one is either for the airport or against it. In the words of Marx to Vera Zasulich, writing in the context of an earlier rural battle against the state, ‘It is a question no longer of a problem to be solved, but simply of an enemy to be beaten . . . it is no longer a theoretical problem . . . it is quite simply an enemy to be beaten.’<sup>6</sup> A 57 kilometer tunnel will either be drilled through the Alps or it will not. An airport will either be built in farmland or it will not. Other countries know this well. In the most stirring and significant precedent to Notre-Dame-des-Landes, expropriation of farmland for the Tokyo Narita airport in Japan started in 1966, and by 1971 a decade of murderous battles between the state and farmers who refused to give up their lands, supported nimbly by far-left Zengakuren, had begun.<sup>7</sup> It was these highly exemplary, even Homeric battles, immortalized in the films of Shinsuke Ogawa and Yann Le Masson – what I have come to regard as among the most defining combats of the worldwide 1960s – which, according to the testimony of many French militants of the era, inspired their own frontal and physical clashes with the police in the streets of Paris and other French cities. Breton documentary maker Le Masson’s film of the Narita battles, *Kashima Paradise*, screened in Nantes in the early 1970s, brought the Japanese example to the attention of early opponents in Notre-Dame-des-Landes. But the Japanese experience was not singular. A little earlier, an economic boom nourished an urge in Canada to build, outside of Montreal, and in time for the 1976 Olympics, what was destined to briefly become the largest airport in the world. Against the vigorous protest of the 12,000 farmers removed from their land, the Mirabel airport was built. But it was soon judged to be too far from the city and usage faded away in favour of the old Montreal airport. Mirabel was converted to a freight airport, but even that did not prove lucrative – for many years its desolate and empty terminal was used as a film set. Canadian prime ministers attempted to lure evicted farmers back to the region, with little success. In 2014 the terminal building was demolished at a cost of \$15 million.

But it is Spain – home of the proliferating ‘ghost airport’ phenomenon – that provides the best contemporary example of the pillaging of public funds for useless structures.<sup>8</sup> With a population of 47 million people, Spain now houses 52 airports. (Germany, a country with double the population of Spain, has 39). Out of those 52 Spanish airports over two-thirds are failing – in some, no aircraft ever lands or takes off. Yet the airports are staffed and maintained at enormous expense.

## Footnotes

1. See Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
2. See Jean de Legge and Roger Le Guen, *Dégage! . . . On aménage*, Collection ‘La province trahie.’ (*Les Sables d’Olonne: Editions le Cercle d’Or*, 1976). For a critical history of the developmental rhetoric and policies undergirding French postwar economic growth, see Céline Pessis, Sezin Topçu and Christophe Bonneuil, *Une autre histoire des ‘Trente Glorieuses’: Modernisation, contestations et pollutions dans la France d’après-guerre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013). Here and elsewhere, translations from the French are mine.
3. The new definition of the acronym has entered the Grand Robert dictionary in France: a ‘zad’ is defined as ‘a (frequently rural) zone that militants occupy to oppose a development project damaging to the environment’.
4. See Michele Monni, ‘Italian Politics and the NoTAV Movement: The Resiliency or Failure of Citizen Activism?’ and Lucie Greyl, Hali Healy, Emanuele Leonardi, and Leah Temper, ‘Stop That Train! Ideological Conflict and the TAV’, in *Economics and Policy of Energy and the Environment*, n. 2 (2012).
5. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 164–75.
6. ‘Marx-Zasulich Correspondence: Letters and Drafts’, in Teodor Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), p. 116.
7. See David Apter and Nagayo Sawa, *Against the State: Politics and Social Protest in Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).
8. See Christine Delphy, ‘B comme Béton’, [barricades-mots-zad.org/](http://barricades-mots-zad.org/).