

## The Zone à Defendre of Notre-Dame-des-Landes in France: An Ambivalent Space for Social Critique

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In public discussion forums in France, occupied *Zones à défendre* — or ZAD — have been overshadowed by terrorist attacks, mass protest events against a labour market reform and hooligan riots during the 2016 European football championships. This article deals with one of these ZADs. It examines an area near Nantes that has been occupied to prevent a large airport project. The so-called ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes takes on a key role as a model and place of reference in the network of French ZADs. The discussion addresses the questions whether and to what extent an occupied area can be described as a space for social critique, what spatial dimensions can be discerned and what geographical-local, symbolic-ideational and action- and interaction-related characteristics and codes enable us to grasp the element of social critique and its spatial components. I address aspects that are analytically relevant in answering these questions and offer insights into an ongoing research process. The analysis of the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes as a multi-dimensional, heterogeneous, spatial phenomenon subject to a continuous process of reconfiguration shows that it and its inhabitants cannot be subjected to any classification schemes and that the occupiers are border-crossers *par excellence*.

**Keywords:** Liminoid spatial phenomena, Victor Turner, anti-structure, ritual, infrastructural project.

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Whether it is urban development projects or plans to construct nuclear power plants, infrastructural projects bring about the politicization of public space, they trigger conflict-ridden debates on legitimacy, public trust and civic participation and regularly become objects of public protest (Pardo and Prato 2011: 15 ff.). As a collective public action against experienced political or social grievances or for or against political decisions, protest is not merely about being *for* or *against* something. It is simultaneously linked with demands to shape social change. The range of protest actions is broad and can comprise street demonstrations, occupations, violent riots, etc. The protesting actors are just as heterogeneous as the forms of protest they partake in. Often they emerge through social movements as mobilized networks of groups and organizations (Rucht 1994: 77).

In this article I examine the so-called ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, an area of protest located north-west of Nantes (department Loire-Atlantique). The area is occupied since 2009 by protesters aiming to prevent a large airport project. The project Aéroport du Grand Ouest, an international project to urbanize rural land, had been planned since 1963 and was declared a public necessity in 2008 (Kempf 2014). The ZAD is publically well known for the militancy, the persistence and the innovative potential of its inhabitants. The abbreviation ZAD stands for the official French term *zone d'aménagement différé* (designated construction area), *de facto* it also means *zone à démolir* (zone to be destroyed) in the French technocratic language. The

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opponents of the airport project reinterpreted the term ZAD with the militant meaning *zone à défendre* (zone to defend). The abbreviation ZAD in its neologistic meaning is a linguistic symbol that refers to the elementary meaning of the spatial component especially for occupation as a creative form of protest. However, the abbreviation *per se* is not linked to concrete locations, it rather embodies mental constructions, ideas and visions of life, which indeed take on a concrete spatial dimension in the design of the symbolic space of the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, but in part also exist exclusively as ideals, plans and wishful thinking at the spiritual and virtual level.

I address the questions to what extent the area can be described as a space for social critique and to what extent we are able to grasp the ambivalence that characterises the occupied area. In order to capture the ambivalent nature of the zone, the writings of the Scottish ethnologist Victor Turner on liminoid social threshold phenomena were selected as the theoretical foundations for the analysis.

The largest share of the analysed information originates from my participative observation in the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes. I visited the occupied area and took part in the daily life and the interactions of the occupiers. I compiled observation protocols, field notes, verbatim logs of informal discussions as well as transcripts of unstructured interviews. In order to create a basis for trust, I refrained from using audiovisual research material. The authentic, usually spontaneous discussions as well as optic impressions enabled me to generate the information on which the article is based. Additional data come from a qualitative interview conducted in Montpellier with Anna, a former occupier of the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes. The empirical material was assessed on the basis of the method of structuring content analysis (see, for example, Merkens 1992 and Lamnek 2005), which is a multi-level procedure for the category-based evaluation and hermeneutic interpretation of data.

### **Liminoid Social Phenomena and the Notion of Space**

Victor Turner understands society as a dynamic process subject to continuous change: the purportedly static structures of the social and state order are questioned during symbolic liminoid<sup>2</sup> threshold conditions in recurring conflictual social processes. In these phases of transition Turner recognizes the process of the similar division of classical theatrical acts as consecutive processes. He defines these processes in their entirety as *social dramas* (Turner 1974: 23 ff.). By using this term, he refers to the same term for theatre performances, whose dramatic plots and characters are characterized by their social conditions and by means of which social grievances are to be pointed out.

Turner distinguishes four ritual-like *acts* of dramatic social processes: the introductory phase of breach of social norms which generally occurs publically; this is followed by the expansion of the crisis situation. The third phase, which is attributed key significance and which Turner defines as the remedial process aimed against the spread of the crisis, is the sphere of *anti-structure* and *communitas*. This is the liminoid sphere of critical reflection of the triggers of the crises and the deconstruction of interpretative patterns and decisions made in the status

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<sup>2</sup> From *limen* (Lat.), meaning threshold.

systems. It is the phase in which a great variety of strategies can be applied to overcome conflicts. *Communitas* is understood as a community of equal individuals who are not differentiated by different social means to take action, social status properties and hierarchies – it is the ‘community of the threshold condition’ (Bräunlein 2012: 54). During this phase the social norms of the *status quo* are temporarily suspended. *Communitas* comprises a phase of *anti-structure*, which is deliberately experienced as a contrast to the criticized existing social structure characterized by differentiation, hierarchy, and *more* and *less*. *Anti-structure* is accompanied by a euphoric optimistic mood, promising perceptions of freedom and comradeship by its very own rules. Ambiguity, the reversal of norms, reflexivity and creativity shape this ambivalent phase, which has the potential to exert effects on the social *status quo*. However, Turner’s *communitas* is only a temporary opposite pole, a fluid state of transition, which ultimately supports the existing order. According to Turner, the *anti-structure* which emerged as a form of critique of the hierarchization and institutionalization increasingly tends towards a greater degree of structure and hierarchy in its own right. It produces its own manifestations of dominance and subordination and thus becomes the basis of social structure. Turner sees the *communitas* and social structure as being in a dialectic relationship according to which every society requires the threat potential and the pressure of critical public opinion to shed light on perceived grievances and thus facilitate strategies to regulate the status system. This in turn serves to ensure its stability. Turner describes the *final act* as a process characterized either by the reintegration of the group questioning the status system or by the legitimization of an unrepairable breach between the conflicting parties. (Turner 1974: 37 ff.).

In contemporary societies Turner distinguishes so called liminoid threshold phenomena of breaking out from the *status quo* into spheres, in which control mechanisms and social conventions lose their binding character (Turner 1988: 72 ff.). They can retroact from the margin on the centre; they make it possible to reflect on the existing structures and transform them. This phenomenon, at the beginning of which times of social change occur, frequently is linked with social critique. According to Turner, those who are at the bottom of the status system regarding their positions, their social image and their means of influence are the ambivalent key actors of liminoid threshold phenomena in every society (Turner 2005: 95). He mentions the music festival in Woodstock (USA 1969) as an example of such a spontaneous, rapidly dissolved experience of the *communitas* (Turner 2005: 125; 131).

Anti-Structure refers to counter-spaces and at least temporarily opens up free spaces for self- or co-determination, the evolution of identity and community. Liminoid spaces are ritually designed social boundary areas and as areas of transition thus bear the potential of opening up new living spaces. At this point it is important to define the notion of space as a key concept of Turner’s ritual theory. Dieter Läßle (1991), a Professor of International Urban Studies, has developed a dynamic concept of social space. It connects concrete physical places and social structures and is characterized by the interaction of structural and action-related elements. Läßle’s model of a *matrix space* allows for the interpretation of social spaces according to their development context and their social operational framework. One of Läßle’s space dimensions is referred to as the *material dimension* in the form of a material-physical substrate. This analytical category refers to persons, human artefacts attached to a certain place as well as

material structures of utilization of nature acquired and overstrained by humans such as buildings, plantings, greenhouses and pastures. Läßle views the material level by means of different forms of communication as being incorporated into a natural whole which was not created by humans. As a second component of social *spaces*, Läßle identifies a *dimension of action* in the form of social practices of production, usage and appropriation of the spatial substrate by social actors. Institutionalized and normative *systems of regulation* define how space-structuring artefacts are dealt with. Sign, symbol and representation systems linked to the material substrate of the spaces which continuously shape themselves allow for the social functions of space-structuring artefacts to be cognitively recognized and convey affective means of identification (Läßle 1991: 194-197).

### **Aéroport du Grand Ouest**

The municipality of Notre-Dame-des-Landes is supposed to provide nearly 80 percent of the entire planned space for the airport project. It has had the status of a designated construction area since 1974; during the same year the airport project was incorporated into the urbanization plans of the region. A total sum of more than 500 million Euros excluding taxes will be required for the project, around 43 percent of which will be subsidized by public funds. The project, which provides for airport buildings and infrastructure, two runways, enhanced road transport connections, as well as smaller areas for environmental compensation measures, threatens an area of approximately 2000 hectares of land. The concerned landscape comprises wetlands of significance for environmentalists, a unique Breton landscape with agrarian land surrounded by hedge banks as well as residential space (Renard and Riolland-Juin 2013, Avry 2012).

Citizens' initiatives have accompanied farmers' protest against the infrastructure project since its launch. Besides the cost-benefit factor which has been negatively assessed, the arguments for their opposition refer to the enormous disruptions and changes to the living conditions of the local population and nature, climate policy considerations and the fact that the existing airport of the city of Nantes, which is to be replaced, currently does not operate at full capacity (Avry 2012: 180).<sup>3</sup>

The ZAD is in a transitional stage regarding the implementation of the project (status 01/2017). In 2010 the Société Aéroports du Grand-Ouest, a branch of the consortium VINCI — a global player in the construction, financing and operation of infrastructural facilities — became the concessionaire of the project.<sup>4</sup> However, due to protests and ongoing court procedures, the construction of the airport was postponed by policy-makers in 2012.<sup>5</sup> Some land owners agreed to the sale of their property and moved away, while others were

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<sup>3</sup> cf. ACIPA: Ce qu'il faut savoir. URL: [www.acipa-ndl.fr/](http://www.acipa-ndl.fr/) (09 January 2016).

<sup>4</sup> See Decree No 2010-1699, 29/12/2010, which ratified the agreement between the State and the concessionary company Aéroports du Grand Ouest for the concession of the airports of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, Nantes-Atlantique et Saint-Nazaire. URL: [www.legifrance.gouv.fr/](http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/) (14 June 2016).

<sup>5</sup> See the newspaper article, Notre-Dame-des-Landes: Jean-Marc Ayrault veut calmer les esprits' in *Le Point*, 26/11/2012. URL: [www.lepoint.fr/](http://www.lepoint.fr/) (14 June 2016).

misappropriated. Several farmers still refuse to accept eviction notices and to surrender their farmyards and land.<sup>6</sup>

In 2016 President Hollande proposed a referendum which was locally organized; on 26 June the electorate of the département Loire-Atlantique was called on to answer the following question: *Are you in favour of the project to transfer the airport Nantes-Atlantique to the community of Notre-Dame-des-Landes?* A majority of 55.2 percent of people voted 'yes'. Meanwhile the anti-airport activists declared that they will keep on resisting.<sup>7</sup> In January 2017, Bruno Le Roux, the Minister of the Interior, publicly declared that the French government would not implement its plan to evacuate the zone until the end of the ongoing judicial procedures.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Zone à défendre***

Opponents and critics of the status system from France and other mainly European countries began to occupy the zone following the campaign gathering *Camp for Climate Action* in 2009 (Kempf 2014: 29 ff.). According to the occupiers' estimations, approximately 150 people lived in the ZAD during the author's visit in February 2015, although the number of inhabitants fluctuates significantly as many of them only stay there temporarily. A fundamental motive for taking action is based on broad social critique. The discussions conducted by the author reveal propagated worldviews, political attitudes and value-based demands and visions which draw on grassroots democratic and *green anarchistic*<sup>9</sup> ideas as well as philosophical ideas from *deep ecology*<sup>10</sup> in the broadest sense.<sup>11</sup> As a linguistic *code*, the slogan *Against the Airport and the World around it!* points to social and system-critical value orientations with a global reference which might be called 'ethics of environmental rationality' (Prato 1993: 178). These value orientations are verbally conveyed on the basis of an inwardly integrative and outwardly expressive approach, demarcating anti-establishment rhetoric and anti-globalization discourse. The following core substantial aspects can be recognized:

- Hierarchical relationships of subordination and inequality in the private as well as public political sphere, which are disguised and preserved not only through disciplinary state power, but also through apparent freedoms such as the freedom of movement, democratic participation rights, relative prosperity and consumption possibilities.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Sylvain Fresneau, farmer, historical resident of the ZAD. *Les Domaines*, 13 January 2015.

<sup>7</sup> See Notre-Dame-des-Landes : début du bras de fer pour l'évacuation de la Zad. *Le Figaro*, 28.06.2016. URL: [www.lefigaro.fr/](http://www.lefigaro.fr/) (28 June 2016).

<sup>8</sup> See Notre-Dame-des-Landes : "La ZAD sera évacuée à la fin des procédures", affirme Bruno Le Roux. *Europe1*, 16.01.2017. URL: [www.europe1.fr/](http://www.europe1.fr/) (13 February 2017).

<sup>9</sup> The French geographer Jacques Élisée Reclus (1830 – 1905) is a thought leader of green anarchistic ideas. See, Reclus, Elisée: Du Sentiment de la nature dans les sociétés modernes. *La Revue des Ressources*, 27.07.2012. URL: [www.larevuedesressources.org/](http://www.larevuedesressources.org/) (27 January 2015).

<sup>10</sup> A thought leader of deep ecology is the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss (see, Næss 1973).

<sup>11</sup> Informal discussions with occupiers, ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, 08-14 January 2015.

- The imposition of self-interests by powerful political-economic networks through *pseudo-democratic* political orders which ignore the legitimate interests of the population.
- A global capitalist system of profit-oriented sale of goods, resource-intensive and conflict-ridden trade and the appropriation, modification and destruction of natural resources.
- Uncontrolled freedom of action of multinational companies under the aegis of the rhetoric of growth, progress and consumption possibilities and to the detriment of social needs.
- Superficial social relationships due to the functional logics of the status systems and a lacking social consciousness that a life beyond the experienced compulsions is possible.
- The uncontrolled expansion of urban spaces (metropolization), the disappearance of agrarian land as a traditional foundation of life and the disrespectful handling of the common good of nature as the basis of all life.

Many occupiers stated that they see the airport project as one of numerous emblems of the perceived global status system. Boundaries are drawn between the occupiers on the one hand and the farmers and citizens' initiatives on the other, though they are equally opposed to the airport project by means of these framings which are conveyed through discursive processes as well as written opinions of occupiers (L'Insomniaque 2013). Thus, the second part of the occupiers' appeal *Against the Airport and the World around it!* is rejected in the discourses of the farmer representatives and citizens' initiatives.

It became evident that nature and community, as well as freedom as the foundation of social coexistence, as a basic right, value and ideal condition are the most significant driving forces behind the involvement of the occupiers. When questioned by the author about their personal motivation for living in the ZAD, they frequently expressed the desire to actively send out a signal of resistance to a *status quo* they criticize. United in solidarity and in tolerant, collective, grassroots democracy — as free and self-governed as possible — they declared their wish to reflect on, develop and try out alternatives in an area of relatively untouched nature. They are supposed to learn to live together in a community with people from a different social background and with different ideas and visions, while protecting the wetlands and its biodiversity. The ZAD is regarded by numerous occupiers as a laboratory of life in multiple ways. According to them the zone constitutes a space for experimenting with ways of life and ideals which distinguish themselves from the regulatory mechanisms, expectations and practices of the status system. Activities related to various forms of social critique are to be concentrated in one place in the occupied zone. Numerous inhabitants are involved in largely autonomous collective housing and agricultural projects based on the principles of environmental sustainability and solidarity. They also engage in diverse forms of protest against the airport project and for the preservation of the ZAD as an autonomous zone. Many occupiers are involved in militant projects both inside and outside the zone, for example against right-wing extremism.<sup>12</sup>

Anna was attracted to and motivated by the evolving proactive flair as well as the prospect of creating a free space for action:

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<sup>12</sup> Informal discussions with occupiers, ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, 08-14 January 2015.

‘I realized that we had the opportunity to *create* something [...] instead of being always *against* things, one could really *stand up for* something there, and this something was *life!* It was really about fighting for life, creating a living environment, preserving, protecting the living environment... it really appealed to me. Because fighting *against* things works for a while, but what do we have to offer afterwards? [...] In Notre-Dame-des-Landes there was [...] reflection, a desire to create together...’<sup>13</sup>

In the ZAD, previously vacant homes were occupied and partially renovated or redesigned, while huts were built on the ground and in trees. Recyclable scraps and used materials from requisitioned remaining stock play a key role in these processes of a reconstruction and a re-definition of space. As elements of a culture of reprocessing and as symbols of local autonomy and a rejection of the market logic these recycled materials clearly have an identity-forming function and mark the aesthetic of the appropriated space.

As measures and symbols against the neglect of soil, gardens and permacultures were planted and are maintained in a sustainable way; spirulina was cultivated and plant-based sewage systems developed. A bread bakery and a beer brewery were constructed to increase food self-sufficiency. In addition to vegetable growing projects, occupants of the zone breed animals. The repertoire of projects includes theatrical, film and music groups, a medical plants group, joint efforts concerning repairs and the reconstruction of the historic structures of houses and the establishment of internet and communication rooms. The meeting rooms, a library and accommodations serve as common spaces for the development of a vivid discussion culture.

Critique of capitalism is also lived out through the restriction of private property to elementary personal necessities and the rejection of profit-oriented trade. All household objects are common property and divided resources. The transfer of goods takes place through informal economic exchange relations and — in the case of bread, agricultural products and cheese — by sale without a fixed price: the purchaser pays an amount that he/she is able to and that appears appropriate to him or her, which also includes the possibility of not paying at all. The aim is to cover production costs.<sup>14</sup>

Every inhabitant decides freely whether to participate in the projects and where to live in the zone. The compositions of the groups of residents fluctuate due to the mobility within and beyond the zone. Thus the different habitats of the ZAD are constantly transformed living places of ‘temporary communities’ (Gwiazdzinski 2016: 9). Trustful relationships based on common affiliations within friendship-based and interest-related networks have proven to be a significant foundation for the makeup of the residential communities.

Decisions are made by discussions in the groups as well as at the general meetings, where participants determine common positions and share experiences. The promoted fundamental principles of human interaction, respect, equality and tolerance not only shape the outward

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Anna, former occupier of the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, Montpellier, 22.06.2015. Emphasized words are marked in italics.

<sup>14</sup> Informal discussions, participant observation in the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, 08-14 January 2015.

rhetoric, but are also encouraged, practiced and debated time and time again as the guiding principles within the zone.<sup>15</sup>

Social critique as well as alternative forms of life are reflected in numerous symbols and in diverse linguistic *codes* with expressive and cognitive effects. Inscriptions, banners, slogans and graffiti ensure the public visibility of the protest action. These *codes* are symbolic references to the framing and the illegal status of the occupiers which play an important role for their self-staging and identity construction.

Other areas in France were also threatened by large infrastructural projects and occupied during my visits in 2015. The occupants of these zones defended similar objectives, resisting *in situ* (Gwiazdzinski 2016: 4) and demanding transparent and horizontal decision-making processes concerning the use of the occupied space. The occupied areas were also referred to as ZAD in the abbreviation's militant sense by the occupiers, the media and in public debates. The ZAD near Nantes is linked by means of various personal and virtual networks (homepages like <http://zad.nadir.org>, blogs and social networks) with other occupied places in the country and beyond. The occupants temporarily change their places of residence and permanence, while maintaining diverse mutual relationships, personal contacts and relations of exchange. The ZAD near Nantes takes on a key role as a model, place of reference and point of orientation within the network of French ZADs. The reasons for this are the duration of the occupation, the complexity of social life within it, the consideration of ecological aspects in discourse and residential projects, its politicization and its confrontational nature.<sup>16</sup>

The occupations have to be regarded in the context of other contemporary forms of mobilization which also imply the (re-)appropriation and the transformation of (public) space, for example occupations of places and buildings, *Guerilla Gardening*, artistic projects and manifold innovative and festive forms of protest (Gwiazdzinski 2016: 3-6). The type of militant which is assigned to these recent forms of direct action is characterized by multiple individual (militant) affiliations and deep mistrust concerning ideological promises of salvation, formal organizational structures, institutions and hierarchies as well as centralized decision making. Their involvement in protests is marked by pragmatism and a demand for individual freedom, autonomy and enjoyment and is motivated by a readiness to experiment in order to develop and effectively use new potentials for action in the scope of plural, fluid social relations (Jeanneau and Lernould 2008: 141 ff.). The coordination of their projects takes place via informal networks of trust online and offline as well as via horizontal decision-making processes (Pereira 2010: 148 ff.). The socio-cultural background of the militants is very heterogeneous concerning their individual identities and their social strata. Nonetheless, they are united on the basis of their wish to reconstruct public space 'here and now' within the scope of concrete common projects and to experiment with non-discriminatory, responsible forms of social and economic

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<sup>15</sup> Informal discussion with I., ZAD of Notre Dame-des-Landes, 08 January 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Participant observation, informal discussions in the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, 08-14 January 2015, in the ZAD of Echillais (Charente-Maritime), 16 February 2015, in the ZAD Ferme des Bouillons (Seine-Maritime), 10 June 2015 and in the ZAD Agen (Lot-et-Garonne), 18 February 2015.



exchange and cooperation (Daniel 2014: 116-118). The following motivating factors for these recent mobilizations in France and beyond are apparent:

- A severe lack of legitimacy of the political parties and actors.
- The shrinking credibility of the trade unions and comprehensive, ideologically motivated projects of social change.
- Widespread perceptions of social insecurity and youth unemployment.
- A labour market and social policy which seem to only obey the principles of increasing capital gains and capitalist urban speculation.
- The increasing inequality of opportunities in life between the elite and masses, the bourgeoisie and social milieus of the city suburbs.
- Last but not least, generation gaps (Martínez López 2013: 871 ff.; Jeanneau and Lernoald 2008: 141 ff.).

Generally speaking, the struggle for public space is an expression of ‘tensions between state morality and community and individual moralities as they are encapsulated in the ambiguities and distortions that often mark the processes of government, bureaucracy and legislation’ (Pardo and Prato 2011: 1-2).

### **Heterogeneity and Ambivalence**

As I have mentioned earlier, the occupiers of the ZAD are extremely heterogeneous with regard to their political views, concepts of society and worldviews, their social backgrounds as well as their always very personal motives for living and taking action in the zone. The ZAD unifies bourgeoisie and working class children, people with university degrees and people who have not completed any formal education. People previously in high-ranking professional positions, former military personnel, university dropouts and previously unemployed people live with and among one another in the ZAD. People with a professional background in line with the demands of the status system live under the same roofs with, or in direct vicinity of people with a criminal past, former or current drug addicts and with people from the squatters’ movement. People from social milieus characterized by conservative values interact with people from autonomous leftist milieus. People from different age generations also come together in the ZAD. The fact that the inhabitants of the ZAD come from different regions and countries with different mother tongues reinforces the heterogeneity.<sup>17</sup>

Also discernible are group-related patterns of self-identification and the identification of others — for example, feminists, environmental protectionists, anarchists, which are reflected by affiliations to their own group — and partly gender-specific residential groups in specific locations in the zone. There are thus more or less distinct demarcations between the groups. The affiliations with such spatially defined group-specific collective residential units seem to constitute a significant *cleavage* in the ZAD.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Informal discussions, participant observation in the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, 08-14 January 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Informal discussion with I., 08 January 2015.

Substantial differences are also apparent with regard to the residents' motives for action, which frequently point clearly to their individual life histories. In this regard various unaffiliated, partly overlapping kinds of loose individuals can be identified.

Numerous residents are explicitly politically active in promoting their more or less ideological worldviews and their self-perception. They can be described as *militant free spirits*. They want to make political statements with their alternative ways of life and simultaneously develop islands of personal freedom to live out their own lifestyles beyond the perceived social mainstream. They frequently regard the ZAD merely as one of many global islands of freedom that have evolved as autonomous counter-spheres and are linked by loose personal and virtual networks. They are nomads not bound to a certain place and often view the area of the ZAD not only as threatened nature and agrarian land, but rather as a useful 'gap in the system', as a means to the end of *sabotage* of the status system. They are frequently involved in non-partisan, network-like organized forms of cross-border social struggles outside the ZAD, which include anti-racist activities as well as activities against the oppression of disadvantaged segments of the population in general, for example for the recognition of the refugees in Calais or in support of the Mexican Zapatista movement. However, fervent supporters of anarchistic ideas have little understanding for advocates of grassroots democratic approaches within the *status quo*. Militant feminists see their own position in the zone as being undermined by macho behaviour and combat pathos as well as manifestations of sexism and perceive the propagated notions of equality as a pseudo-reality in the ZAD. Inhabitants who are primarily involved in nature protection activities sometimes explicitly distance themselves from the opponents of institutions, the police and the global capitalist system, which they perceive as being too confrontational and conflict-oriented, while others distance themselves from political ideology *per se*. Militant animal rights activists and vegans regard agricultural animal breeding as a form of oppression and exploitation in its own right. Their position collides with the interests of farmers.<sup>19</sup>

Apart from these militant groupings, there are other, very heterogeneous individuals who primarily use the zone as a personal island of freedom for the realization of a deliberately self-determined lifestyle and use the space — which was acquired, shaped and defended by militant free spirits and through their protest activities — either individually or as small collective units. Based on discussions conducted by the author, these people tend to be less militant. Their occupation is an end in itself. Since they do not or only seldom take part in collective protests and are sometimes perceived as moochers, who wish to acquire everyday necessities by violating the unwritten rule of reciprocity, they were described by one militant free spirit as *individualist opportunists*.<sup>20</sup> Yet the latter by no means implies that they are not willing to confrontationally defend the ZAD against attempts to control it from the outside.

Equally heterogeneous individuals of a further spectrum seem primarily to want to live in a community, to belong to a collective social unit linked by a feeling of togetherness based on

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<sup>19</sup> Informal discussions, participant observation in the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, 08-14 January 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Informal discussion with I., 08 January 2015.

Turner's notion of *communitas*; some of them may even been looking for parental authority. At the same time, no form of authority stemming from the status system is accepted. They can be regarded as *homeless people searching for a community*, whereby the term home is understood here both as a concrete place and a spiritual place. The motivation of the search for community as well as the difficulties in adapting to the demands and expectations of the status system, which manifest themselves in a feeling of being excluded in life outside the zone, unite this kind of people with the many militant free spirits. Many people without a home experience cohesion, solidarity, community and acceptance in the zone for the first time in their lives. They see the zone as the epitome of a true, simple and slow-paced life, as a place of spiritual liberation and as *refuge of non-conformists*. They see social acceptance as not being linked to status symbols such as *achieving the most* and *making money*, while their feeling of responsibility is frequently based on their efforts to manage nature responsibly. Numerous people searching for a community sympathize, though in different degrees, with the libertarian political ideals spread by the militant free-spirited inhabitants and engage to different degree in militant activities.<sup>21</sup> They are often, but by far not exclusively one-time homeless people, individuals from socially disadvantaged and conflict-ridden family relationships, people who had previously committed criminal offenses or people with a history of alcohol or drug addiction. They have frequently experienced limitations to their opportunities in the status system. Anna sums up:

‘Those excluded from the system who come together in these zones because they are kind of the last *bastions* where they are still welcome, because what we really want in the ZAD is for there to be no *discrimination*, no *exclusion*, for *everyone* with all their differences to be welcome and to succeed in living together in peace...’

There are occupiers who opt for this living space while fleeing from persecution in the status system or intentionally seeking a lawless zone. These *internal rule-breakers* do not represent any particular form of social critique. These generally less community-oriented individuals are not the ones who shape the political character of the ZAD. However, their conduct, for example the sale of hard drugs and aggressive physical assaults, does at times violate the informal rules of conduct and *codes* of social interaction respected by the majority of inhabitants. Their conduct reflects a dimension of illegality which the adherents to the alternative living projects view as illegitimate and undermining the community. How the inhabitants collectively deal with internal rule-breakers is a matter of controversial discussions regarding tolerance and the legitimacy of sanctioning and the danger of the reproduction of the sanctioning authority of the status system.<sup>22</sup>

The range of individuals' willingness to take community-related and protest-related action significantly differs and spans from the dedication to only living their own lives individually, to active community-oriented involvement in collective residential units and projects in and beyond the zone and the engagement in non-violent resistance on to a repertoire of more militant forms of protest.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with K., ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, 08 January 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Participant observation in the ZAD, informal discussion with I., 13 January 2015.

As a sphere of confrontation, the ZAD produces not only different communities of values, partnerships of convenience, loose temporary networks as well as group-based *cleavages* and discourses, but also informal hierarchical tendencies in social action. These are in part the expression of socio-psychological dynamics and communication structures in collective processes. They at least partially reflect the social positions or the social milieu segmentations of the inhabitants previously existing in the status system. One female occupier stated: ‘There are people here who have more to say than others.’<sup>23</sup> Not without resignation, Anna observed that ‘the big mouths’ are the ones mostly listened to during discussions and the decision-making process:

‘The human dynamics [...] create leadership. After a while when there is an established group, everyone knows each other, the differences have been respected [...] nevertheless human nature generates domination and the desire to impose ideas... Even if they are very nice one does not have to impose his own ideas because all tastes are in nature, everyone is different and every path through life has to be respected. And then there are power struggles which take place. I have a lot of difficulty with this.’

A heterogeneity factor at the individual level, which is partially linked to the social origin of the residents and relevant for the level of action in the zone, is the number and actual openness of ‘doors’ to the status system that individual occupiers have preserved. Such doors exist through social welfare benefits, occasional jobs in the surroundings, in the form of social opportunities based on their family, educational and professional background and by being incorporated into family and friendship networks beyond the zone. These doors offer prospects for leaving the ZAD and returning to the status system. While numerous occupiers have one or several such doors, others no longer have stable links to the status quo. This difference and the individual awareness of the existence or non-existence of such personal doors and social networks surely have an influence on their self-perception as well as on the patterns of individual behaviour and social interactions within the zone.

These puzzle pieces rudimentarily elaborated on already make it clear that the critique of the airport project itself as well as the critique of the status system in the discourses of the individuals and groups cannot be construed in the same manner and transformed to the level of action and interaction. The opinions and demands for action, whether and to what extent precisely the ZAD constitutes or can or should constitute a counter-sphere of experienced contrasts to the status system differ significantly among the groups. With regard to the level of action in the zone, militant free spirits criticize a divergence of living demands and social critique on the one hand and the practical reality of life on the other. In the opinion of several of these critics, the ZAD is ‘everywhere, not just here’. One militant free spirit angrily told the author that declared opponents of the consumer society categorically refused to collect leftover food from supermarket containers to be prepared and consumed in the zone.<sup>24</sup> ‘It is as if we were putting one foot out the window’, says an occupier regarding the practical reality of life

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<sup>23</sup> Informal discussion with Z., ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, 10 January 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Informal discussion with C., ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, 10 January 2015.

in the ZAD. She justifies her regular visits to the zone with the opportunities for participation that it offers: ‘There *are* alternatives. And at least I can co-manage affairs here a bit.’<sup>25</sup> The multidimensional heterogeneities and ambivalences at the individual and collective level indeed result in controversial discussions not only regarding fundamental political and social issues, but also with respect to the legitimacy of violent protest strategies as well as the future design of a ZAD project in case the airport project is abandoned.

Anyway, it is apparent that the level of action in the ZAD is by no means subject to individual or collective arbitrariness despite or precisely due to the ambivalence, the cleavages and conflict potentials. The level of action rather plays out within a complex, partially ritualized system of formalized and informal grassroots democratic negotiations and social control. Indeed, collective practices of self-management, self-help and social cooperation are necessary and indispensable tools for the management of everyday life in areas of ‘a political action that is embedded in daily life’ (Pattaroni 2014: 72). These collective practices also have to include individual needs, routines and contributions, for example maintaining and cleaning the site, preparing meals, or just the need to withdraw from time to time (Pattaroni 2014: 73). The project work, everyday life and the organization of protest are significantly based on continuous processes of negotiation and compromises and attempts to construct a sustainable ZAD community are great challenges. These insights underline the importance of the general findings that moral values and orders *per se* cannot be assumed to be irrevocable, they are negotiable and changing and that legitimacies are always defined in the interplay between values, interests and orders (Pardo 2000: 8 ff.).

However, the widespread disappointment among the occupiers regarding the pressure of expectations, control mechanisms and inequalities in the status system, as well as the perception of lacking opportunities to assert particular interests in the perceived *status quo*, are an effective overarching basis for the construction of a ZAD identity by means of distinct anti-globalization and anti-establishment rhetoric, and the corresponding expressive *codes*. Perhaps it is precisely the plurality of friendly partnerships, partnerships of convenience and exchange relationships and networks that emerge in the everyday life in the ZAD that gives rise to trust and creativity and brings about a feeling of togetherness through the perception of being part of a self-determined *social experiment*. Perhaps it is these moments of pro-active optimism and perceptions of freedom and camaraderie detached from positions fixed by law, by tradition and by convention — which manifest themselves time and time again in discussions, project activities and celebrative culture — that at least temporarily constitute effective catalysts of the milieu-specific segmentation previously existing in the status system and the in part very different world views and motives for action of the occupiers.

The ZAD is a highly politicized and confrontational multidimensional space, which is constructed and constantly shaped by spatial artefacts and numerous codes and logics of work and social interaction in the sense of Läßle. The threshold character of the ZAD can be visualized in the form of a spatialized boundary: the D 281, a rural road that was appropriated by opponents of the airport project in June 2013, leads into the ZAD. Within it and at its edges

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<sup>25</sup> Informal discussion with Z., ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, 10 January 2015.

there is a broad range of artefacts with symbolic value including numerous living places and road blocks set up to defend the zone against law enforcement forces. The visual impression of the threshold character is reinforced by the landscape structure of the ZAD: the small pastures and fields surrounded by hedges, which symbolize life and authenticity in the eyes of many occupiers.

Drawing on Läßle, the ZAD is constituted as a synthesis of numerous individual cultural, residential and living spaces, which demonstrate their convertible characteristics and functions as continuously transformed and reassessed sub-spaces in the reality of life and the *framing* of the occupiers. Thus the zone also has manifold internal thresholds. As ‘aggregate artefacts’, most of these places with their often imaginative names and with their special functions in the zone comprise complex spatial symbolic and representative systems with integrative effects. Many of these places take on key significance for the identity-shaping narratives conveyed by the occupiers that they can achieve autonomy beyond the state’s control mechanisms and norm-setting powers. The key narrative is based on stories about the *Opération César*, the *de facto* failed police operation aimed at clearing the zone in 2012 (L’Insomniaque 2013).

Despite all ambivalences there exists a diversity of individual and collective interactions with the status system and feedback effects of the ZAD as a constructed, enacted collective body on the status system. This includes varied ways in which the occupiers frame their activities by means of publications, media, textual and audiovisual material both online and offline (L’Insomniaque 2013). During their interactions with representatives of the media, numerous occupiers state that their first name is Camille, which is gender-neutral in France. The pseudonym not only serves the purpose of anonymization. It also is a linguistic *code* for interactions with the outside to demonstrate unity and the capacity for action on the basis of a common ZAD identity which is detached from concrete locations, times and key figures. This *code* is the symbol of the construction of not only a new, dynamic group identity, but also for individual social identities which are continuously evolving.<sup>26</sup> These identities are also dependent on the constructed opposition to adversaries in the form of the state as well as public institutions and economic actors. In the construction of these identities, breaches of norms of the perceived mainstream as well as physical expressions reflecting naturalness and authenticity, which are manifested in hairstyles and clothing, take on a key cognitive and emotional significance.

Informational events as well as often creative protest events are organized within and outside the ZAD. Furthermore, there are small cooperative projects focusing on alternative agriculture with ‘historical’ inhabitants who have involuntarily become occupiers due to their looming expropriation. An alternative market called *Non Marché*, at which agrarian products are offered without a fixed price, is held at a commonly accessible cross-way. Acquaintances of the occupiers are present in the ZAD as visitors, while cultural programs like concerts and lectures are open to everyone. The informal network *Naturalistes en lutte* consisting of

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<sup>26</sup> Informal discussion with I., 08 January 2015.

representatives of environmental NGOs, academics and interested citizens regularly organizes guided tours of the plant and animal life of the zone.<sup>27</sup>

The common motivation for preventing the airport gave rise to a movement, whose strategic framing is focused on the disadvantages of the project: citizens' initiatives and residents, environmental protection activists, farmers and zone occupiers as well as leftist parties, labour unions and committees of social critics from the entire country protest together on the streets and by means of common press releases and statements online and offline. As part of the general resistance to the airport project and against the clearing of the ZAD, people make use of a large repertoire of protest. This also includes large-scale demonstrations, which are regularly accompanied by parades of several hundred tractors. Last but not least, the occupants are supported by parts of the local population in diverse ways. For example, they provide them work material and were also visibly willing to save them from the *Opération César*, the clearing of the zone by special forces in autumn 2012, by means of non-violent resistance on site (L'Insomniaque 2013).

### Conclusion

This case analysis demonstrates the contemporary relevance of Turner's insights on social threshold spheres as performative forums of social negotiation dynamics, of symbolic communication and transmission of messages in processes of social crisis and conflict. The ZAD indeed demonstrates a threshold character in manifold dimensions which span from the abstract-ideational dimension to the material dimension onto the spatial-geographical dimension and comprise both the individual and the group level. Ambivalence and the zone's threshold character stimulate a critical discussion with the categories of *anti-structure* and *communitas*: must the terminological categorization be seen as substantively diffuse or maybe even as one-dimensional and idealizing? Or is, by contrast, the processual and ambivalent component, which became apparent while elaborating on the analytically relevant aspects of the ZAD, inherent in it? The zone can indeed be regarded as a counter-space for social critique, which originated at the margin where the norms of the status system lose their binding character: in a confined, narrow rural area on a territory with a disputed status and disputed ownership relationships. The appropriated experimental space is deliberately experienced as a contrast to the criticized control, hierarchy and social up and down in the status system. On the one hand, the counter-space brings about a great deal of reflexivity, creativity as well as its 'own rules' through the plurality of partnerships and horizontal exchange relationships and networks of trust. The ZAD is an emblem for spheres of identity, freedom, self-presentation and the creative staging of protest.

On the other hand, the ZAD demonstrates — in line with Turner — clear trends towards returning to routines, hierarchy and structure. It invokes individual and group-related cleavages, hierarchization tendencies, disparities in influence and diverse clashes of interest. At least partly they are manifestations and consequences of the socialization, social background and resources of individuals during their lives within the status system, and they bring forth conflict potential.

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<sup>27</sup> Participant observation in the ZAD, informal discussion with I., 13 January 2015.

Dynamics of collective processes correspond with those in the status system. The question arises whether the ZAD could ever have brought forth an *anti-structure* at all. Instead we might be inclined to speak of a social microcosm and generally question whether and to what extent such categorizations are justified at all. In the ZAD, *communitas* indeed manifests itself time and time again in the form of fluid, impulsive moments and forms of social interaction with a dynamic of their own.

The ZAD is a symbol of the increasing conflicts over the extensive transformation and exploitation of natural resources on a global scale. It is one of numerous *local* forms of expression of growing social dissatisfaction with the *national* political and socio-economic *status quo* in a centralized French state as well as with a perceived *global* status system. It is a spatially defined ‘burning glass’, which directs the focus towards conflicts that constitute comprehensive social change. The ZAD can indeed be interpreted as the liminal phase of a social drama in the sense of Turner, which is brought about by perceptions of crisis and which is characterized by numerous strategies to deconstruct and to (re)invent social reality and cultural orders.

The classification schemes for the ZAD as a bastion of utopists and as an Eldorado of violent vandals as well as categorizations of the occupiers as a consistent collective body (hippies, anarchists, anarcho-punks), which are propagated in public discourses, are categorically wrong. The actors of the threshold process are not permanent contact partners for political parties, are not partners of tactical alliances, and cannot be politically persuaded during electoral campaigns. They are border-crossers *par excellence*.



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