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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Limits of Consensual Model within the Squatters' Movement: Patterns of Exclusion at ZAD NDDL

Lukas Kotyk

French Research Center in Humanities and Social Sciences (CEFRES)

Abstract: This study focuses on the decision-making processes within a social movement against an airport known as ZAD NDDL, at the end of the cycle of mobilisation. The movement in decline, with a squatted area still formally governed by the principles of horizontal prefiguration, is reaching its limits in terms of conflict resolution using the available organizational tools. Analysing patterns of exclusion within the squatters' movement is a way of understanding the inner dynamics of non-hierarchical decision-making processes where there seems to be no possibility of achieving consensus. This research is based on long-term participant observation and open-ended interviews. An analysis of the redistribution of power in relation to the tools available in non-hierarchical methods of governance shows how attempting to govern a territory horizontally can lead to excluding a group whose ideas differ from those that have become hegemonic in the given area.

Key words: Consensual model, Exclusionm, Squatters' movement, Horizontal prefiguration, ZAD NDDL

Corresponding Author: Lukas Kotyk, [lukas.kotyk\(@\)cefres.cz](mailto:lukas.kotyk(@)cefres.cz)

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the inner dynamics of conflict resolution within a social movement in France, which successfully used “conservational squatting” (Pruijt 2012) as a method of protecting a rural area against the construction of an airport. The zone to defend (zone à défendre, or ZAD), known as ZAD Notre-Dame-des-Landes (NDDL), was occupied in 2007 during the last phase of 40 years of resistance, and many people are still demanding its right to exist even after the official abandonment in 2018 of the plans to build the airport.

The autonomous zone of 1650ha has been governed by the logic of prefigurative politics, where prefiguration can be understood as “a practice through which movement actors create a conflation of their ends with their means” (Maeckelbergh 2009, 67). Typical of the “newest social movements”, prefiguration has been taking place since the 1990s (Day 2004, 719), with a focus on creating a different society while resisting the state (Graeber 2004; Brissette 2016; Yates 2020). Part of the struggle during the occupation, as activists live together in daily life, is experimenting with idealised visions of social arrangements that tend to be sensitive to all forms of oppression and use consensual decision-making processes. While the days of mass mobilisation are now years past, there are still hundreds of inhabitants in the fields of Brittany, where visions of how to govern the zone differ radically.

Since 2018 the zone has been in the process of legalisation, which is a common end to a cycle of a squatters' movement (Martinez 2018). When illegal occupations have gained momentum and pure repression seems to be too ineffective and expensive (Pruijt 2003, 135), legalisation is the tool of choice for police to govern the illegalities (Aguilera 2012; 2014). Based on the technique of ‘divide and rule’ (Martinez 2020, 246), squatters are divided into the two categories according to their willingness to negotiate with the authorities (Bouillon 2013; Pruijt 2017; Rossini et al. 2018). The “bad” and “good” squatter stereotype is drawn between the “autonomous” and “institutional” wings of the movement (Aguilera 2018, 121), which are treated differently by the authorities. The process of legalisation can be understood as a “state strategy of splitting up and pacifying the movement” (Azozomox and Kuhn 2018, 160), while the “institutional” wing is partially tolerated, the “autonomous” wing that refuses any form of dialogue is targeted by repression (Dadusc 2017, 161). In ZAD NDDL this process has led to an amplification of the division between two groups, a division that has already been present in the zone since 2013 (Verdier 2018, 293-205). The two coexisting networks are in an adversarial relationship as they represent different interests in how the zone should be governed.

While research on the squatters' movement extensively covers the dynamics of struggles with authorities in various states in Europe (SqEK 2013; Cattaneo and Martinez 2014; Martinez 2018), a few studies focus on daily practices within occupied spaces (de Moor 2016; Yates 2014). These spaces are typically approached by researchers in periods when they are in their stable phase, and activists are in a relatively secure situation. The importance of analysing social movements in decline is emphasised by Owens, who observes that this potential research terrain is generally neglected: “If social movement theory is to deepen its understanding of social movements, then researchers must pay equal attention to the entire movement cycle” (Owens 2009, 15). Following Owens lead, I believe that research on occupied spaces in decline is imperative. The aim of this study is to explore the inner dynamics of power and governance of occupied spaces as they fall apart. I examine the ability of non-hierarchical forms of governance to shield participants from violence and analyse why they fail to maintain a free and safe space.

This paper offers an analysis of the case of eviction within a social movement in decline, which allows the examination of the limits of a non-hierarchical organizational repertoire when facing adversarial politics. The aim is to deepen our understanding of the “consensual model” (Piazza 2013) when non-hierarchical decision-making processes are applied in conflict. Based on insider interpretations narrated by activists, I analyse why the movement is falling apart from within and wherein lie the foundations of this rupture. Studying the patterns of exclusion within the squatters' movement itself provides an opportunity to understand how prefigurative politics are performed in daily life. The decline and the end of the movement reveals the specificities of the distribution of power and the ways how power can be accumulated by certain groups. It is a matter of the character of social movements: “A critical period for any mobilization, decline consequently offers a window into larger movement dynamics” (Owens 2009, 24). When the movement comes to a close, the conflation of its ends with its means can become an empty slogan and the creation of a different society while resisting the state a story to be told to those who are not close enough to see beneath the surface.

2. Theory: Horizontal Prefiguration

In the last decade, there has been a growing body of research on social movements that considers prefiguration as an essential analytical tool for understanding their dynamics (Yates et al. 2024). The methods adopted to sustain movements can be studied by focusing on the ‘repertoire of collective action’ (Tilly 1978) and analysing forms of self-organisation based on their shared prefigurative character. Although there are studies that cover the subject of horizontal prefiguration within the organisation of social movements in times of mobilisation (Graeber 2013; Maeckelbergh 2009), few studies are concerned with the maintenance of background spaces where these movements are reproduced during periods of “abeyance” (de Moor 2016; Taylor 1989; Yates 2014). This study aims to address a research gap by focusing on daily practices in an occupied area in decline where the idea of horizontal prefiguration is still put into practice.

Participants of these movements emphasise the ‘here and now’ by creating spaces that are radically different from those around them. We can understand this approach as consisting in “attempts to reflect political goals or values in social movement processes” (Yates 2020, 1), and this serves as a guiding principle for the movement’s inner structure. By such means social movement participants often succeed in creating spaces that have the capacity to fulfil their vision, at least temporarily. In the logic of the “prefigurative turn” (Maeckelbergh 2016), activists are unwilling to wait for the authorities to change the social arrangement, or to become the authorities themselves, but instead want to effect change within the movement itself. They function as laboratories to experiment with organisational repertoires that would not be possible within existing legal frameworks.

When the “discursive nature of imagination” (Yates et al. 2024, 435) is taken seriously, visions of possible future social arrangements shared by participants in a social movement can lead to the creation of various solutions to organisational repertoires. Horizontal prefiguration involves a deliberate attempt to organise without anyone in charge and who could force others to do any action: “Horizontality is part of assertion of our own subjectivity, the rejection of vertical structures, chains of command which tell us what to do (...)” (Holloway 2010, 43). The mechanism of horizontal power distribution does not give any formally binding force to one individual over another. This does not mean that there are no power dynamics in such social arrangements, as society without power is only an abstraction (Clastres 1989, 23; Foucault 1982, 791).

2.1 Prefiguration and Free Spaces

The concept of prefiguration allows us to examine specific techniques that are common to different social movements. Since the hierarchical structure of the state and most organisations is widely considered to be oppressive in this context, many prefigurative attempts are shaped by the ideal that people should create different modes of cooperation. If the participants in a movement oppose hierarchical structures being the norm, it is necessary to apply prefigurative logic to find a functional solution. This means having a decision-making process based on the consensual model (Piazza 2013), without the exclusion of opinions based on voting (Graeber 2004). To gain an understanding of how the logic of prefiguration shapes the inner structure of organisations we need to examine the organisational repertoire that generates non-hierarchical techniques used to maintain a horizontal power distribution. As Yates suggested in his research on prefiguration, prefigurative politics can be studied while being implemented in daily life (Yates 2014). Similarly, my approach to study prefiguration involves tracing the practices that form the core of the focus of this study.

To give physical form to imagined realities, common spaces are needed that allow the opportunity for prefiguration. Polletta analyses the concept of ‘free spaces’, often used to describe such a phenomenon: “(...) free spaces and their analogues refer to small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed

from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization” (Polletta 1999, 1). Free spaces represent a possibility to experiment with the ideas of the social movement, enabling its participants to have a place where they can gather. They are crucial for sustaining the ideas of the movement in “abeyance” (Taylor 1989), in between cycles of mobilisation (Tarrow 1994). A basic requirement for free spaces to be genuinely free is their ability to ensure a degree of disconnection from structures of state control. Sometimes referred to as autonomous zones, the importance of these spaces being beyond the reach of the authorities is an important factor. The ability to have freedom from rules and regulations is a condition for allowing participants to unfold their imagination.

2.2 Prefigurative Movement in Decline

In my research, I adopt Owens’s view that social movements should be studied even during periods of decline, and that it is essential to analyse the dynamics of all phases of a cycle of mobilisation (Owens 2009). Decline can be understood as ‘the end of a larger narrative’ (*ibid.*, 16), when main narratives are competing for legitimacy and disrupting cooperation between movement participants. Through a transition after the collapse of the movement, many conflicts arise –with decline comes identity crisis and disruption of solidarity (*ibid.*, 16). Despite radically divergent approaches towards the zone under study, what is still shared is the idea of being part of a new left movement and experimenting with prefigurative politics, all decisions continuing to be taken by consensus.

Ideally, reaching a consensus is based on methods that guarantee that “(...) no one walks away feeling that their views have been totally ignored” (Graeber 2004, 89). Maeckelbergh, in her research on the alter-globalization movement, notes that, while being an inevitable part of consensual decision-making processes, conflict can be fruitful if carefully managed:

Conflict is welcomed because it represents diversity. Out of diversity comes creativity and creation. This transformation of conflict from adversarial to constructive takes place through horizontality. Horizontality acts as a guiding ethos and practices to actively limit hierarchies to allow diversity to remain constructive. (Maeckelbergh 2009, 100)

Theoretically, the assembly is not supposed to ensure that members are forced to reach unanimity but, on the contrary, to seek to create a safe space where guided conflicts can enable participants to understand each other’s visions and to constructively search for a solution that respects diversity.

Problems reaching a consensus arise when two adversarial groups try to be part of the same decision-making process and the methods available within the known repertoire regularly fail to work. Methods elaborated during the part of the cycle of mass mobilisation may have worked well (Maeckelbergh 2013), but the picture can be more complicated when the movement is in decline. That conflict can be useful and does not need to be resolved (*ibid.* 32) only applies when a strong narrative still sustains willingness to participate in difficult and time-consuming discussions. As the case study in this paper demonstrates, when a physical area is at stake and people are contesting the space they live in, unresolved conflicts seriously affect their daily lives.

3. The Case of ZAD NDDL

The origin of the movement against the airport dates back to the 1970s and its history has been well described from both an academic (Verdier 2018) and emic perspective of its institutional wing (collectif comm'un 2019). The project of the airport starts in January 1974, and up until the year 2000 the anti-airport activism took the form of a traditional social movement using conventional repertoires of contention such as creating counter-expertise and organizing demonstrations. The movement began to change as the construction of the airport seemed to be approaching, and in 2005 resistance was radicalised with the first direct actions and civil disobedience. The window of opportunity for squatting appeared in 2007 when local farmers were forced to leave, and activists began to take over empty houses and systematically occupy the zone. The period between 2007 and 2012 represents a “prefigurative turn” (Maekkelbergh 2016) in the movement against the airport. During this period, ZAD was established as a zone to defend.

The period from 2012 to 2018 can be considered as the years of high degree of autonomy, with very limited access to the authorities. With an area of 1650 hectares and around twenty squatted farms and dozens of newly built houses it created an unprecedented locality for experimenting with different logics of how to recreate life in the countryside. The zone attracted attention from the media and academia with three major anthropological studies conducted during this period (Bulle 2020; Verdier 2018; Pruvost 2021). The current phase of the zone's history began with the official abandonment of the airport in 2018, when the French Prime Minister made the opening and reconstruction of route D281 a precondition for negotiations. The road had been occupied since 2012, cabins standing on the asphalt. For many, the “route de chicanes” was a symbol of the strength of the movement itself and its capacity for resistance. The decision taken by one group to cooperate with the state and to clear the route by force brought a new level of violence into the conflict between the two approaches towards squatting. To be able to carry out these inner evictions, a political militia created within the institutional wing of squatters was used to target the individuals most prominent in their opposition to legalisation and to spread fear among others.

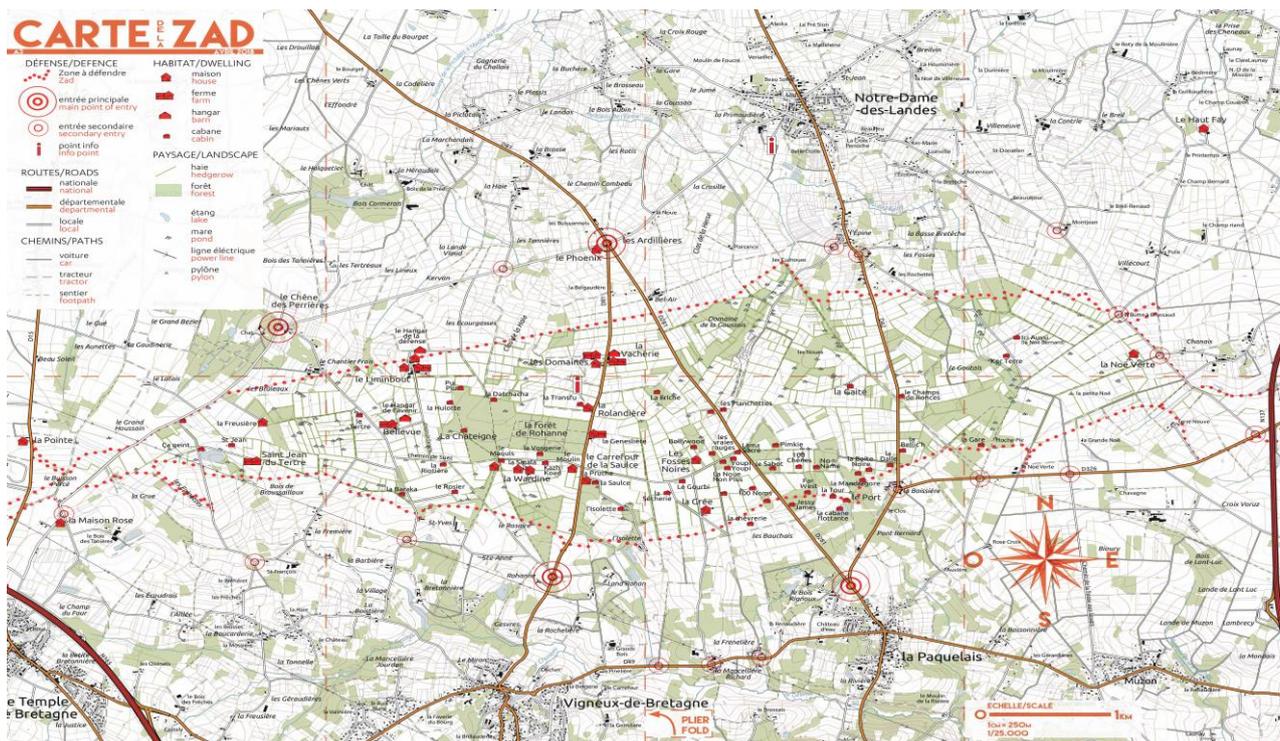
3.1 Autonomous and Institutional Wings of ZAD NDDL

The centre of the autonomous part of ZAD NDDL, situated around the last squatted farm resisting legalization, is the place where people evicted from the rest of the zone end up, and is thereby becoming a hotspot of diversity. To organize life within the autonomous part of the zone does not require regular meetings, as there is an open access policy and no common project that needs to be discussed systematically. The inhabitants generally prefer to discuss important topics informally. Moreover, there is a deep-rooted scepticism about official meetings as a form of organization, as many of them have already been excluded from the general meetings in the zone. There is a strong sensitivity to subtle forms of domination based on skills linked to social class, such as public-speaking and organizational abilities. Meetings are organized only in cases of urgent problems that concern the whole autonomous part, or when public events are being prepared. As a consequence, the autonomous wing manifests the features of “structurelessness” (Freeman 1972), and so it can be difficult to call a meeting when someone who is not well connected wants to deal with issues that need open discussion.

The institutional part of ZAD NDDL is organised around twelve main collectives, each of which includes one of the members legally responsible for an official agricultural project. They are affiliated to these small businesses and live together near occupied farms. Such a way of sharing of a common resource in an exclusive collective can be understood as a commons, where it is clearly defined who has access to the benefits (Ostrom 1990; Bromley 1992). Each of these groups creates its own rules of functioning within its common space

(Bollier 2007; Stavrides 2016) and demarcates the boundaries of newly enclosed areas. Each case has its own specific inner dynamics and problems, which are typical sources of conflict such as “uneven communing” (Noterman 2016) or a tendency to shift towards a “totalitarian commons” (Eizenberg 2012). Furthermore, collectives composed of highly educated middle-class members tend to be undiversified in their class composition and are homogeneous as a consequence of including new members through friendship networks (Ferguson 1991).

The most cohesive element binding the projects of the institutional wing is the common negotiation with the state over details of legal contracts for houses that still have the status of squats, the surrounding fields having already been secured with contracts. The main platform for discussion is the monthly general assembly, AdU, which gathers around a hundred people and is well organised. There are two rotating facilitators that moderate the meeting and a person who takes the minutes. It starts with an info-point to provide space for information about what is going to happen in the zone. The topics for discussion that follow are made known to the facilitators before the meeting and are discussed point by point. No topics questioning the process of legalisation are accepted. As the autonomous and institutional wings do not share a platform to discuss subjects concerning the zone as a whole, the only thing that brings everyone together is a conflict serious enough to generate the need to avoid open violence. This study examines a case when such a conflict occurred and analyses how the inhabitants of ZAD NDDL were forced to negotiate with each other after years of mutual mistrust.



Map of ZAD NDDL (Source: <https://zad.nadir.org/>)

4. Methodology: Narrating the Conflict

Although I was present in ZAD NDDL before and during the months-long conflict over the eviction of a squatter, this study is based on the narration of the experiences of those who live in the zone and participated in the search for a solution. Narrating what happened during the struggle allows the participants to connect the events in the wider context of the continuing exclusion of a marginalised group from the zone. This text captures an emerging narrative at the moment of its construction during ongoing controversies, in which zone inhabitants are trying to give meaning to events overwhelming their daily lives. Narratives are an inseparable part of social movements (Polletta 2006), and their members are usually skilled storytellers (Owens 2009). Narrative is often used as a tool to control the movement from within (Benford 2002) and is protected by members of the movement. The case analysed in this study shows how the dominant narrative of a successful social movement against the airport is constantly undermined by stories of exclusion, power, and collaboration with state institutions.

The method of data collection at the site is based on ethnographic field research typical of long-term participant observation (Hammersley, Atkinson 1996; Okely 2012). Fieldwork was conducted in two phases: six months in 2020 and ten months from 2022 to 2023. By being there as a researcher and conducting participant observation in difficult times, I established long-term relationships based on trust that allowed me to “(...) ask provocative personal questions, and expect thoughtful, serious answers” (Bourgois 1996, 12). This analysis is based on seven open-ended interviews, each lasting between two and three hours, with those who were there to actively support the victim of aggression and with the victim himself. Knowing the situation, I could ask questions that reflected the person’s position during the period under study. In order to avoid any harm, I anonymized all the names of the inhabitants mentioned in this text.

This study focuses on a non-hierarchical organisational repertoire, state institutions being excluded from the analysis. Although the influence of the state plays a key role, the actors that are directly involved in state institutions remain invisible. I demonstrate how within a social movement in decline the discourse of legality and the reasons for accepting the law are reproduced by some of its own participants. I follow the participants in the autonomous part of the movement and examine the ways power is realised in the interactions between the state and them, and ways in which they respond. From their perspective, there is no direct contact with state institution employees. Most of the pressure comes from within the movement, from the rationality embodied by its institutional part.

5. The Conflict Under study: an Ethnography

When a conflict over the death of a chicken ends up with the person responsible being put in hospital, one might think it no more than the pitiful resolution of a neighbour dispute through aggression that got out of control and ended with one side losing its temper and harming the other. In the context of already existing tensions between the two different approaches towards the zone, this case mobilised two networks against each other over a period of eight months. A newly established farmer living on a squatted farm, whose chicken had been chased out of the garden and accidentally injured, attacked the squatter living on his legally rented field. The squatter, Gérard, had been living in a caravan and had a gardening passion for this spot years before legalisation came to the area, the farmer, Conrad, feeling he had legitimacy to claim the space for his own project. Gérard continued his easy life and never recognizing the newly established owner. Things changed for him when Conrad came to take revenge for the chicken on the morning of the incident: “And at the same time as I saw his head retreat, I saw his arm retreat. But there was a table just there. And I went: Oh, and then I saw

the thing that he'd just put behind my legs there and I thought, what is this thing?" (*Interview 1*). Arriving stealthily into the caravan where *Gérard* had lived for years, the morning surprise changed his life for months to come.

The object that Conrad put inside his neighbour's home was an explosive that was far beyond the victim's imagination. Thinking it was a smoke grenade, he took the object in his hand in an attempt to throw it away: "In my idea I saw the thing fall into the field and go poof, in fact it never happened, there was a boom. The boom is here, I see a big flash of lightning - boom, a huge flash of lightning. So here, at the bottom of my arm" (*Interview 1*). This moment of misinterpretation of the nature of the object, the context not leading him to identify it correctly, is something deeply rooted in *Gérard's* mind because the consequences were severe: "The hand is red, but not a drop of blood. There's nothing. Everything is torn off, so clean that there's not a drop of blood, but the hand is scarlet" (*Interview 1*). Losing half of his hand as a result of the explosion, with his thumb, index finger, and half of his middle finger missing, the simple life he had enjoyed in his garden quickly disappeared. The following months would be spent in hospital, with a dozen operations needed to reconstruct the hand, saving as much tissue as possible and restoring its shape. As he waited in the field for the ambulance surrounded by people in shock, he accepted the new reality: "The descent into hell that I had for half an hour, the biggest of my life, the worst bad trip of my life" (*Interview 1*). As *Gérard* was taken to hospital for medical attention, the way he was evicted from his caravan scared people from the autonomous part of the movement.

While the victim was silenced by the fact that he was in hospital, the first meetings took a place in 'no market,' outside in the field, which seems to be the most neutral place where both networks felt safe in this tense atmosphere: "It was the first time that people from different parts or ideologies of the ZAD communicate together" (*Interview 6*). As he had no direct witnesses, the person responsible for the attack claimed that it was an accident in order to gain the support of the collectives in the institutional part of the zone: "He couldn't deny that he'd brought the explosive, but he'd just found a little space that could be modified" (*Interview 4*). When *Gérard* woke up days later after the first operations and heard what Conrad's version was, he began to speak up. The members of the network around Conrad had kept their narrative and portrayed the victim as being unreliable: "It would cast doubt both on the justice system and on the ZAD. So that was his strategy. I think he did it very quickly. It seems natural to me, almost in this situation" (*Interview 4*). Anyway, for people who did not want to get involved, for whom the victim was not an important person in terms of their own activities, it became the main excuse during this period not to take the case seriously: "And then doubt means that you don't dare take a stand because you have doubts and that even if we say to ourselves that it's probably *Gérard* who's saying ... yeah, well, we still have a little doubt so we don't take a stand" (*Interview 5*). But for many people connected to the autonomous part of the zone, discrediting the voice of the victim and pretending that nothing actually happened was beyond the limits of tolerance, and they tried to force the aggressor to leave the zone.

During the first few days after the attack, people met across the divide to argue about different interpretations of the situation and to try to find solutions to continue to live in the zone after the event. There was no common vision for a possible consensus as the two adversarial groups wished to protect the members of their network: "There is a lot of anger and a lot of things to talk about, and now even more because we protect our friend who has lost his hand and we are facing the friends of the aggressor" (*Interview 6*). Once Conrad's friends understood that there was no imminent danger and that they could present the conflict as a two-version case, their intention to have common meetings across the divide quickly faded away. After a few heated discussions, the idea was to move on. By contrast, the people around the victim were not willing to accept the normalization of violence as part of the approach towards the squatters: "Quite quickly, we found ourselves at the meeting just with autonomous people or with a few people from the ZAD in the middle, but who were there as observers" (*Interview 4*). The only platform for continuing the talks across the two parts of the zone and for

demanding to take a common position was the AdU, the monthly general assembly. Organized by the institutional part of the zone, it is normally open to everyone, at least for the first part of the meeting. The assembly takes place in a large barn with heating, in a room that is regularly used for concerts and conferences. It became the base ground for disputes over the position towards the aggressor and the victim of the attack.

5.1 Patterns of Exclusion

Resolving such a controversy by a non-hierarchical decision-making process, with two groups representing adversarial positions in the conflict, is quite a difficult task. Many people from the autonomous part of the zone began to regularly attend the AdU to discuss the subject and to demand that it be taken seriously. The aim was to influence those who maintained their neutrality: “I thought that, faced with such an event, the vast majority of the ZAD would firmly condemn the act and implement what was necessary to protect the victim and allow his return” (Interview 4). The contrary result happened, when the tools to manage the meeting were applied to control the decision-making process. If the meeting had been governed democratically, the situation would have been solved differently:

And in fact we were also successful at the AdU, we managed to put pressure on so that there was an indicative vote, practically a majority in favour of Conrad leaving until the next AdU. But in fact the facilitators didn't follow that vote. On the pretext that the consensus wasn't complete because there were 2 or 3 people who opposed it. (Interview 4)

The facilitators have the power to move quickly to another subject if they wish. After the indicative vote to demand that Conrad leave the zone for at least a month, the people bringing up the subject of aggression were asked to leave the building: “We've always ended up on the outside, we've never really weighed in on the story, so to speak. The decisions were made beforehand, I think. I think the decisions were made beforehand by a pseudo-small committee” (Interview 3). In the organisation of the AdU, control over the agenda and facilitation is crucial to maintaining the dominant narrative that is re-created during a meeting.

Those who did not respect the fact that the point of the aggression was no longer included were regularly forced to leave the meeting because of opening a topic that was not on the agenda: “Yeah, always happen that they kick us out and they using like we are just here for sabotage, and not to find full solution. They use that against us” (Interview 7). After the facilitation, there is control over access and who has the right to speak. To avoid such situations of people supporting the victim having a voice and to have a clear reason for not letting such people in, a rule of membership was implemented in the following weeks: “And therefore considered not to be a member of the AdU, because now there are new rules for being a member of the AdU, you have to fulfil a set of specifications. This was not the case until recently² (Interview 5). Exclusion from the decision-making process was an important move to avoid discussion and to keep the subject undecided. As horizontality is based on guided discussions with the aim of searching for common ground, there can be situations when it is more tactical to avoid discussion altogether. This was solved by restricting the idea of an open meeting; a security group began to limit entry: “But at the last AdU, they managed to get their way, which is to have a small group acting as a guard at the entrance to keep out people who are... bah, anyone related to east, roughly speaking” (Interview 5). In this case of a formally open meeting, the strategy applied to achieve the desired results was based on limiting access and undermining the credibility of the opposing position.

The other element of power dynamics at the AdU is rooted in the tradition of diverse groups competing for influence. In a non-hierarchical decision-making environment, interest groups can gain powerful positions:

They say they work by consensus, but in fact they don't work by consensus, they work by lobbying. If you want a decision to be taken at the AdU, or if you don't want it to be taken, you have to lobby, and so you have to represent a lobby that is powerful enough to impose itself on others (Interview 4).

As the people dedicated to protecting the victim had no such capacity within the institutional part of the movement, their position was side-lined. To calm people who were concerned by the incident and the conflict that it was causing, the AdU set up a special group to deal with the situation. The idea of mandating the delegation was that the group would report to the AdU every month on how the situation was evolving to avoid direct discussion during meetings. But it was not accepted by the other side: "It's important to mention that because the group was created by Clara, Clara is the girlfriend or whatever you want of Conrad. So Clara select people and yeah, if you start like that, it's not a neutral group. It is not objective" (Interview 7). The objection about lack of neutrality was expressed during the AdU, and many people were disappointed by the process. Nevertheless, the group gained a firm position in the decision-making process.

As a member of the group, Camille got involved to try to keep the discussion open. A similar strategy was applied to control the subjects of discussion by those in charge of facilitation: "They just wanted to control everything and they even said they prepared the meeting before. Yeah, so you couldn't bring another point in" (Interview 2). Camille, accepting legalisation and thereby being connected with the institutional part of the zone, was quite surprised to be asked to leave the group: "I mean you're not always gonna have the same point of view, in any case is normal as well. But the fact that it became just a small group that didn't permit the participation of others you know, this is the real problem" (Interview 2). The working group takes responsibility from the AdU and it works as a small closed collective that is not disturbed by opinions that differ from the main narrative: "Since very quickly there were no longer anyone close to our side who were part of this group, I don't really see how they could have resolved this conflict without talking to people" (Interview 5). As time passed, no proposal was made as to how Gérard could continue to live in the zone when he returned from hospital. The function of the group itself was often questioned, when there seemed to be no will to help with the situation: "It was mainly to make sure that Conrad didn't leave, and they did a good job of getting everyone back to sleep, because people got used to the fact that he would stay in the end" (Interview 5). By excluding anyone close to the victim, and as a working group with a mandate from the general assembly, this method allows a few people to make decisions that are presented as a result of horizontality. And for Gérard, it meant that he would live next to his neighbour as if nothing had really happened, without the support of the AdU and the legalised projects.

5.2 Control over the Space

The return to the zone was difficult for Gérard because it happened in the middle of the winter. His friend took care of him in a self-built cabin equipped only with a wood-burning stove and candles. With no running water or electricity, it was a challenge to maintain hygiene and keep his wounds clean: "There's no more wood and it's cold and Gérard is really in poor health. And a few of us thought that it's not possible for him to stay in these conditions given his state of health" (Interview 4). An old caravan with heating was bought and connected to electricity by his friends, with a water source nearby to help Gérard get through the winter. While exclusion from the decision-making process does not allow ideas to be represented, exclusion from resources is a tool to put pressure on the daily lives of people from the autonomous part:

So, they took the opportunity to cut off the electricity and then they made pseudo water cuts to put pressure on, saying that it was equipment problems, but in practice, it was rarely equipment problems. It was more a human problem, wasn't it? (Interview 3)

The group that formed around *Gérard* to care for him over the winter was forced to accept the harsh conditions and to continue providing basic needs to support his recovery: "This means cooking for him, taking care he gets his medication and dealing with administrative formalities" (Interview 4). It also included regular visits to the hospital, recharging the batteries, getting gas for the heating, shopping, and providing emotional support. Moreover, helping *Gérard* put a person into an affiliation with a group that was under significant pressure: "Yes, it's scary, it's scary of possible reprisals" (Interview 4). In the case of intense conflict, this intimidation is a way of demotivating people who prefer to maintain their neutrality. If you are seen to be involved, you could be targeted and excluded from the institutional network.

When he got better and was able to live without assistance, *Gérard* decided to move the caravan to his old site. The group delegated by the AdU to deal with the case questioned this move, seeing it as problematic: "Trying to negotiate my return because they call my return my re-installation: 'I've never been uninstalled, that's all'" (Interview 1). In the end, *Gérard* decided to move his caravan next to the old one without the consent of the group:

And the wife of Conrad, come and jump on the gate that we wanted to open and not destroy, but just open to make the caravan pass and then some support come to help her. And they were really arrogant, they were really trying to reverse the victim. They really think about Conrad and not *Gérard* and *Gérard*, he is now in front of them. And even in front of them with his little space that he lives and try to live after this trauma. And they are still confident. I don't know, in showing that they disagree. How can they feel that? I don't know, it's crazy (Interview 6).

Thanks to the support and use of force, the people around *Gérard* managed to provide an opportunity to reclaim his site. As the gate was protected by the group mandated by AdU, the only way in was blocked. To avoid violence, the caravan had to be moved around through trees and bushes. What could have taken a few minutes turned into hours of clearing the land to create a new route to *Gérard*'s former habitation under the surveillance of the institutional delegation.

There are a few theories within the zone about the character of domination in daily life and why it is a strong experience for many inhabitants, which the *Gérard* case made visible: "These people feel dominant even in a situation where their actions are indefensible. Well, in fact they stay in their position" (Interview 4). The main critique of what is happening in the zone is based on the demand to create a story for the public that has actually never been real. To legitimize its status, to obtain contracts, and to attract visitors for the summer festivals and work camps, the image of another world is important for the economic stability of the legal projects: "It's not even lies, they're trying to invent a good story. A pretty story. By making the tourists believe that everything is fine here in the best of all possible worlds, it's perfect" (Interview 3). Creating a profitable business leads to a situation where maintaining the right narrative is crucial. The result of the process of legalisation is the recreation of a class society that is hidden behind the story of a successful social movement winning its territory:

There are different classes of people in the ZAD, opposing social classes, well-educated petit bourgeois; well educated? Who thinks they're well educated and who thinks the others are poorly educated and therefore they are more legitimate (Interview 5).

Inhabitants of ZAD are mostly physically separated by the creation of different neighbourhoods as a consequence of inner evictions, with a basic division between the eastern and western parts of the zone. While on one side there is a clear vision about the shared story that should represent the zone, those on the other side strongly disagree and continue to live their lives in spite of the continual attempts to silence any dissenting narrative.

Even though the organizational repertoire used in ZAD NDDL is based on non-hierarchical techniques and follows the governance systems typical of the new left movement, this does not protect the zone from reproducing a system oppressing those who do not fit into the dominant narrative:

There's also a systemic oppression, at the whole of society, but which is reproduced in ZAD, where people with no job, no income, who live in a very precarious way are seen as dangerous people, are seen as stupid, dirty and harmful to the general public (Interview 4).

In the same way that exclusion and dehumanisation became a way of controlling the narrative in ZAD NDDL, the threat of centralised violence as a means of subduing the population makes people reconsider their possible actions: "I get the impression that this is a dictatorship of fear. They'll try anything to put pressure on you so that you're the bad guy and you're the one who has to leave, they've pushed you to the limit so that you'll leave" (Interview 3). The resistance that formed against *Gérard's* eviction was based on an attempt to try to reverse the tendencies that had already been present in the zone for years. To accept such treatment of a squatter puts everyone in danger: "We are against the people that are trying to avoid the topic and trying to normalise violence" (Interview 7). Some of those more connected to the institutional network hope that the situation will improve thanks to outside intervention: "I'm pleased that we're connected with the institutions in France, but despite all the critique about the system in fact the results can be even worse here when you have these types to take control" (Interview 2). But for most of the autonomous network, to stay disconnected from the authorities is not a questionable political stance. In the end, the ideas of ZAD NDDL as a prefigurative experiment are disappearing with each new unresolved conflict: "I think it helped us to be more realistic, there were still some illusions, whatever we thought. And I think there are less of them now" (Interview 4).

6. Discussion: Governing by Exclusion

The case of aggression between two squatters from different parts of the movement reveals the dynamics of the struggle over the narrative that should represent the zone. The situation itself is interpreted by many in the context of a sequence of inner evictions aimed at a specific part of the population. The controversy can be understood as a "framing dispute" (Benford 1993) where there are two adversarial positions, and is typical of movements in decline (Snow, Benford 1992). Framing the situation as an accident is an unacceptable argument for the autonomous part of the movement, which sees it as a clear manifestation of the imbalance of power and the systematic use of violence. As the experience of the event is interpreted through discursive frames and narratives (Polleta 1998, 154), two different realities emerge within the movement during its decline: "Decline is more than a story – it comes into being through real changes in objective conditions, the clashes of competing interests, and the evolution of perspectives" (Owens 2009, 257).

For the autonomous part, the narrative they have created has the potential to mobilise and activate those in the zone to organise resistance and fight to protect the victim. It is an open-ended story about continuous efforts to establish an autonomous zone while resisting the state, which is absorbing the zone through legalisation.

For the institutional part, it is imperative to maintain control over a narrative that exerts hegemony over communication with the media, the authorities and tourists. This narrative is constructed to defend its legitimacy for acquiring legal contracts and has the potential to attract visitors. It is a story with an end, about the social movement that won against the airport but was not strong enough to remain illegal. Accepting the process of legalisation is presented as the only reasonable position and is celebrated as a way to save the zone itself.

A protective attitude towards a narrative as a method of social control is common within social movements: “The content of narratives about the past are the subject of intensive social control efforts, typically reflecting extant power relations” (Benford 2002, 72). The case of aggression in ZAD NDDL allows the exploration of a situation in which a group decided to actively resist the dominant narrative and challenge it via a non-hierarchical decision-making process. The analysis re-examines the limits of the consensual model: “If an unanimous decision is impossible to reach on issues considered crucial by activists, it can entail an internal split and the exit of the dissenters from the group” (Piazza 2013, 94). In my study, a contrary effect appears when the shared space is contested because exiting can itself be quite problematic. *Gérard* has nowhere else to go, even when recovering from a serious injury – the only place to get help is the zone itself. The group’s departure from the zone is enforced through exclusion, intimidation and the systematic use of violence.

While ideally a consensual approach to conflict can be constructive (Maeckelbergh 2009; 2011; 2013), Maeckelbergh has experienced this potential at different phases of the cycle, as an organiser of meetings: (...) when I facilitated the meetings myself, I gained insight into how the agenda for meetings is put together as well as the kinds of adjustments movement actors make when they transform abstract values into context-specific practices (Maeckelbergh 2011, 3). During my research of a movement in decline with diverse inner dynamics, I was labelled as being aligned with the autonomous group and regularly excluded from meetings among others. Moreover, as a researcher with the capacity to represent and reconstruct the story of the excluded group, I was under pressure from the institutional network among the most vocal members of the autonomous group who had cared for the victim of aggression during the winter.

The basic plot of two adversarial narratives is known from research on the legalisation of the squatters’ movement, as legalisation is a common tool used by the authorities to close the phase of the cycle of mass mobilisation (Dadusc 2017; Pruijt 2017; Martinez 2018, 2020). The case under study here confirms the effectiveness of legalising one part of the movement while repressing the other. Moreover, it has shown that legalisation not only strengthens the inner division in between the “autonomous and institutional wing” of the movement (Aguilera 2018), but that the institutional part itself takes an active role in the governance of illegalities. Based on the narrative that pushes the projects to fit into the legal structure, evictions of squatters are delegated to the squatters themselves. This leads to a situation where the zone is transformed without the need for police intervention, and pressure is shifted to administrative dimensions. As a consequence, the consensual model is used as a means of imposing one narrative over the other, and there is a need to put a pressure on the dissenting group.

Like any form of governance, the consensual model has its weaknesses and can lead to outcomes contrary to those it is supposed to provide. Rather than accommodating a diversity of views (Graeber 2004), it can be used to silence those who disagree with the dominant narrative. The strategies identified in the conflict under study are based on control of the agenda, control of facilitation, and control of the space through the implementation of exclusive membership. In this way, exclusion is used as a means of achieving consensus when the consensual model is applied to deal with adversarial politics. From an external perspective, the governance of ZAD NDDL would clearly fall into the category of a non-hierarchical decision-making process based on the consensual model. However, a closer look at the way horizontal prefiguration is performed from day to day shows that the exclusive character of the imposition of the dominant narrative is an effective way

of controlling the population. If the dominant group is well organized, it can be easier to use the consensual model to maintain power than other forms of organization, such as voting, would allow.

The patterns of exclusion at ZAD NDDL extend far beyond the decision-making process and are present in the daily interaction between two adversarial groups. Divided on the basis of social class, those without resources are treated as a danger to the legal version of the zone. Pictured as unreliable and useless, they have no place in the newly emerging social system based on exclusively governed collectives with economically active projects. Exclusion from common resources is a way of making the life in the zone more difficult, as the analysis of the conflict reveals – the disconnection of water and electricity was used to demotivate the victim from staying in the zone. The autonomous wing still has the capacity to mobilise enough members to be able to organize non-violent direct actions as a form of resistance, such as *Gérard's* reclaiming of his right to live next to his garden, despite the verdict of the group mandated by the AdU. However, the daily presence of exclusion, intimidation and threats of violence has already forced many to leave. While many inhabitants have nowhere else to go, autonomous life in ZAD NDDL is year by year becoming increasingly difficult.

7. Conclusion

My purpose in this study has been to identify and elaborate a number of problems that characterize the application of the consensual model within social movements. Research on a squatted area in the process of legalisation offers an opportunity to examine the gap between idealised visions based on prefigurative logic and the difficulties of conflict resolution in daily life. I have objected to an analysis of prefiguration that underestimates the role of adversarial politics within the movement in decline and the advantages that an elaborated decision-making process can bring to one group on the basis of class division. The literature on the squatters' movement provides an overall understanding of its dynamics in relation to the state and extensively covers cycles of mobilisation, but few studies analyse the inner dynamics within squatted places. This study covers the subject of difficulties that come along with the transformation of a squatted zone into a legal structure and the subsequent competition for space. The focus on frame disputes and competing narratives reveals how a non-hierarchical decision-making process can be used to silence the dissenting group. As the case of ZAD NDDL clearly illustrates, exclusion can be an optimal strategy to achieve consensus and to maintain the dominant narrative.

The research reveals the problematic nature of control over the movement and shows the possible pitfalls of the consensual model when applied in a case of conflict. In particular, patterns of exclusion were identified both in decision-making processes and in daily life. In the case of the act of aggression causing injury to one of the members of the autonomous part of the movement, horizontality did not provide the tools needed to protect the victim from further threats. In the end, direct action and mobilisation was the chosen strategy to prevent the victim's eviction. The inhabitants involved often expressed concern about the use of violence and tried to resist their marginalised position in assemblies and in the zone. Studying a social movement in decline allows the examination of organizational models under pressures not present in earlier phases of the cycle. The limits of non-hierarchical decision-making processes being reached, the researcher can analyse problems that are not visible when a shared narrative is still keeping people together. The case of aggression at ZAD NDDL is a clear example of how the consensual model did not deliver on its promises. Additional research is needed to specify the conditions under which horizontality can be claimed by a small group of people as a persuasive means of realising their vision. Understanding the weaknesses of social movements that fail to provide a safe space for their members can help improve the models of governance for future occupied zones.

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