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# Meaningful Action:

Recomposing Labor and Value with Practices and Imaginaries on the zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes

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**Abstract**

This paper explores how the modern categories of labor and value are questioned by practices and ideas on the autonomous zad of Notre-Dame-Des-Landes, France. In a world where the global economy is defined by the division of time between labor and leisure, it is necessary to question these foundations by asking what this dichotomy implies. With data from eight weeks of ethnographic fieldwork observing how utilitarian notions of value are questioned on the zad, this research aims to disclose how, in the place of contemporary hierarchical labor relations, horizontal organization of production and autonomous labor practices afford collective and individual freedom to pursue meaningful ends and actions that are not necessarily ‘productive’. My argument is grounded in an action-based theory of value to propose that the intimate relationship between imaginaries and practices form the basis for understanding how the intersection of value and labor can help us reimagine conventional assumptions about the contemporary economy for the sake of meaningful emancipation.

**Key Words:** social anthropology, zad, value, labor, imaginary, action

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# 1. Introducing the zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes

*It is a sunny Wednesday morning as I walk to the collective garden of the zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes to participate in the weekly full-day maintenance, from 9AM to 6PM. Like every Wednesday since my arrival, I go there to help, talk to people, and collect vegetables for the collective where I am housed. The sound of singing birds and humming insects fills the air, and in the garden of roughly one hectare, the remaining vegetables from the winter season share their living space with slugs, worms, and various bugs. They are undisturbed from Thursday to Tuesday, benefiting from the completely ecological and chemical-free gardening practice that has developed over the years under the guidance of the garden's référents<sup>1</sup>. On Wednesdays, however, people gather to weed, plant, and harvest the earth. Today, there are around fifteen people, but more will join and some will leave in the coming hours. A few of us, myself included, are passer-bys, but the majority comes from all four corners of the zad.*

*Today, it is "Paul" who 'directs' work as a référent. The garden is administered by a handful of people who meet on Tuesdays to inspect and discuss what needs to be done, planted, or harvested the next day, Wednesday. As we gather in the ankle-deep mud between the greenhouse and the cultivated plots, the goal of today's work is disclosed by Paul, who then asks us in which activity each of us want to participate. I sign up for sowing radishes, while some go off harvesting and the rest plant tomato seedlings. Kneeling and squatting in the dirt, planting the radish seeds one by one, Paul and I discuss how choosing and controlling one's seeds is important both for ecological agriculture and peasant resistance against feudal or capitalist overlords. And during that time, I learn how to handle tools and manage the earth to create ideal conditions for radishes to flourish. Lunch is prepared by one of the référents with almost exclusively on-zone products. We are all hungry and tired from effort, and devour our lunch over small-talk about the garden, the weather, politics, and upcoming events on the zad, before going back to the field at 14.*

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<sup>1</sup> Person temporarily in charge of a collective project.

*Work begins again. Some people have been replaced by members of their collective, and some have just dropped in for the afternoon. It is the fourth time I garden, and I have learned not to overstrain myself by taking regular breaks to breathe or chit-chat. Paul asks me if I want to plant kohlrabi with him and two guys who turn out to be architects by formation. "So you are architects?" I ask them while we kneel over the furrows. "Well, that depends what you mean by 'being an architect'" one answers mockingly. Paul joins the discussion, and to my pleasure we start talking about jobs. They all agree on actually liking the content of their former jobs, but the pressure to work more without an increase in salary was simply unbearable. Freedom, they joke, came when they decided to come to the zad to 'work' like this.*

*At 17:30, we slowly begin to wrap up work by meticulously storing the tools in the toolshed. We are all sore and tired from working, but happy that the day is over. Jokes are exchanged with the delightful feeling of accomplishment. We gather for the final ritual of the day: the distrib' (distribution) of today's harvest. In front of us is a table filled with splendid vegetables, and we enjoy the sight of the fruit of our collective effort. Paul thanks us for today and begins the final speech. He tells us how the distrib' works: the collective garden has an annual cost of around 2 000 euros and everyone is encouraged to participate according to their needs to the small cash box which says "prix libre" (free pricing); there will be a first round where everyone takes a moderate amount of vegetables to ensure that everyone gets enough for themselves and for the people they are fetching vegetables; then, there is a second round where all the vegetables must disappear.*

*Coins and bills are put in the box as we turn around the table filling our bags and wooden crates with vegetables. Those who did not take much are encouraged to take more, and so we get rid of everything on the table. Tired but satisfied from my effort, I walk back to my sleeping quarters, carrying a crate of vegetables on my head to share with those who allowed me to stay on the zad.*

## 1.1. A Brief History of the zad

In 1974, the French government decided to allocate 1,200 hectares of land on the commune of Notre-Dame-des-Landes for the construction of an airport in the farmland periphery of Nantes, region of Loire-Atlantique (Rialland-Juin 2016). The area was labeled a *zone d'aménagement différé* (ZAD) - or a “deferred development zone” (Pailloux 2015) - to be developed into an airport for the year 2017. However, between 2007 and 2018, climate activists and anti-globalists occupied and settled 1,650 hectares, and appropriated the acronym *zad* by calling it a *zone à défendre*, an autonomous “zone to be protected” from capitalist and state exploitation (Verdier 2021, 116). During the 2010’s, clashes between the French authorities and the “zadistes<sup>2</sup>” were frequent, but the police’s violent evictions of the illegal squatters were fervently countered by local and civil involvement in demonstrations and the subsequent rebuilding of the communities that had established themselves on the zad. In 2018, after years of struggle, the government decided to abandon the project for financial reasons. Since then, the roughly 300 residents of the zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes have developed into a plethora of collectives experimenting with different forms of social organization, agricultural and economic practices, as well as relations with their living surroundings. It is organized under the common goal of having consensus based decision making shape the development of the zad without state intervention; in other words, it is a place where different forms of being human are being experimented with. These collectives live around or in occupied farmhouses (henceforth referred to as *lieux de vie* - “living spaces”) that were bought up by the District council (*Conseil départemental*, CD) and intentionally abandoned for the airport project. Today, social life centers around these, as they have been refurbished with bathrooms, showers, kitchens, sleepings, libraries, meeting rooms, and workshops.

Due to this countryside area being designated a zone of deferred development, it was, contrary to the rest of France and Bretagne, spared of the agricultural reforms of the 20th century that destroyed hedges and parcels of traditional peasantry. Today, it is a haven of biodiversity with its incredible variation of animal and plant species (Verdier, 8). The year-round humid soil, largely consisting of clay, reminds us that this used to be an even swampier land, drained for the

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<sup>2</sup> A term with complicated meanings and connotations used to describe the people of the zad. To avoid any counterproductive labeling, the terms “inhabitants”, “occupiers”, or just “people” of the zad will be used in its stead.

purpose of husbandry and growing buckwheat (ibid., 27-30). But in striving for autonomy by collectively working the land with ecological methods, the inhabitants of the zad have become relatively self-sufficient in food production. Since 2018, demands have been made from the French authorities to ‘legalize’ agricultural and economic activities to cede land rights to the inhabitants of the zad. In this era of ‘post-legalization’, individual projects and enterprises have started to blossom in a coexisting model with the forms of collective and cooperative production that will be explored in this paper. It is therefore not surprising that this place of diversity has become the object of various studies by anthropologists and sociologists concerned with political and environmental questions and experiments. None, however, have explored how these autonomous practices and activities question the categories of labor and value. Grounded in two months of fieldwork on the zad examining value as imaginative action through the theoretical lens of David Graeber and Anselm Jappe, this research is an attempt to describe how, on the zad, people escape contemporary labor conditions to create their own.

## 1.2. Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this research is to explore how labor and value are practiced and imagined on the zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes with the help of the following three research questions:

- How is labor experienced and understood by the inhabitants of the zad?
- What is the produced and imagined value of the practices of the zad?
- How do the notions of labor and value intersect in practices and imaginaries?

## 1.3. Outline

In the chapter that follows, I will disclose the previous research and the theoretical framework of this essay. The third chapter is a discussion of the anthropological research methods used for this research. In the fourth, the agricultural production of the zad will be described, while the uses of markets and money is the object of the fifth chapter. The sixth chapter will cover labor practices, and in the seventh, the meanings and values ascribed to these will be analyzed. I will end this essay with a concluding discussion about the results of this research, its implications and potentials, as well as its shortcomings.



## 2. Previous Research and Theoretical Foundations

The zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes is a field that has been visited and revisited by researchers in an astounding frequency for its short existence. To motivate the relevance of my research, I will provide a summary of the most pertinent studies done on the zone, which have inspired and aided this research, before discussing the theories that have been used to analyze it. This will also help clarify what gap in the knowledge of the zad this study attempts to fill.

### 2.1. The zad, Social Sciences, and Imagination

Sociologist Margot Verdier's (2021) work has been a major reference for obtaining an etic understanding of the zad. In attempting to form an anarchist sociology inspired by the political organization of the zad, Verdier provides an historical overview of the zad and its metamorphosis up until 2017. Moreover, she explores the various ways in which the zad's inhabitants try to autonomize their economy from global capitalism. She argues that by reinventing property relations through reinstating collective work and *commons* its inhabitants are resisting accumulation of resources and asymmetrical hierarchy-relations. While this paper also has a certain anarchist undertone, it does not make the same conclusions - or assertions - as does Verdier. First, the field has changed considerably since Verdier's fieldwork in the 2010's, and second, the aim of this essay is not simply to criticize the 'economy' as she does, but to question the very assumption of it through exploring *value*. However, the strength of Verdier's work is that she explores *values* in the political sense. In describing the zad's political organization, she makes the point that since politics is everywhere, research must avoid falsely assuming neutrality. Instead, it should inscribe its process and its findings in wider contexts and struggles for justice and emancipation. Verdier (ibid., 191) holds that "sociological imagination" is the ability to imagine a better and more democratic world outside of the systems, schemas, or structures of thought and practice that be, thus enabling conceptual breaches of ideas and questions to form. Verdier's plea is but a few methodological inches from Graeber's anarchist anthropology, which puts human creativity and imagination at its center and which we will develop in the second part of this chapter.

Another helpful source for understanding the politics of the everyday has been Geneviève Pruvost and her various works on the zad. In one of her articles, Pruvost (2015) studies three models of work founded on participation, out of which one, the collective model, is taken from the zad. She holds that collective ‘work’ is the realization of a societal project, or a form of direct action that “politicizes the slightest movement” and questions the notion of work (*ibid.*, 20). It does, however, leave the question of *what* is being made and *why* unanswered from an anthropological perspective, as the notion of imagination, which helps answer these kinds of questions, finds no place in her research. In another article, Pruvost (2017) schematizes the daily life of the zad, which offers valuable insights and quantitative data of the zone - a method she has described as “ethnocomptabilité” (Pruvost 2024): by drawing schemes of ‘accountancy’ over the things used, exchanged, or obtained by inhabitants of the zad, their price, origin, and use, Pruvost attempts to recount what people *count* and what *counts* to people. In short, her analysis replaces value with evaluation, and therefore, in extension, imagination with practice. This is a radical difference between Pruvost’s approach and the theoretical framework of this paper, which suggests that imagination and practice are inseparable.

Without doubt, sociologist Sylvaine Bulle’s *Irréductibles* (2020) has been the most critical and challenging reading for this essay. It is a comparative study of inside narratives, essays, pamphlets or manifestos published by the zads of Notre-Dame-des-Landes and Bure in eastern France. In regard to Bulle’s theoretical approach and argument, there is mainly one aspect of interest for this paper: the link between autonomy and the imaginary. Autonomy, she argues, is difficult to ‘capture’, since it encompasses a broad range of political ideas situated on the left wing of the political spectrum. But Bulle holds that there is one common philosophical denominator between these ideologies: the core of the philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis, concerned with the importance of the imaginary production of society. For him, autonomy has to do with a collective of individuals establishing self-governance, in which the imaginary is not conditioned by institutions, but where the society is conditioned by the imaginary (Bulle, chapter 1 paragraph 3). In Castoriadis’ own words, “to speak of an autonomous society, of the autonomy of society, not only with regard to this or that particular dominant stratum but with regard to its own institution, needs, techniques, etc., pre supposes both the capacity and the will of human beings to govern themselves in the strongest sense of this term” (Castoriadis 1997, 249). Autonomy in this sense is the opposite of heteronomy - where ‘external’ laws and rules are

imposed by the state - and stresses the importance of imagination in producing “auto-institutions” that non-deterministically realize the emancipation of human thought and therefore, in extension, humans’ material conditions. If in Bulle’s book the imaginary is less developed and discussed with empirical material such as her and people’s experiences, this anthropological essay aims to do precisely the opposite by instead being grounded in a firm belief in the virtues of the methods of reflexive anthropology to emically explore how autonomy is simultaneously imagined and practiced.

## 2.2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical inspiration for this research began with the reading of *Markets of Dispossession* by economic anthropologist Julia Elyachar (2005). It is essentially about the (social) economy among craftsmen from the el-Hirafiyeen neighborhood in Cairo who contest neoclassical models of commensurable, economic value by understanding the ‘free market’ as instead being a place invested with social and cultural meanings. She introduces the term “relational value” (ibid., 7) to economic anthropology to describe the value that the craftsmen create in a symbiotic economy where money and economic activity are guided by a belief in the karma-like “evil eye”, and cooperation and human relations between the craftsmen triumphs over competition. In advocating for an anthropology of value that is linked to larger questions of power and politics, Elyachar draws on Graeber’s *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coins of Our Own Dreams* (2001) - the theoretical pillar of this essay.

As the title suggests, Graeber’s book is an undertaking at creating an anthropological theory of value, the principle of which being that value is to be found in the level of control we have over our “intersubjective spacetime” - that is to say, the degree of influence we have as individuals over our immediate environment in relation to other individuals (Graeber, 44-5). Value here resides in the act itself of influencing our surroundings, in its potential for changing these. For Graeber, value is also “the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves” in a social totality (ibid., 45). Put differently, value is the creative act of making an action socially meaningful to oneself and others. He argues that creative action cannot be detached from material reality, since it can only be mediated, transformed from thought to action through material objects and therefore depend on their actual physical properties. To

contextualize Graeber's argument for an action-based theory of value, we must equally understand capitalist economy, and therefore revisit Marx.

Jappe (2024[2003], 4) proposes a critique of the “*basic categories* of capitalist modernization” and of ‘traditional Marxism’, that is, by attacking capitalism at its roots and not, as is common today, its recent outgrowth ‘neoliberalism’. He distinguishes between the widely read “exoteric” Marx who famously lashed out at liberalism, and the “esoteric”, less famous scholar who criticized not only capitalist society but the very foundations of its categories of labor, commodity, money, and value, upon which he builds his Marxian “critique of value” (ibid., 5-7). The exoteric Marxist definition of capitalist society is that money is used as a means to obtain more money (ibid., 44-5). Instead of money being a means of circulation, or a medium of value, for obtaining things, produced objects - commodities - are instrumentalized in an exchange process for accumulating money. The ‘market’ is in fact the separation of a commodity’s production and consumption, its de-personalization by being placed in impersonal circulation.

This rests on the fundamental assumption of classical Marxism that production forms the basis of society (Marx 1845), but Jappe stresses that in commodity society<sup>3</sup>, it is neither labor itself nor the ownership of labor that creates value. Rather, it is “labour power”, or the capacity to labor (Jappe, 47). In salaried work, this labor capacity is quantified not in labor performed but in time, defined as “the quantity of pure expenditure of human energy measured in time” (Jappe 2014, 26). Indeed, Marx’s definition of capitalism, according to Graeber, is that “it is the only system in which labor - a human being’s capacity to transform the world, their powers of physical and mental creativity - can itself be bought and sold” (Graeber, 55). Profit is thus extracted by making the laborer work for more time than is socially necessary to produce the commodity at hand - what Marx called surplus value (Jappe 2024, 48). Value can therefore, in capitalism, be objectively measured as the labor-time put into the production of an object.

Jappe argues that labor is only a necessary category for the reproduction of capital, and not an ‘actual’ thing. Human activities that are not mediated by money do not fall under this category, since they do not generate quantifiable surplus value (Jappe, 68-9). It is a fierce critique of work itself: emancipation is not about reducing the wrongdoings of value by equally redistributing the fruits of production among its workers, but of abandoning labor as a category

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<sup>3</sup> Jappe replaces capitalism with ‘commodity society’.

and labor time as a standard for value altogether (ibid., 71). Moreover, the Marxist definition of commodity fetishism rests on the belief that a commodity absorbs labor and that the social relations that make it up are obscured by money relations on the market. But Jappe (129-130) posits that the actual fetishism of modern society is *the belief that a commodity contains value as labor*. That value which the ‘Old World’<sup>4</sup> tries to produce, and the belief that it is created through labor, absorbed by things, and realized in circulation is the actual fiction of our society. It is most flagrant in our belief in labor as separated from other activities (ibid., 126), which poses the question of how to *evaluate* value in economies where wage-labor markets do not exist.

The problem with a Marxist approach that assumes the primacy of material over immaterial production for the (re)creation of society, is that “society is not a thing at all: it is the total process through which all this activity is coordinated, and value, in turn, the way that actors see their own activity as meaningful as part of it” (Graeber, 76). Graeber holds that “structure” is a constant process of creation by the actions that make it up, and that we must understand the importance of imagination in this process. Individual projects (action) of pursuing meaningful ends - what one *imagines* is important - are coordinated in a social totality, because there must be a “potential audience” of others - a society - that recognizes the value of this action (ibid., 76-78). It is an insistence on the same definition of the imaginary that Castoriadis proposed as “the capacity to make be what is not in the simply physical world and, first and foremost, to represent to oneself and in one’s own way (...) that which surrounds the living being and matters for it” (Castoriadis, 356). In other words, parts, fragments, or actions, only take on their meaning when they are related to an “imagined audience” - or society - composed of social beings and their actions (Graeber, 86-7). This value-form is inherently political in the sense that it is the sum of social relationships between people, how they imagine their reality, and eventually how they then realize it in concrete acts. If freedom is “the freedom to decide (collectively or individually) what makes life worth living”, politics is the combat over deciding what value is (ibid., 88).

It is impossible to overlook the anthropological parallels between totemism and commodity society: in a certain sense, we project our belief in labor onto the totem of value. Jappe’s argument is inherently Durkheimian, positing that the sacred is but a projection of the

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<sup>4</sup> The ‘Old World’ (*le Vieux Monde, l’Ancien Monde*) was a term used for talking about the society the inhabitants have left behind. It allows to synthesize complexity when talking about the world that surrounds places such as the zad, since there is no need to always specify whether you mean the ‘capitalist’, ‘racist’, ‘sexist’ or ‘unjust’ ‘system’, ‘society’, ‘state’, or ‘economy’.

profane, that the divine is a reflection of the social *for* the sake of the social and not something in itself (Jappe, 132-3). Broadly speaking, economic anthropology has asserted that what characterizes capitalism is its insistence on an economy separated from other spheres of life through the valorization of productive labor (ibid., 136; Hann & Hart 2011). By detaching value from this category of labor, we unveil the tautological principle of commodity society: it urges us to produce more value by working more, while value is nothing but labor time. Were we to refute labor as time-based remuneration, and instead insert value in the performance of actions, new possibilities of emancipation would arise (Jappe, 82). As we will see in this essay, in which we apply Graeber's imaginative action and Jappe's critique of value to analyze the practices of the *zad*, the dissolution of boundaries between 'productive' and 'unproductive' labor allows the pursuit of value in the form of imagined and performed meaningful activities.

### 3. Method and Approach

The empirical data of this paper was gathered during eight weeks of participant observation on the zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, roughly between mid-February to mid-April 2024. I attempted to meet as many people as possible and ended up interacting with around fifty people forming the basis of my thesis, although only a dozen became key participants. While most of them were between the ages of 30-45 and predominantly of male gender, I also spoke to far older and far younger persons of both female and non-binary gender categories. To protect their integrity and observe anonymity, all their names have been replaced by pseudonyms and personal details and traits have been omitted. When Davies (2008, 77) writes that participant observation is more of a “research strategy” than a method, she implies that it consists of a wide range of methods. This is particularly true in my case where I, depending on the situation, and the relationship I had with the participants, oscillated between the four roles that the ethnographer can adopt: complete observer, observer-as-participant, participant-as-observer, and complete participant (ibid., 82). Ethnographic vignettes, such as that in the introduction, have been inserted in the analysis as “narrative windows” (Schöneich 2021, 118) to recount crucial moments from the fieldwork which exemplify experiences of work and value on the zad. The following sections will discuss the methodological approach in its entirety and complexity.

#### 3.1. A ‘Field’?

As noted in the introduction, the zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes is composed of 1650 acres of farmland on which various collectives and individuals live around common buildings (*lieux de vie*). I alternated my stay between two of these collectives who accommodated me, and met their members, some of which - Louis, Hervé, Yoëlle, Léo and Paul, for example - became crucial participants for this research. However, these *lieux de vie* are not inhabited by individuals, but serve common purposes ranging from communal kitchens and bathrooms to meeting rooms and sleeping quarters. The degree of communal living varies between the collectives: for example, certain are open to everyone on or from outside the zad, while others are more restrictive on usages. This also reflects the chosen style of living: while some are composed of individuals who ‘live their own life’ but share common areas, others opt for more in-group cohesion by restricting household activities (dining, for example) to members of the collective only. In both cases,

however, inhabitants sleep - or live - in caravans or cabins scattered around the common space. These are the two modes of living I had the opportunity to experience, but there exist several others which I unfortunately did not have the time nor access to explore.

This variety in organization of life illustrates the very point of Matei Candea's critique of multi-sited ethnography by arguing for the "arbitrary location" (Candea 2007). He urges us to use framing - or "methodological asceticism" (Candea, 174) - as a valuable tool of analysis in the anthropological method - and not understand them as impediments to it. While writing my research proposal in October 2023, I was gnawed by the feeling that I was undertaking something 'backwards' by not conducting a multi-sited ethnography, as advocated for by Hannerz (2003) and Marcus (1995). But Candea's article reminds us that a closed-off field is everything but homogeneous, as it almost always contains several sub-places, sub-groups and contradictions. Rather than claiming to explain a cultural whole, the incompleteness of this short ethnography is but a "window into [the] complexity" of the zad (Candea, 179).

This complexity is best described as diversity. This was most striking in terms of people's occupational activities. After a week or so, I realized that there were all sorts of 'professional' lifestyles - ranging from full-time self-employed farmers, shepherds, brewers, to full-time employees, construction workers and plumbers - and mainly three modes of agricultural production and distribution - collective (non-market), cooperative (semi-market), and individual (market) organization that will be developed in chapter 4. In addition, it turned out that the zad was all but a hermetically sealed zone. Quite the opposite, it was and still is a node in a web of "common political purpose with allies who stand elsewhere" (Gupta & Ferguson 1997, 39) and serves as a place for these to meet physically, exchange ideas, and mobilize. The "struggle" (*la lutte*) is considered by its inhabitants to be of a glocal character: people's engagement with ecological and political causes does not confine itself to the borders of the zone but spills over to zads and autonomous movements elsewhere. Tempted, as Marcus (1995, 106-110) would have it, to "follow the thing[s]", the ideas, the narratives and the leads that people introduced me to, I remembered and repeated to myself Tom Boellstorff's mantra: "research narrowly and think broadly" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 54). Confronted with the immensity of diversity, I restricted my study to mainly focusing on those who had neither employment nor were self-employed in the formal sense, but who nevertheless *worked* in a substantive way, who *did* stuff that seemed to be of some sort of value other than that mediated by the commensurable standard of money.



### 3.2. Working Myself into the Field

After my arrival, I rapidly resolved to engage in collective work to prove my devotion to both the cause of the zad and its inhabitants. The weekly gardening, in which I participated almost every Wednesday<sup>5</sup>, became my main news channel: at the end of the working day, information about upcoming events or collective work were announced. Here, I decided to follow the things. Gardening led me to working with the collective potato production, where I met Jeanne, one of the key participants of this research. As we were loading and unloading around a ton of potato sacks, she approached me to ask me if I wanted to help her out during the coming week. Naturally flattered by this offer, I happily accepted. This is how I was introduced to Jeanne's kitchen collective, in whose cooking sessions I partook with her comrades Georges, Charles, and Léo, and which constitute a substantial part of this research. In short, I helped them prepare meals which were distributed by their mobile kitchen trailer during political actions, demonstrations, and gatherings on or outside of the zone. In the evenings, I would often stay up late in the forge with the smith Louis, who would teach me the basics of forgery while talking about poetry, philosophy, and value, and how it all related to the objects he was crafting.

It would be wrong to state that that one place led me to another, when in fact it was through meeting people that a field of social relations across the space of the zad opened up to me. Davies (88-9) writes that fieldwork depends upon social interaction, which in turn is a two-way process between researcher and participant. During participation in collective work - be it planting leeks, sorting potatoes, or peeling them for cooking - I had the opportunity to meet and talk to people. In some instances, I was conducting "snowball sampling" (Göransson 2019, 132), where an acquaintance made while hoeing would introduce me to someone else with whom I would talk 'outside of work'. In other, the monotone routine of performing a not too physically draining task, would prove a perfect place to discuss the topic of my thesis - that is, the value of the work we were performing.

The bodily experience of spending a lot of time working urged me to adopt a phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of the research participants through the vessel of my body (Tutenges 2022; Woodthorpe 2007). Most days were 'structured' by serendipity, as a "series of unplanned everyday life experiences" would unfold with me "joining in with whatever [was] going on in order to become further involved in the practices of the

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<sup>5</sup> Ethnographic vignette in the introduction.

research participants” using “participant sensing” (Pink 2015, 101). Participating in collective work was indeed a “whole-body endeavor” (Tutenges, 412) in which I would experience and analyze phenomena multisensorially. McGranahan (2018, 4) stipulates that “anthropological ethnography is an embodied, empirical, experiential field-based knowledge practice grounded in participant-observation”, and indeed, spontaneous evening courses in forging or learning to farm with my hands were the epitome of the “low-tech endeavor” (ibid.) that is conducting ethnography. Furthermore, the phenomenological approach coincided well with the very nature of the overall life on the zad: a hyper-social space structured by social relations, collective complications as well as collective fulfillment. Through experiencing these and following social phenomena, I managed to peek into the life worlds of some of the inhabitants, and participated in their construction of social reality (Davies, 50).

### 3.3. A Political Field: Research and Emotions

Before going to the zad, I knew that it was a highly political field, and maybe *the* political field par excellence, judging by French academic research and media coverage from the 2010’s and onwards. I was not prepared, however, for the emotional implications of constantly treading a field mined with sensitive topics. This had partly to do with my role as a researcher.

On the zad, it was not uncommon for people to respond to my approaches with opinions about science in general, and anthropology and anthropologists in particular. During my first week, I had a lengthy discussion with Yoëlle<sup>6</sup> one evening about power relations in research, as she asked me who I was doing this research for and who would read it. Sensing tension about the nature of research, I decided to sit down to explain my intentions and visions with the project. Yoëlle told me she had done fieldwork on peasantry in Georgia for her master’s thesis in collaboration with a French development agency - a project she in hindsight regretted as she was afraid her findings were used to replace the rural peasantry by capitalist developers. I listened to her fears, and together we discussed our respective understandings of scientific research. Even though we did not necessarily agree on what constitutes science, the mere fact of our having discussed it did improve our relationship considerably, as she began inviting me to events and dinners with her comrades, thus giving me invaluable access to the field. This discussion was far

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<sup>6</sup> Member of the collective where I stayed, and responsible for the cattle of the agricultural collective of the zad (see chapter 4).

from the only one on the topic of objectification by the researcher's gaze or method that inhabitants felt. Quite often, the word "sociologists" was used with a slighting intonation about researchers who had visited the zad without contributing to anything - a condition that was referred to as "research extractivism". By spending most of my days working with collective projects or helping individuals out, I strived - or worked - in the direction of not becoming one of those 'sociologists'.

Davies suggests that the "research methodology is intertwined with politics, with the validity of its findings dependent in part on the political position and experiences of the researcher" (Davies, 71). There is no point in hiding the fact that I have followed and supported the struggle of the occupiers of the zad for political reasons, admiring their climate activism and consensus-based decision making. This does not mean that I adhere to every idea on the zone; in fact, it would be practically impossible as the political palette of the zad is as bright as the rainbow. Admittedly, the political spectrum can be situated under the broad term of anti-authoritarianism, located on the left wing of conventional politics. Since the complexity and messiness of politics has been studied by, among others, Bulle, Pruvost, and Verdier, suffice it now to say that the zad is a political project that is diverse in its essence because of the constant negotiation of "living together" (*vivre ensemble*) between everything from autonomists, anarcho-individualists, anarcho-collectivists, collectivists to various types of communists.

Navigating these muddy waters of ideas was a challenge in itself in the sense that I often had to confront strong political positions. For example, resentment against the political class, the state, and the police is not uncommon in France in general, but the unconditional antipathy inhabitants expressed was at times overwhelming. Spending time with the inhabitants, working, drinking, and smoking cigarettes together, hearing their life stories and violent, often traumatic, experiences with both society and police helped me *feel* their contempt. Not only did I emphatically perceive 'where they came from', but over the course of two months of sharing life together I developed but a fragment of the emotional relations and understandings that exist on the zad. As Woodthorpe (2007, 8) notes, emotions are invaluable in understanding contextualizing data during the research process, which partly consists of acknowledging "ourselves, and our participants, as emotional complex beings".

### 3.4. Inductivity and Mutual Contribution

Coming to the zad, I thought I had my research questions and theory set. This defined the people I tried to meet and the questions I asked them, but because of their ideas and answers I had to recalibrate these inductively to fit with the aim and material of this research. There were several people who contributed to the research in substantial ways, but the most important theoretical contribution was that of Jean, a middle aged inhabitant who ran the printing press of the zad and enjoyed talking about political theory and philosophy at the local bar. This research is indebted to Jean for having introduced me to Jappe's critique of value, which now forms an integral part of the theoretical groundworks of this essay. Generally, I was encouraged to read a wide range of engaged anarchist writers and thinkers, which have aided sensitizing myself to the life on the zad, but have not contributed to this research in any other particular way.

So far I have enumerated but a few of all the things I have learned from and owe to the inhabitants of the zad. It is less clear how I contributed in any way to their lives. This seemed particularly important in a context where people were conscious about and felt impacted by 'research extractivism'. Reciprocity, I realized, is not anthropology's foundational concept for no reason, and I wondered how I could repay my debt. Partly, I concluded, by working, helping out with both collective and individual work, which I intensively did. Another way of doing this was sharing my views and opinions, ideas and biases on various topics discussed. After a couple of weeks, when I became socially acknowledged, I was accountable for what I said and did, but could therefore also contribute with my meanings and opinions. When telling people about my project, I would also explain what I had understood so far, which gave them the possibility to contest or acquiesce, and it has to some extent contributed to building elements of this paper interactively. Lastly, while I remain reserved toward the actual impact of this paper, I do hope it will contribute to making the social life and the struggle of the zad a little more known, thus doing some justice to their practices and imaginaries.

## 4. Modes of Organization

Elyachar (97) writes that “economists usually draw models of the market to grasp how it works. Ethnographers, on the other hand, often trace detailed pictures of specific processes of exchange”. This is only half true in this case, since I have also focused on the underlying processes of production that condition the subsequent transactions taking place. Spending my time in the western and central parts of the zad, I encountered mainly three modes of organization of agricultural production. These can be divided into: collective organization, cooperative production, and individual enterprise. In the first two, “social relationships (...) organize productive activities in such a way that they form part of a whole” (Jappe, 75), but it is mainly the first one that is of particular interest for this essay. However, it is necessary to describe the two others for developing a general understanding of the zone.

### 4.1. Collective Organization

This production, described in the ethnographic vignette of the introduction, is organized by the group *Sème Ta Zad* (STZ, “Sow Your Zad”) and is destined for internal consumption. STZ produces everything from vegetables in the collective garden, thousands of kilos of potatoes and buckwheat, to rapeseed, flax, cheese, bread and meat. These various productions are managed by regulars or *référénts* - people who want to invest their time in maintaining and developing a specific production - but the work is most often carried out during collective workdays by individuals who voluntarily participate. For example, every Wednesday is gardening day, where people tend to the garden and collect vegetables. The potato group, however, sends out messages when they need people to participate in potato sorting, planting, or harvesting.

STZ’s mode of operation is open to everyone who wants to join and is fundamentally non-profit. Since human labor is not remunerated, their only expenses are of material character. This includes maintenance of gardening equipment, purchase of fuel and seeds, and rental of machinery. The garden, for example, has an annual cost of 2 000 euros, which is collected through the ‘sale’ of vegetables at free pricing after gardening days. The money is put in a common fund for unforeseen costs and the creation of new projects.

## 4.2. Cooperative Production

The *Coopérative* combines elements of solidaric redistribution of products and manpower with profitable sales of the same. It is made up of individual ‘cooperators’ who each produce something, be it in gardening, buckwheat cultivation, milling, or bakery. These goods are first redistributed among the members of the Coop, second, sold on external markets at market prices, and finally, made available to the common buildings where non-members of the Coop can enjoy them at free pricing. Since work is not remunerated, the money obtained by the Coop serves to pay production costs, invest in machinery and tools, and create a certain material comfort for its cooperative members.

According to the members, this material comfort in production allowed by the influx of money does not only profit themselves but the general project of autonomization of the zad: machines, services, and goods are swapped or bartered between the Coop, STZ, and individual producers. For example, during my stay from late winter to early spring, STZ’s collective garden was in its off-peak season as production transitioned between winter and spring vegetables, creating a natural shortage of leeks for the weekly distribution. The Coop’s garden, however, was still replete with leeks, which were harvested and bought by members of STZ at production price to then be distributed at STZ’s Wednesday gardening day. Another example relates to immaterial goods, when know-how in, for example, carpentry is borrowed from the Coop by collectives to refurbish common buildings.

## 4.3. Individual Enterprise

For some, autonomization also means autonomization from collective modes of production, and, in other words, from STZ and the Coop. These individual - or often couple-based - projects are legally declared under the *Mutualité sociale agricole* (MSA), thus benefiting from state subsidies. They are therefore regularly referred to as legal projects. These consist of bakeries, pasta manufacturing, vegetable oil production, dairy, beef and lamb meat, medicinal plants, eggs and poultry, gardening, and brewing - products that are sold on markets outside of the zone. If legal projects imply state benefits, they are also under the constraint of taxes, quotas, and the general struggle to keep a small scale enterprise profitable.

Likewise, it would be unfair not to acknowledge the benefits of legal, individual projects. While there are ideological disagreements on what the zad should be between those who operate on a collective or cooperative basis and those who pursue individual projects, the zone is structured around a general consensus of mutual aid. Links of support do therefore exist between individual and collective organizations. Tools, machinery, and goods tend to circulate between these on a non-contractual basis, but on assistance according to needs. Who profits from whom seemed to me like a “chicken-and-egg” debate, where proponents of the collective model would argue that individual enterprises profit from cheap raw materials, low rent and electricity prices, while the latter would respond that without their machines and legal projects the former would have a hard time surviving in the zad of post-legalization. These tensions remind us that diversity is not a utopia but a constant bargaining between values. To avoid overdramatizing or misrepresenting the arguments and stakes, we will leave the agricultural question for a while to explore money and markets.

## 5. Affording the Struggle: Markets and Money

The concept of “affordances” is regularly used in digital anthropology in combination with the notion of “polymedia”, that is, the deliberate choosing of different media of communication for different ends and purposes (Madianou & Miller 2012). The underlying idea of talking about an “environment of affordances” is that “the primary concern shifts from an emphasis on the constraints imposed by each medium (...) to an emphasis upon the social and emotional consequences of choosing between those different media”. Social relations are therefore reinvested in the use of different technologies which acknowledges both the agency and the limits of that agency of social beings in their use of and negotiation with technology. Or, in economic anthropologist Bill Maurer’s words, “the technology takes the back seat to the functionality it affords” (Maurer 2015, 18). Following Maurer, if we understand money as a technology, the case could be made that affordances are needed in order to understand how, when, and why money is used on the zad.

Maurer (2006) argues that ethnography provides evidence that money is not inherently ‘bad’ nor necessarily fetishizing in the Marxist sense, and that we therefore must explore its pragmatic uses by moving from “meanings to repertoires” (ibid. 30). Maurer (2015, 28) proposes that we stop seeing money merely as an asset for exchange, for risk of depersonalizing it and obscuring its underlying relations. If we instead treat it as a means of *payment* rather than a purely moral token, its social and physical infrastructure are made visible. This helps us move our analytical focus to the systems in which money travels, systems that can either be open or closed (ibid, 30). By studying use cases of money and people’s “money repertoires” - how they negotiate money through the use of it - “money ecologies” become apparent - that is, the ‘system’ in which money is used and understood, and in which these repertoires are unfolded to continuously renegotiate that ecology (ibid., 48 & 134). This is particularly pertinent for the action-based theory of Graeber, as structure, in both cases, is not understood as predetermined but formed through action or use of material objects. Let us then provide some use cases of money from the zad.

The *non-marché* (“non-market”) takes place every Friday afternoon on the ruins of what used to be a thriving communal spot within the zad. Today, the remnants of cabins and houses that were destroyed by the police in 2018 gives the space a desolated look. Yet, a handful of



people keep the market afloat by bringing various goods, drinking homemade cider, and discussing the latest news of the zad. The products distributed are bread baked by one of the collectives, some vegetables from STZ and a collective garden outside of the zad, and sometimes fruit from dumpster diving. In theory, they are sold at a free price, but the times I was there the products mostly seemed to be given away for free. The little money that is collected in a metal box full of copper cents is then given to a fund destined for collective use on the zad. According to inhabitants I spoke to, the low engagement in the non-marché is, among other political and social factors, due to the fact that producers do not get their cost of production covered when distributing their products this way.

The *Supermarchouette* takes place once every month in one of the common rooms of the zad. Products, such as potatoes and vegetables from STZ, fermented and canned fruit and vegetables from the cannery<sup>7</sup>, sauerkraut, kimchi, herbs, bread, cheese, and meat from STZ, are displayed on tables in the room in a self-service style, without ‘vendors’ at their stalls. The food is being sold at free pricing, but to prevent negative production costs a guiding price is written down on a small chalkboard in front of each product. Jean told me once that the good thing about free prices is that they can be manipulated and inflated if need be. At first, this declaration seemed strange to me as I thought the whole point of it was to prevent high prices. But at the Supermarchouette his statement made sense. The indicative kilo price of the bread was around 2 euros, while Paul, who usually bakes the bread, told me it was between 1,30 and 1,50. Paul later said there were two reasons for this, the first being that ‘large’ margins secure the cost of production for everyone, and second, that they needed a little extra cash for developing new projects. After the market, the money is collected, counted, and distributed among the participants to cover their respective costs, and the surplus is kept for funding agricultural projects.

The third ‘official’ market is the farmers market *Vacherit*, taking place every Friday and which is oriented toward non-zad customers. Individual farmers from or outside of the zad and the Coop sell pasta, honey, vegetables, meat, pastry, cheese, galettes, eggs, and beer at market

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<sup>7</sup> Situated in the eastern part of the zad, I never visited the cannery myself. Its general functioning, however, is that the members of the workshop transform and can surplus fruits and vegetables from gardens (on or outside of the zad) into marmalade or classic preserves that are then redistributed at free pricing at, for example, the Supermarchouette. Essentially, it falls under the category of collective organization.

price. This is where profit is made. The same galettes, crêpes, and eggs that are sold at the Vacherit for 1 to 1,5 euro each can be bought on the zad for at least four times less.

These three ‘markets’ illustrate how three different money repertoires are deployed. In the first instance, money had only the symbolic significance of contributing to the combat fund, of paying symbolic membership to the cause: food was in practice given out and shared freely between the participants. Economic exchange was completely absent. In the second, it would be wrong to state that no exchange took place. But since there existed no formal transaction between buyer and seller, it would be equally wrong to focus on exchange. Rather, money was used by inhabitants of the zad to obtain products they wanted or needed, but more importantly, and contradictory as it may seem, cash was also the embodiment of autonomy, as it afforded payment of fuel, food, and resources (such as construction materials) that cannot be procured on the zone. In these two examples, the use of money was limited to sponsoring social ends in a closed system, when at the Vacherit, stakes were different. Here, money was handed over from buyer to seller for farmer products - money that was then reinvested in private funds.

The point of all of this is to argue that money, because of its different uses, was both the means by which to obtain autonomy, and what constituted the risk of losing it all to individual pursuit of interest. During a conversation with the kitchen collective<sup>8</sup>, Jeanne told me she did not care at all about money, upon which Georges replied that it is “bourgeois not to care about money”. For example, when their collective cook for actions, it is ‘sold’ at free pricing but often with an indicative price based on the calculated cost of production. Although they tell me they do not want to ‘make money’, the times we served food we ended up making profit because of people’s goodwill and low production costs. Money was then used to buy cooking utensils or - and this is the crucial point - food for the next action, which contributed to cutting the price considerably, thus used to maintain low and affordable prices. We could say that in doing so, Jeanne and her friends managed to “disentangle ownership from use” (Maurer, 111), as money was not owned by anyone but constantly re-used for social purposes. Since it was never invested to increase personal profit, there was, in Jappe’s words, no “transformation of money into capital” (Jappe, 13), as, through practices of enclosing and limiting the uses of money, it was never directly used to make more money.

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<sup>8</sup> See ethnographic vignette chapter 6.

To cite Maurer once again, “when people modify state-issued currency, they (...) insert other values into market values” (Maurer, 92). As noted above, the struggle for ecological and social justice and values were embedded in the production and distribution of goods on the closed non-market and Supermarchouette and money became means for these ends. But the open system Vacherit and the market sale of products from individual producers reveal that this was not always the case. Rather, the zad’s money-uses are in constant negotiation between different money ecologies of social-ecological and market values - infrastructures that depend on the pragmatic approaches that constitute the consensus based approach of doing politics on the zad.

Before moving on to exploring *work* a note must be made on what affords unpaid activities in the first place. As described above and earlier, the organizational infrastructure of the zad made it possible to live as an individual with few resources and material means, but money was still used and needed. An important source of money for several of the participants was the *revenu de solidarité active* (RSA): a state benefit of around 550 euros a month that serves as a minimal income. While I sometimes experienced reluctance to talk about this, it was also pointed out to me that this minimum income made activism and occupying movements like the zad possible. Since inhabitants avoided saying that it was ‘thanks to’ the RSA, it is arguably more just to state that it simply, in many cases, afforded people to engage in meaningful and fun activities. During gardening at the STZ, a comrade put it clearly: “I may not have employment, but I do have work!”. In what follows, we will see that the uses and affordances of the RSA on the zad suggests that when people are given the chance, the time, and the resources to do what they find meaningful, they adapt money to find ways to engage themselves for those ends.

## 6. Working Differently

*A working day: part 1.*

*9:00. I wait for Jeanne outside the Ambazada, a communal meeting place and kitchen built for hosting greater gatherings. We had agreed to meet at 9, but she shows up a bit late as usual. This is the second time I help her and the collective she is a part of to cook for gatherings and demonstrations, and I know not to expect time to be counted by the exact minute. The two of us start a fire to heat up the kitchen's water tank, brew some coffee and smoke cigarettes while waiting for the rest of the crew to show up. Georges and Charles are out getting groceries and we cannot start cooking until they arrive around one hour and a half later. We have plenty of time to discuss our lives, politics, and farming.*

*10:30. Georges and Charles arrive with a car full of food. Leeks, squash, cabbage and potatoes come from the local gardens; eggs, butter, cheese, honey, and beef from a local farmer; sugar-dried blueberries and mascarpone from dumpster diving (recup'); pie dough, emmental, and cream from the supermarket. The collective has signed up to provide lunch for 120 people during two separate meetings, one organized by a union in Nantes and the other by the region's organic farming group - two groups that are in contact with the zad through networks of resistance and personal relationships. In other words, we have a lot to do.*

*Innumerable leeks are rinsed from dirt, slugs, and snails, and finely chopped; 15 kilos of potatoes are peeled and cleaned off potato bugs; 15 kilos of meat is minced by hand; 90 egg whites are beaten until stiff before being incorporated into the sugar-mascarpone-yolk mixture to form a fluffy and solid cream. Basic products are transformed into zadiste 'haute cuisine' without the need of a kitchen brigade-type hierarchy. While she instructs us on the cooking techniques when we ask (because of her expertise), she does not supervise. Quite to the contrary, initiatives are taken by everyone who wishes to perform tasks - or take breaks. (...)*

The kind of activities I and the participants of this research participated in, such as the cooking described above and the gardening in the introduction, were essentially self-managed and unpaid. Whether we were gardening or preparing food, no formal hierarchical structures existed. There was no chain of command, no top-down direction of how individuals' labor capacity should be used. Quite the contrary, work was auto-managed and auto-organized. This commonly used prefix was telling of the larger unwillingness to subordinate to any form of domination. In this chapter, we will explore practices and understandings of labor by examining first what kind of work the inhabitants were escaping from, and second, how they organized work differently.

### 6.1. Leaving Work Behind

A few days before leaving the zad, I realized I had been dealing with the other side of the conceptual coin tossed at anthropology by Graeber (2018) in his book about “bullshit jobs”. When asking inhabitants of the zad about their reason for coming here, responses often revolved around the situation of salaried work in the ‘Old World’. Louis, for example, when telling me his life story, accused managerialism of having ruined his craft. Formed in forgery by the notable craftsmen organization the *Compagnons du Devoir*, Louis spent years of his working life traveling around France to restore historical monuments, cathedrals, and castles. But in came managers and consultants who eroded the meaningfulness of performing work. Government started paying less for restoration projects while workshop owners were being overtaxed, and managers were hired to cut costs. Inspired by *Bartleby's* “I would prefer not to” and taoist principles, Louis simply walked away from work one day, eventually ending up on the zad where he built an alternative, common forge.

For him, it was tautological to increase profits by paying someone (completely useless) to force floor workers to work more and faster. The whole idea of handcraft, he told me, is precisely that work is not conditioned by machines, but that tools are in the service of the craftsman's will, and therefore, in extension, that one's labor capacity hinges on one's willingness to work. Louis often talked about Gaston Bachelard's philosophy of work and matter, and would recite passages from *La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté* (1947). Bachelard's insistence on the “reveries of will” resonated well with the aesthetics of resistance Louis symbolized in his forge: “the will is best administered by a reverie that unites effort and hope, by a reverie that already loves the means independently of their end” (ibid., 9, my translation). What I want to underscore with this

example is the importance placed on individual autonomy and will, and not the unconditional subjection of it to a larger cause, as is the common misconception of autonomous zones as collectivist or communist dys- or utopias.

Another frequently received answer when asking people about their attraction to the zad, was self-management (*l'auto-orga, l'auto-gestion*). Pierre, for example, had university training in informatics and programming, but realized that he did not want to work in that sector. He was therefore employed in a small company organizing outdoor events for children who needed to be sensitized to environmental questions. He actually really enjoyed doing this - but he spent most of his working hours in an office preparing these trips, filling out paperwork and other tasks his boss deemed necessary. Workload got more intense as the company struggled to stay afloat and his salary stopped increasing. At this point he was 25 and could therefore apply for the RSA, which he did and moved to the zad in search for a meaningful way to spend his time. Today, he is in charge of both the collective garden and the potato production of STZ, and, as inhabitants refer to him, a pillar of the zad. Marie, came to the zad for similar reasons: although sensitive to the cause of the zad, it was only when she heard that there was a place “where people did stuff that they wanted to do - and did it themselves” that she decided to move.

Following Graeber, we could call this the dream of action capabilities: the imagination of the possibility to emancipate from forcing structures to a world where you participate - in word and deed - in deconstructing these for less coercive forms of existing. While the examples enumerated above referred to their motivations as ‘non-political’, others had outspoken political motivations. Hervé, an agricultural worker, lives on the zad because he does not want to work away his life, and does a minimum of agricultural work (60 hours a month) for a farmer off-zone to have enough money to live and also because it is what he is good at. But, in his opinion, since a great deal of the ‘newcomers’ have higher education (from bachelor degrees to doctorates) and come from well-off middle class families, they are motivated by political ideals. Indeed, younger people such as Yoëlle had come here after her master in agronomy and is now taking care of the cows of STZ, and Clara pursued a double degree in geology and agronomy before dropping out to herd sheep for the ‘cause’. There was often an anarchist reason lying behind these choices: “no one above me should tell me what to do”. Georges simply refused all forms of authority, and Louis rejected the condition of the contemporary employee: ‘choosing’ to turn up to work every day for a meager salary to afford food and rent.

Nevertheless, anarchist critique of salaried work was not the only motivation. One of the few people with communist ideas I met was Léo. He came to the zad in search of a collectivist society where everyone worked together for the common good. Overall, he was happy to be here, but he often expressed discontentment with the individual forms of production. Léo wanted labor and resources to be commonized, as he believed the collective force was stronger than the loose association of individual ones.

Disclosing the variety of causes for moving to the zone “not to work”, as some would put it, is crucial for understanding that the *causes* for coming to the zad were manifold, but the *motivation* was essentially the same: being able to decide what is meaningful and acting in accordance with those beliefs. If we consider ‘society’ as “the total process through which all (...) activity is coordinated, and value, in turn, the way that actors see their own activity as meaningful as part of it” (Graeber 2001, 76), these individual pursuits of meaning are part of the overarching, total process that is the zad. Its diversity of values therefore only contributes to its ‘coherence’ as a political project.

## 6.2. Horizons of Autonomy

For Nicole, who was *référent.e*<sup>9</sup> for the collective garden of STZ, the principle of “horizontality” (*l’horizontalité*) of garden labor was in itself a way of fighting against oppressive structures, such as patriarchal gender hierarchies. She told me that in a horizontal framework, both knowledge and means of production (tools and land) were commonized (shared): if no private ownership of the same exists, then it follows that unjust power relations cannot really take root in the ‘workplace’. In the case of the collective garden of STZ, collectivization of resources affords the participants of gardening personal autonomy, as they participate in work on voluntary involvement, whether it is for supporting the cause and ideals of STZ or for getting food for the week - or both, as it was in most cases. But private ownership is not the only stake here. If the dissolution of private property helps transform human relations, the *performance* of work must be accompanied by certain imaginaries and beliefs.

There is a crucial difference between ‘work’ as I experienced it on the zad and how employer-employee relations work in the ‘Old World’ according to the participants. While you can be asked by your employer or higher-up to perform a task, the question, in many cases, is not

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<sup>9</sup> Person in charge of a collective project.

always a question. But when a *réfèrent* asks you if you “would mind” doing something, you can always say no. And if you say yes, you can of course walk away from it later if you would like. During gardening days, people would come and go, work at their own pace and take brakes whenever they felt like it. While no ‘judgment’ is made on your work ethic if you decide to quit a task, frustration can of course ensue, as certain tasks - such as finishing sowing the radishes before rain comes - must be done. If the principle of autonomy for Castoriadis is that people manage their own lives and their time, there can be no constraining obligations in this form of work; rather, people believe in the importance of personal autonomy and therefore act in that direction.

Louis, for example, spends most of his evenings in the forgery ‘working’ at his own pace. Some of his projects - such as restoring old swords - were inherently personal, as he was passionate about medieval weaponry. But with other projects, the distinction between ‘work’ and ‘hobby’ was difficult to make, as he was equally passionate about forgery in general. For example, he restored old donated or found farming tools - sickles, scythes, axes, and hammers - and sharpened knives. Sometimes he had an order placed by someone who needed new tools and restored them for that end, but most of the time he simply did what he enjoyed doing: crafting tools, fluidifying and solidifying metals, exploring how the poetic combination of fire and cold water quenched steel and transformed its molecular structure to form a knife’s edge.

Another important component of his activities consisted of perpetuating the “alternative forgery” (*la forge alternative*), that is, an auto-formative model of forgery. He told me that anyone who wants to learn forgery can come to the forge to work, but without there being a master-apprentice hierarchy as is the traditional praxis. Instead, a horizontal model is applied to the formation, one in which Louis shares his knowledge of the practice, but where the one ‘undertaking’ the formation applies this to a project of his or her own making, thus working *for* no one but him- or herself. The idea is then that knowledge is spread around different squats and places (in France) in order for movements and people to autotomize themselves in the handling and forging of tools and machines. During my stay, a comrade of Louis’ who had learned forgery with him before building a mobile forge inside of his van, came back from a tour between squats and friends in France, where he shared his skills and his knowledge in different struggles. With him, he brought stories and ties from other places, things he had learned, books, and tools which he reciprocated with Louis.



When I asked Georges, who came to the zad after 2019, what he had done or learned before coming here, he replied: “Nothing. Literally everything I know how to do, I’ve learned it on the zad”. When I met him, among other things, he baked bread for the zone once a week, cooked with the mobile kitchen collective, and is part of the forest and logging group. He has developed all of these skills on the zone, and now, through practice and manuals from the zad’s library, he is perfecting them. As Nicole phrased it:

The system in which we live would like us to have a speciality, end of story. And that we should be subject to the specialities of others. This brings us to our knees before the system. We need the authority of others. Whereas here, in fact, we share our knowledge and very quickly become multi-skilled. You could learn all the CAPs<sup>10</sup> in the world here. Maybe not all of them, but a lot of them. There’s baking, farming, people who make crepes, a forge, a tannery, a cheese factory, a cow group.

*Multi-skilledness* here is integral to the project of autonomizing the zad and its inhabitants *because* it affords a certain division of labor. This might seem contrary to what Marx wrote, but as Jappe points out, division of labor itself - which is based on the collaborative process between parties to form a productive whole - does not alienate workers from their product; rather “objects of utility become commodities only because they are products of the labour of private individuals who work *independently of each other*” (Jappe, 34). Creating and sharing knowledge on the zad is both the product and part of the process of production itself. Specialization in a field is not a threat to autonomy or the ‘gateway’ to commodity fetishism, because *specialization cannot be undertaken alone*: formation rests on the principle of interdependence, and autonomy, therefore, hinges on the same. It seems that within this intersubjective model personal projects do not clash with collective interests, as they are mutually dependent. Horizontal formation and work, we could argue, is breaking the “iron chains which weigh men down” that Rousseau (1750, 4) denounced as having been imposed on us from above, and simultaneously willingly reforging them into new, non-obligatory links with the people around us. However, freedom here is not the return to any primitive ‘State of Nature’, but, in Graeber’s words instead:

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<sup>10</sup> *Certificat d’aptitude professionnelle*, a certificate of formation in a work field.

demands both resistance against the imposition of any totalizing view of what society or value must be like, but also recognition that some kind of regulating mechanism will have to exist, and therefore, calls for serious thought about what sort will best ensure people are, in fact, free to conceive of value in whatever form they wish. (Graeber 2001, 89)

By now, the ‘political’ significance of horizontal work as an autonomous practice is obvious. But if we want to insert it into a larger context so as to understand it as a *human* practice, it could be helpful to speak of the element of *play* involved in its construction. If we follow Graeber (2018, 85), part of the reasons for undoing traditional work patterns and redoing new ones can be ascribed to the joyful experience of playing: the satisfaction of making up things for the sake of being able to do so. Horizontality is, in this sense, the performative exercise of one’s freedom to decide what to do. Play here is therefore in direct liaison with Graeber’s theory of action. One’s imagined capabilities of acting upon the world - one’s fantasies and ideals - are realized in practices and activities upon the spacetime, activities that themselves are patterned by and pattern a malleable set of intersubjective rules (Graeber 2001, 259): an “imaginary totality” in which practices do not “contribute to the reproduction of inequality, alienation, or injustice” (ibid., 227).

## 7. The Meaning of Work

*A working day: part 2.*

*(...)13:00. Lunch break. Jeanne prepares a lunch-stew out of spillover meat, a squash and sweet potato purée and heats up an extra quiche. I have not eaten this good in days, and I savor this reward for my effort in the kitchen. Comrades that are stopping by drop off chocolate, soda, and orange juice from a recup', and Jeanne immediately serve them lunch. Happiness is on everyone's faces as we eat and congratulate Jeanne on her cooking skills.*

*14:30. After even more cigarettes and coffee, work is slowly taken up again. Georges is in charge of the music and motivates us with a mix of electro, anarchist folk and rock, and local fight songs. It reminds me of the reason we are peeling this damn potato for, this infernally amorphous and dirty potato that gives me blisters: the struggle. They are feeding combatants for righteous causes.*

*20:30. We eat some leftovers from lunch and discuss what needs to be done tomorrow and compliment each other on the work performed. We admire the beauty of the quiches, and imagine the look on the syndicalists' and farmers' faces when we serve them a three course lunch. The stew is slowly cooking in a pot the size of which I have never seen before, and the smell of it makes us exalted. Georges and Jeanne will stay up until midnight to stir the stew every now and then. I am now officially 'off duty', but I know I could have left a lot earlier if I wanted. But I did not. Exhausted, I walk back to my sleeping quarters under the full moon and the rising stars. A feeling of meaningfulness, of having spent my day with friendly people creating beautiful dishes, washes over me like excitement.*

When working like this on the zad, I often felt a high level of satisfaction as we and the people we served food to could savor our culinary creation together. I did less so when I started working in the garden<sup>11</sup>, but after a couple of weeks, I began to feel attached to the plots and plants I had been working on. Here, the effects of the collective and individual action performed was

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<sup>11</sup> See ethnographic vignette in the introduction.

materialized by a sprouting garden, a table full of vegetables and fruits that was shared by people - or, as Graeber would have it, an indication that control has been taken over the intersubjective spacetime of the garden: time was structured by the actions of planting and tending to the garden, and expressed through the weekly distribution of vegetables; space, equally by the action of growing. All of this was essentially intersubjective, as food was shared and destined to sponsor *la lutte*. Planting, harvesting, and preparing the potatoes (peeling and cutting out potato bugs) was time consuming and demanded a lot of work, but there was a sense of pride taken in them. This was often asserted when joking that “at least they are *our* potatoes!”.

Some held the inherent value of horizontal work in high enough esteem for it to alone justify its practice: if you are a convinced anti-authoritarian, not *having* to work is the end itself. But in most cases, *meaning* did not end here. For the inhabitants of the zad, the meaning of their labor seemed to extend beyond themselves and their bodies. In trying to structure these meanings into narrower - yet somehow fuzzy - categories, I have divided them into *means of combat* and *intensity of life*, which will be treated in the following two subsections.

## 7.1. Means of Combat

### *Action.*

*It seems like a typical morning in the small town of C in western France. But out of nowhere, a handful of cars pull up in the parking lot of the local police station. Inhabitants of the zad and near-retirement farmers come out and greet each other. Jeanne arrives with her crew and sets up shop: a pop-up tent is quickly raised under which a table is garnished with wine boxes, coffee thermoses, quiches, wraps, cheese, bread, crêpes, fromage blanc and plum jam. A portable gas stove is lit to heat up a soup, and, in extension, us, freezing in this late February weather.*

*René, a farmer from the vicinity of the zad, has been summoned to the station, suspected of participation in an earlier action against landowners who acquire farmlands in an alarming rate and turn them into profitable enterprises such as horse farms, at the expense of peasants who get marginalized and often ripped-off when trading with these. At least, this is what I am told when I arrive*

*with Yoëlle. Although I sense a general “ras le bol<sup>12</sup>” with privileged estates in the Nantes region, the mood is overwhelmingly gay. Today’s mission? Firstly, show René that he is not alone but supported by ‘the movement’, and, secondly, put pressure on the local police not to illegally keep him a minute more than the maximum four hours of open hearing.*

*The four hours would be long and tiresome were it not for the recomforting distraction that is eating and drinking well. People check in on and update each other on their lives, recount how their agricultural or personal projects have evolved since they last saw each other. Combat stories of the latest blockade, of the farmers’ uprising, or personal incidents with the authorities are told. I am taught the basics of juridical and not-so-juridical self defense against abusive police practices.*

*When four hours have passed, we walk over to the entrance of the station as a group and ask about the status of René. We take it that he has been arrested, but five minutes later, René emerges and is rejoiced to see us. He is shaken, but quickly served warm soup. While his case has not been resolved, he tells us that the officers were stressed by our presence and were ‘forced’ to eventually let him go. This morning I was unsure about what impact this action would have, but as Marie - the wandering lawbook of the group - tells me, we are here to “make sure the cops follow the law, which they usually don’t”.*

I first heard of the term “means of combat” (*moyens de lutte*) from Laurent, a 90 year old farmer from the region who has spent his life farming and fighting for justice for small peasant farmers. He has been involved in the struggle against the airport since long before the occupation began, but has helped the zad during the last couple of years by providing its inhabitants with fruits and vegetables, sharing knowledge, and mobilizing against police when need be to prevent the government from evicting occupiers and farmers. When I met Laurent he was helping a friend from the zad to plan the planting of an orchard. In exchange for this, he gets means of combat: a network of people and infrastructure that are ready to perform and support action. He is of course far from the only ‘outsider’ to have these links with the zad. I personally witnessed the close

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<sup>12</sup> Feeling ‘fed up’.

connection between the zad and the surrounding farmers in the action described above, but inhabitants themselves told me they were present not only in all the regional actions, blockades, and demonstrations, but nationwide against state megaprojects.

Hervé, the agricultural farmworker, told me that “autonomization is a practice”. Becoming autonomous involves *doing* things and learning how to do them: if no one knew how to do masonry or farming, there would hardly be any zad left. We have already described how non-hierarchical work organization is structured around the principle of sharing knowledges, which constantly (re)creates self-autonomization of individuals on the basis of collective organization and means. The brief ethnographic account above is but an example of the various ways in which inhabitants can mobilize as means of combat. But while knowledge and human capital is invaluable, material affordances hold an equally important place. At this point, food autonomy should be an obvious one, but to obtain this, tools were needed.

The forgery from which Louis operated often served collective purposes, such as forging spare parts for broken machines or tools. STZ, who provided for alimentation on the zone, had at its disposal donated, found or bought farming machines from the last century for planting, harvesting, and transporting products that were produced on a larger scale, such as potato and wheat. Louis told me that the good thing about these ancient machines was that they did not have any electrical circuits like machines today have. This allows reparations that can be done on the zone, as parts are forged by Louis and other smiths and adapted for either the purpose of or the machine itself. Tools, machines, and the infrastructure the inhabitants had built up afforded them *modularity* in the sense that they could adapt objects to the ends they wished. As Graeber (2001, 83) notes on the importance of a pragmatic materialism contrary to a deterministic understanding of the same, “human action, or even human thought, can only take place through some kind of material medium and therefore can’t be understood without taking the qualities of that medium into account”. In other words, Louis’ and his comrades’ capability to turn a rusty potato harvester into a machine for food autonomy and an engine that can be (and have been) used for blockades, was an exercise of imagination in creative action (*ibid.*, 259).

## 7.2. Intensity of Life

I met Auguste for the first time at the *non-market*. He was a middle-aged man who spent his days working in collective gardens, biking, and reading. We had intensive discussions about the

meaning of work and collective life, discussions from which I have borrowed what he called the “intensity of life” (*intensité de vie*). For him, the whole point of personal participation in collective projects was that being with people was, in the end, the meaning of life itself. “Life is beautiful, my friend. The older I get, the more I realize that the world is ugly but that life is beautiful”, he said. By “the world” Auguste meant the unjust capitalist system, in which people were separated from each other, broken down, exploited, and pauperized. Life, on the other hand, was when people united. The zad was a place where “life vibrated”, people, animals, and plants together. But life, he continued, was also “the struggle” for a cause. Auguste was far from the only one to express a dual meaning of “the social” (*le social*). It is only for analytical purposes that I have distinguished between the social struggle, attained by means of combat described above, and sociality in a relational meaning; in reality, these two understandings collapsed under what some referred to as “fraternity”, and others “solidarity”, and the case could be made that in practice, there is no point in separating human relationships from social struggle. However, in order to understand how they overlap it is necessary to separately develop its relational meaning on the zad.

It was only after a month and a half that it suddenly struck me that *le social* that people were referring to as the meaning of being on the zad was in fact largely constituted of friendship relations. It came to me when I was sitting with Georges, Charles, and Léo in the screening and meeting room of one of the common buildings talking about organizing a Mario Kart and pizza evening on the projector screen: this, I thought, is the type of thing I would do with my friends. So much time and effort was put into happenings with political purposes or undertones that I had become oblivious to the fact that things were also done for the simple reason of having fun together. If we understand this as part of the motivation of preparing food for free, partaking in demonstrations, coming up with slogans and painting them on banners, hosting parties for the independence of Bretagne, or ‘just’ building a music studio, things become clearer. As noted earlier, there was an element of play involved in the construction and performance of activities on the zone - and what do friends do most if not, in a certain sense, play?

Many referred to the origins of these friendships as having been created by years of fighting together. ‘Veterans’, such as Jeanne, Paul, and Louis who were on the zad during the violent years between 2012-2018, talked about collective “war traumas” from standing their ground against French riot police, wounds from which they had to heal together. Together, they

reminisced about combat stories and cherished victories, and although many expressed uncertainty about the future of the zad, there was a common sense of having won ‘the battle of the zad’. These larger narratives about the zad were grounded in personal experiences, and therefore accompanied by strong emotions. While drinking coffee together an afternoon and talking about the struggle, Jeanne told me that even though she never saw so much brutality in her life as during the occupation and evictions, it was the only time in her life she saw the beauty of humanity: truck convoys of food and boots from Spanish anarchist movements coming to support the zad, grandmothers from the neighboring villages turning up to clean and dry the occupiers’ muddy clothes, pallets and pallets of donated chocolate bars, bread, and salad - all of this under the shooting of teargas shells and flash-balls. Louis urged me to picture myself that my and my friends’ houses, built with our own hands, were destroyed by the cops, but that the next day 40,000 people showed up to rebuild everything in no time.<sup>13</sup>

Auguste described these moments - and other, rather mundane, such as collective gardening - as moments of “human effervescence”, “ultra-strong moments” when people take care of each other, touch and experience each other sensorially. It relates directly to the collective effervescence Tutenges (2022, 409) defines as a “state of heightened intersubjectivity” in which individuals’ feelings and doings form part of a larger, concordant totality. But from hearing about people’s life-stories and their relationships, and from participating in the daily life of the zad, I understood that *le social* was not always harmonious. The longer I stayed on the zad, the more I discovered the complications with doing society on the basis of diversity and difference, and I was quite overwhelmed by it. I was told and witnessed that managing people with problems of substance abuse, psychological troubles, or simply different political opinions could imply both physical and psychological violence. But for them and for Auguste, the *intensity of life* on the zad was precisely the social and physical intensity of having to make do with people different from yourself. Auguste explained to me that making life with people was simply the unavoidable condition of life: avoiding people or sociality is the same as avoiding life. This was perhaps the most extreme position I heard; yet, it resonated well with the overall insistence that *people coming together* was and is a special and valuable experience, even though it is far from an easy undertaking.

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<sup>13</sup> He was referring to when, in 2012, French police launched the “Opération César” in which squats and houses were brutally destroyed, only to be contested by the popular counter-operation “Astérix”:  
[https://www.liberation.fr/societe/2012/11/29/notre-dame-des-landes-resistance-mode-d-emploi\\_863931/](https://www.liberation.fr/societe/2012/11/29/notre-dame-des-landes-resistance-mode-d-emploi_863931/)



### 7.3. Synthesizing Value(s)

To find an alternative to commodity society, it is not necessary to go very far or to elaborate any ‘utopias’. It is at the source of Western society, precisely where the commodity began its historical triumph, that we also find its opposite. It is therefore well worth reassessing Aristotle’s idea of the ‘good life’ as the real purpose of society, for such an idea is diametrically opposite to the service of the fetish-god of money. (Jappe, 165)

The forms of work on the zad that have been examined in this paper completely reject economist approaches to value as commensurable units of utility, quantified by money (Graeber 2018, 196-204). In commodity society, this “language of ‘needs’” (ibid., 197) objectifies human wants and puts them into an abstract category that the market is supposed to solve. It is not impossible, as Graeber (203-207 & 220-227) notes, that under capitalism, the conceptual opposition between “value” - the interested, calculated market price of a commodity - and “values” - the belief in a nobler purpose, or “selfless idealism” - has helped the same economic system to emerge as moral concerns have been separated from selfish calculation.

On the zad, the union of personal and social motives to labor illustrates that “real motives are always mixed” (ibid., 204). In fact, there existed no objective measure of value. Instead, I listened to and followed individuals’ subjective understandings and pursuits of what they deemed valuable, and seldom did they conflict with either the interest of the zad or the larger political struggles in which it was involved or supported. Their “creative potential” was acted out within - not against - the “imaginary totalities” of the zad, actions that were performed for and acknowledged by its inhabitants (Graeber 2001, 259). The meaningfulness of individuals’ activities resided precisely here: in the intersubjective spacetime between them, a template in constant transformation against which these actions were evaluated and made meaningful. Preparing food for a demonstration was only meaningful because it was subjectively imagined to be so by those who did it and *made* socially meaningful when served, moments where compliments were granted the cooks and the necessity of food for fueling the combat was acknowledged.

If, theoretically speaking, ‘value and values’ were synthesized in the horizontal practices of autonomy afforded by the zad, it was also done so ‘earlier’, in the imaginaries of the zone.

People represented the zad to themselves as a place of future possibilities. Louis, in his Bachelard-inspired language, told me his dreams of the zad:

In reality, I've wished all my life something like the zad would happen. When I was a kid I dreamed about it: lots of people who succeeded each other to build extensions to this place and create activities. It was a kind of 'earthship' that traveled along the spine of the world, on the green grass pushed by the wind, moving across time and space.

Louis was particularly interested in the "triumph of imagination" over dogmas and ideologies, but various accounts reassembled his (although arguably less poetic). Georges' description of how he imagined the zad resonated more universally across the zone:

I think we can still really live, and the zad makes that possible. It's a place where the future remains a bit half-open, whereas everywhere there's a slab of cement over the future, and those in charge, those we don't like, the clique, the system, call it what you like... well they're making sure you have no future.

Overall, the zad was experienced both as a physical and an imaginary escape from the fatalism of capitalist society, an attempt at "freeing oneself from the tyranny of historical laws" and their determination over future conditions (Jappe, 163-164). In short, creative imagination unshackled its inhabitants from constraints of the past to sow the seeds of different futures.

## 8. Concluding Discussion

“Time is money? Then take it!” - sticker from the zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes

This reversal of the classic quote attributed to Benjamin Franklin quite perfectly embodies how the zad can help us think about what lives we want to live. To summarize the answers to the research questions of this essay, it appears that the value pursued resided in horizontal labor understood as the exercise or performance of what is imagined as meaningful upon the small, co-lived world of the zad and its inhabitants. A making of their own, the zad is in this sense a playful experience of doing life and society on different conditions than are possible in state and market dominated societies. On the zad, calculated economic activity was largely indivisible from projects with social, political, personal, or fun characteristics - activities and actions which constantly recreated an autonomy of interdependence.

In this paper, I have argued that value exists in the ‘pursuit of autonomy’, or rather, in the performance of it, dissolving the division between collective and individual freedom. Nevertheless, we should stop praising ‘general freedom’ here, for risk of glorifying it into the communist utopia where the “free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”. Since work was not a category separated from other activities, and since it was horizontally organized and voluntary, work on the zad afforded its inhabitants *control over and free disposal of their own time*. Not being constrained by having to spend their days fulfilling salaried requirements, they could spend it on what they deemed important for them and their comrades. What characterizes the zad is not that its inhabitants were in control over the means of production and their own labor, but that they, through their practices, were refuting the very category of labor. Louis once told me that his story was “not that of a rebellion. It is one of renunciation from working”. In practice, his Bartlebyan escape from power was not really Bartlebyan, as it was followed by intensive *action* on the zad. But in theory, the point prevails that many *did* walk away from work, preferring not to. Instead, they have resolved doing what they prefer, which is acting upon the world for its direct improvement. Thus, a crucial aspect of their resistance, conceptually speaking, is resisting the category of labor that defines and upholds commodity society. These findings inevitably force us to confront the broader question of how we want to dispose of our *time* in this life.

Undoubtedly, there are numerous limitations to this study. To begin with, eight weeks of fieldwork is insufficient to make any waterproof statements about the condition of the zad. For the sake of further developing the implications of its practices on anthropological labor and value theory, there are several leads that could be followed up upon: examining the use and understandings of money more carefully, studying the relationship between ‘leisure’ and ‘work’, and, finally, exploring perceptions and dispositions of time. These, I propose, could be the object of further research if we want to form a substantial critique of work. All of these shortcomings aside, the zad is yet a place of possibilities for emancipation - not as an achieved end, but as a set of practices, as an active project in the making. It is a small breach of unexpected life in the concrete of determination that has been poured over the world to cement how we imagine it. As such, the zad is but one of many local experiments around the globe that contribute to weaving a new fabric, a creative tissue of meaningful motives to recompose the world with. Borrowing a term from Bachelard (1947, 24, my translation), the zad is a place where the “imagination of resistance” takes place.

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