

# Forest Resistance

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**By enmeshing infrastructures, power is able to curtail local particularities, exploit resources, and fight group autonomy. Inhabiting territories engaged in struggle makes it possible to resist power. “Being a forest,” whether in Notre-Dame-des-Landes or Borneo, means becoming ungovernable.**

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**Reviewed:** Jean-Baptiste Vidalou, *Être forêt. Habiter des territoires en lutte* (Being Forests: Inhabiting Territories Engaged in Struggle), Paris, Zones, 2018, 144 p., 14 €.

You don't have to be a tree or made of wood to "be a forest" —at least according to Jean-Baptiste Vidalou's definition. Indeed, he writes, "there are forests wherever generalized existential misery—the preventative neutralization of all life—cannot be tolerated." His work, *Être forêts* (Being Forests), is an appeal to reject the government of the world through numbers, of which engineers are the implacable artisans.

Vidalou belongs to the Foucauldian tradition of denouncing the government of human beings by technostructures. This thesis is well known, but he adds a territorial dimension, since Bentham's Panopticon, which is needed to discipline and punish, has a harder time with geography's rough patches. In contrast to a factory or a prison, the world, particularly when life is involved, is not flat: in the recesses of valleys, in the depths of mountains, where the gaze cannot penetrate, human beings evade central authority.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven, Yale University Press, reviewed at <https://booksandideas.net/Zomia-Land-Without-State.html>.

Consequently, power has no other solution than that of organizing territory, piercing it with roads, and imposing two-dimensional maps onto space: "Governing human beings means governing their environment." It is by enmeshing transportation infrastructure that power connects territories and communities, curtails local particularities, exploits resources, projects force, and fights group autonomy. The modern state, from Sully's canals to the energy transition's smart grid,<sup>2</sup> connects, fluidifies, and homogenizes.

## Like Blood Flowing Through a Body

If territorial enmeshment was already constitutive of the *imperium romanum*, the ability to do so largely disappeared during the Middle Ages, and, in France, it was not until the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the central authority was once again capable of controlling people and territories administratively—and not merely politically. Particularly dramatic evidence of this trend can be seen in the great royal roads built by Nicolas Lamoignon de Bâville (1648-1724), the Intendant of Languedoc, which made possible the "Great Burning of the Cévennes"—the destruction of thirty-one parishes and the deportation of 13,000 inhabitants—and the defeat of the Camisards, who fought for religious freedom during the Cévennes War (1702-1704).

Yet though roads and communication routes can be used for repression, they can also be used to help integrate territories economically, by allowing the circulation of people and products, as well as natural resources. Quesnay (1694-1774), a doctor by training and the first Physiocrat, was also the first to theorize the circulation of goods, by analogy to the circulation of blood, between the kingdom's different productive sectors. Quesnay, who saw agriculture as the main source of wealth, conceived of prosperity as the result of the circulation of primary wealth and its transformation in the body that is the kingdom. It follows that facilitating the circulation of blood—i.e., money and wealth—means increasing prosperity. A good government must make the economy more fluid.

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<sup>2</sup> The "smart grid" makes it possible to adjust electricity flows between different consumers.

# The Computation of the World

Yet Quesnay ran up against the seemingly irreducible singularity of the real. Two artisans do not make two identical objects, two trees do not provide the same beams, and two populations do not have the same measurements.

Thus it is incumbent upon engineers to liquefy reality, to establish equivalencies and norms, to zone; to make it possible, in short, through the computation of the world, to quantify, evaluate, flatten, connect, make circulate, and ultimately govern the world. Henceforth, human beings and territories no longer exist by virtue of a unique locality, nor as a function of their distinct symbolic and emotional capacities, but by virtue of their inscription in an exchange network of standardized signs: monetary signs, energy signs, carbon dioxide signs, and so on.

Are the energy transition, renewable energy, and smart grids the final avatar of a corps of engineers who, in the name of ecological optimization, are in fact seeking to control resources and populations? Négawatt, a group of engineers working on a system of renewable energy, and E.ON, a German multinational corporation that is seeking, with the French National Forestry Office, to valorize the Cévennes as a source of wood energy, are, for Vidalou, two instruments of a soulless engineering ideology that destroys everything that is unique and whose sole obsession is "to predict everything, to calculate everything, in other words, to reduce everything to economics."

Under their gaze, the forest cannot exist as such. It consists of no more than a reserve of biomass that must be managed in order to feed the grid. As for mountains, their value depends on the number of wind turbines that can be installed on them. And if the waves they emit destroy local life, so be it.

Yet forests, particularly in mountains, have provided shelter for expelled or refugee populations escaping central authorities. Under their protection, counter-societies have preserved themselves and developed. Forests are sites of a different relationship to the world, in which boundaries are porous. There is no need to connect in what is already a life community, where beings can share a common identity. Not a virgin forest, but a forest where one lives a different relationship, a sensitive relationship, to the world.

In the current context, this relationship to the world is not pursued in forests alone: it is the matrix of every movement that rejects the disenchantment of the world and demands a sensitive approach. In urban struggles or resistance to grand, useless projects, two worldviews are now at war. On the one hand, there is calculation, numbers, networks, mobility, and homogenization; on the other, sensitivity, form, place, roots, and uniqueness. Thus one can "be a forest" in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, Broadback, or Borneo. Being a forest means "becoming ungovernable."

## A Very French Approach

While appreciating the intentions and much of Vidalou's essay, and while I would not advise against reading it, I have several difficulties with its substance and its form.

Concerning the substance, the book's reduction of modernity to the role of the engineer strikes me as very marked by the French context, in which a corps of engineers did indeed provide the central authority with administrators. Though I do not deny that engineers and their way of organizing production served as a matrix for industrial society, the claim that they are the primary or even sole explanatory factor is perplexing. Double-entry bookkeeping, which inspired Lavoisier, was the creation of Italian bankers; the assertion of the mind's superiority over the body is a legacy of the Neoplatonists. As for the will to power, it could already be found in Louis XIV, with or without Vauban.

The author, whose training is in philosophy, might have emphasized the responsibility of philosophers and moralists in the emergence of the capitalist world, as Albert Hirschman (1915-2012) did in *The Passions and the Interests*. Furthermore, this same modernizing process also occurred, and at an earlier date, in Great Britain and the Netherlands, where engineers never had the same administrative power as they did in France. What of the role of Italian Renaissance artists, who introduced a new relationship to space, while the frescoes of Lorenzetti (1290-1348) in Siena are an instance of town and country planning?

All things considered, it would be fairer to say that in many countries, engineers were the useful idiots of the planet's systematic exploitation. To explain this naturally deplorable movement, it is necessary to take into account other factors, relating to

anthropological shifts and capital's emergence. Technology is not, of course, neutral: it participates in society, but it does not, by itself, determine society.

## An Outline

Thus one would have liked for the author to have also considered our society's consumerism, passion for speed, will to power, the emergence of the financial system, and so on. From a holistic perspective—to which the author should be drawn—engineers are a feature, but not the generative fact. Equating E.ON and Négawatt (who have always put sobriety and energy efficiency before recourse to renewable energy) is, moreover, a really harmful simplification. "Being a forest" also means being able to tell the difference between a multinational corporation that sells electricity to please its shareholders and committed individuals who are trying to find the least bad solution to the ecological disaster currently underway.

As for form, Vidalou has chosen to combine chapters of testimonial, historical and philosophical analysis, and, finally, a philosophical dissertation into an essay organized around the metaphor of the forest. This combination of approaches is, at times, unsettling, but it is the sign of an author who seeks to present a diversity of viewpoints.

*Être forêts* is thus a draft, an outline that deserves further enrichment. Let's hope that it develops not like the rectilinear trunk of a spruce destined to end up as wood pellets, but like a great Sherwood oak, beloved of rebels of every kind, with its powerful scaffold branches—an essay in social science, a manifesto of rebellious forests, a novel, a collection of poems, rooted in struggle, but also in rich alternative communities.

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