

Candidate number: 1040936

**Inalienable land?
Lived experiences of
'remembrement' in a 1980s
Normandy village**

Dissertation

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To you who yearns for hope in your ecological battle,

look to the past.

Hear here

the lineage of care of which we are apart.¹

And when the hardness of the past worries you,

let time be the river.

And know that

'You shall not go down twice to the same river, nor can you go home again. ...

What is most changeable is shown to be fullest of eternity,

and your relationship to the river,

and the river's relationship to you and to itself, turns out to be at once more complex and more reassuring than a mere lack of identity.

You can go home again ... so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been.²

¹ Sherri Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change*, (Berkeley CA, North Atlantic Books: 2018).

² Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, (New York, Harper Voyager: [1974] 1994).



Figure 1. The Monument, July 1994 (Lebreuilly private archive).

Nine metres tall by one metre sixty, on the side of the départemental road at the entrance of the village of Geffosses, the memorial sits comfortably in its three cubic meters of concrete. Its monolithic shape, sculpted in local grey granite by Breton artist François Davin seems voluntarily reminiscent of the megalithic civilisations. Yet, we are in Lower Normandy,



Figure 2. The Monument, July 1994 (Lebreuilly private archive).



Figure 3. The Monument, July 1994 (Lebreuilly private archive).

in the Manche département. They call it ‘the dolmen’ here but its real name is ‘The National Monument to Nature and Men, Victims of the Remembrements’.

With all of its weight, the stone startles the passer-by. To them who have strayed five kilometres inland from the picturesque coastal path, it declares that both ‘Nature and Men’ were victims of the *remembrements*. It infers that the remembrements were a ‘National’ matter. And for those who are better informed, the elusive barbed wire at the top of the sculpture points to the replacement of hedgerows with the ‘devil’s rope’. When you get closer, an inscription at its base tells you that this was not just a story about Nature. It proclaims: ‘It is because they suffered the tyranny of the administrative system that men built this monument. Oppressed but standing for freedom and human rights’.

Here is the story of how I was one of these passers-by and went to ask questions.

Introduction:

‘Re-membre-ment’, pronounced **və.mã.bvə.mã**\

The ‘*remembrement rural*’ was one of the foundational pillars of the modernisation of French agriculture and of the French economy in the second half of the twentieth century. The name ‘re-membre-ment’ itself implies re-organising the constituent limbs of the French body politic.³ It was a nation-wide land development procedure that enforced systematic land exchanges among landholders and land users on the municipal scale to consolidate the landholding structure. The aim was to regroup each farmer’s scattered plots to combine them into larger fields and to adapt the rural space to the adoption of the tractor and other large, mechanised tools. Between 1945 and 2006 – the year before its founding law was abrogated – the remembrement reorganised an estimated 13 to 17 million hectares of French land (130,000-170,000 km²).⁴ As such, in the latter half of the twentieth century, at least half of the French

³ Venus Bivar, *Organic Resistance*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), p.27.

⁴ 13 million hectares according to Marc-André Philippe and Nadine Polombo, ‘Soixante années de remembrement’, in *70 ans d'aménagement foncier en France* (Lyon: Compagnie d'édition foncière, 2009), p.7; 15 million hectares according to Jean-Pierre Husson and Eric Marochini in ‘Les remembrements agricoles entre économie et écologie’, (Norois: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1997), p.197; and 17 million hectares according to the Fabrice Nicolino in *Lettre à un paysan sur le vaste merdier qu'est devenue l'agriculture*, (Paris: Les Échappés, 2015), chapter 7.

agricultural surface area (28 million hectares today) was *remembré* and millions of farmers and rural inhabitants were concerned by this large-scale overhaul of the landholding structure.⁵

In the academic world, the remembrement is often studied both for the leap in agricultural productivity it enabled and for the dramatic ecological damage it caused by leading to the mass destruction of hedgerows. Indeed, it enabled the post-war transformation of French agriculture from a nineteenth century technological relic into the second largest exporter of agricultural goods behind the United States.⁶ Simultaneously, it initiated the ongoing history of state-funded ecological reparations in the *bocage*. This complex manmade ecosystem of mixed woodland and pasture that characterizes the landscapes of Western and Central France was ill-adapted to large-scale industrial agriculture. With its small fields delimited by winding country lanes sunken between narrow low ridges and banks surmounted by tall thick hedges, the *bocage* would be fundamentally transformed by the remembrement.⁷ Once the reform had regrouped each farmers' fields, the remembrement provided the means and the organisational structure to remove as many boundaries between parcels as possible: between 1950 and 1985, over 835,000 kilometres of hedgerows, of which 280,000 in Brittany alone, were brought down.⁸ The soil erosion, inundations, landslides and droughts that ensued led the government to add environmental clauses to the remembrement in 1975. At the dawn of the new millennium, the French government reverted its incentive and began funding the replanting of trees.⁹

Yet until today, for the inhabitants of the French countryside, the word 'remembrement' is tainted by more than policy-making contradictions tied to the fragile balance between environmental damage and agricultural productivity. The enforced land exchanges signal a comprehensive upheaval of the social and cultural morphology of rural society. Many elderly farmers recall their own remembrement as an event that gave birth to some of the longest lasting

⁵ 'Agricultural land – France in 2018', The World Bank Data, accessed 7 September 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.AGRI.K2?locations=FR>.

⁶ Bivar, *Organic Resistance*, (2018), p.1.

⁷ INRA, CNRS, ENSAR, *Les bocages-histoire-économie-écologie*, (Rennes: PUR, 1976); Jean-Claude Lefeuvre, 'Les enjeux du bocage', *Forêt-Entreprise* no.52, (May-June 1988): pp.9-15. Pierre Flatrès, 'L'évolution des bocages: la région Bretagne', *Norois* no.103, (juillet-septembre 1979), pp.303-320.

⁸ Philippe Pointereau and Frédérique Coulon, 'La Haie en France et en Europe', *Premières Rencontres Nationales de la Haie Champêtre* (Octobre 2006); Philippe and Polombo, 'Soixante années de remembrement', (2013), p.34.

⁹ Serge Auge, 'La Bourse aux Arbres dans la Manche', *Courrier de l'environnement de l'INRA* no.36, (March 1999).

interpersonal conflicts in their lived history.¹⁰ Similarly, the ‘several hundred linear metres of [remembrement-related] filed complaints, court proceedings, and judicial rulings’ under seal at the archives of the French Ministry of Agriculture reveal protests associated to the inadequate valuation of lands, favouritism in land exchanges, refusal to accept their imposed nature, and familial or personal attachment to certain properties, places, soils, trees or springs.

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The National Monument to the Victims of the Remembrement in Geffosses asks whether the policy’s impact can be grasped as a series of ‘harms’ suffered by not only Nature but also by Men.¹² This dissertation is an oral microhistory that follows this thread to the Monument’s origin story. I engaged in conversations with the inhabitants of Geffosses about their lived experiences of the land reform to understand what led them to feel that they as humans had been victims of it alongside nature and to build a monument to honour this claim, thus uncovering the emotional and cultural dimensions of the remembrement.

A Vichyite Inheritance

The remembrement policy itself was inherited by the Fifth Republic from the Vichy regime. The idea of regrouping lands to facilitate their agricultural exploitation dated back to the early modern era across Northern Europe.¹³ However, until the Second World War, successive French governments – timorous and protectionist in their views of agricultural revolution as a process that needed to be led carefully, respecting traditional hierarchies to

¹⁰ This lasting and emotionally charged memory of the remembrement is revealed in peasant memoirs. See Ernest Montpied, *Terres mouvantes; un maire rural au coeur du remembrement*, (Paris: M.F.R. Edition-Librairie, 1965); Nicolas Peneff, *Histoire du foncier et du remembrement de Cadours*, (Nantes: Presses Universitaires de Nantes, 1980); Maurice Beaufils, *Origines, implantation, consequences du remembrement agraire*, (Poitou: Editions P.S.R., 1991).

¹¹ Bivar, *Organic Resistance*, (2018), chapter 1, endnote 46.

¹² To make the link between the words ‘victims’, ‘harms’ and ‘suffering’, I use the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) definition of victims as ‘persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws operative within Member States, including those laws proscribing criminal abuse of power’. See ‘Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power’, Adopted by General Assembly resolution 40/34 of 29 November 1985.

¹³ Erich H. Jacoby, *Land consolidation in Europe*, (Wageningen: H. Veenman, 1959).

guarantee the electoral and social stability of the country – had failed to apply this logic to the landholding structure.¹⁴ The Chauveau law of 1918 had aimed to encourage consolidation and established the organisation structure to carry out such operations.¹⁵ However, this first law involved multiple obstacles, in particular since it required the consensus of all the landholders involved, and it was mostly applied to the lands on which the Great War had erased property boundaries.¹⁶ By the 1940s, the 2.5 million French farms still measured an average of 14.57 hectares divided up into an average of 42 discrete land parcels that measured 0.35 hectares each (1 hectare = 0.01 square kilometre).¹⁷ This exceptional fragmentation held agriculture from mechanising and, by keeping men and women in the fields, delayed the labour migration that would furnish factory workers.¹⁸

In the words of sociologist Henri Mendras, in 1945, ‘France was the most peasant of all Western nations’.¹⁹ 36 percent of the French worked in agriculture with 45 percent of the population living in the countryside. In contrast, 5.5 percent of the active adult population in Great Britain was employed in farming, 16 percent in the United States, and 20 percent in the Netherlands.²⁰ With average yields less than half of those produced by their Belgian neighbours, France simply did not have the essential ‘modern’ or, as Stephen Miller would have it, ‘capitalist’ trait of ‘an industrialised agricultural system, designed to support an ever-expanding number of food consumers with an ever-diminishing number of food producers’.²¹

Several factors had brought about this level of land fragmentation on the national scale.²² Firstly, although there were ways around the legislation, the Napoleonic Civil Code had played an important part by dictating that plots be divided equally among all heirs. The

¹⁴ Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, *The Fruits of Revolution*, (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.9-20.

¹⁵ Notably by making possible the constitution of a ‘trade union commission’ in charge of all the consolidation works, and other ‘improvements’ related to the remembrement (including irrigation, drainage, building paths, etc.). A propaganda film made by Jean Benoit-Levy for the French state depicts the latter’s desire to disseminate the remembrement mentality in 1932: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luNfu0mLCLA&t=19s>.

¹⁶ France, La direction de la documentation, *La documentation française illustrée no.68: Le remembrement rural*, (Paris: Secrétariat général du gouvernement, December 1958), p.19.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.6-7.

¹⁸ Les Paysans de Citroën, dir. Hubert Budor (Film, 2001), <https://www.mille-et-une-films.fr/paysans-de-citroen> (8 September 2021).

¹⁹ Henri Mendras, *Social change in modern France*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.15; Gordon Wright, *Rural Revolution in France*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), p.178.

²⁰ Bivar, *Organic Resistance*, (2018), p.15.

²¹ Laurence Duboys Fresney and Henri Mendras, *La seconde Révolution française : 1965–1984* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp.29-30; Bivar, *Organic Resistance*, (2018), p.2; Stephen Miller, ‘Peasant Farming in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century France’, in *Case Studies in the Origins of Capitalism* edited by X. Lafrance and C. Post (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95657-2_4.

²² Frederic O. Sargent, ‘Fragmentation of French Land’, *Land Economics* 28, no. 3 (August 1952), pp.218-29.

tradition of planting hedges to mark property boundaries in Western and Central France had further materialised this institution into a tight knit bocage landscape. Second was the limited amount of land coming onto the market given the continuing vitality of peasant farming. The quite paltry resources of the large rural population obliged purchasers to ‘take what they could get’, even if a new property was located miles away in a neighbouring village. Lastly, when possible, farmers had tended to favour working with several different types of land under a subsistence farming model. With counties made up of arable lands, forests, pasture, and vineyards or orchards, it was usually in their best interest to hold ‘strips’ in each of these areas to increase the farm’s self-sufficiency and to preserve themselves from natural catastrophe.²³

Like their predecessors, the rural engineers under Vichy quickly understood land fragmentation as a major inhibitor of modernisation. Yet, unlike their predecessors, they believed that only a more interventionist and obligatory policy would wrench farmers out of their consensual and habitual land exchange practices. The ‘remembrement’ was made a law on March 9, 1941.²⁴ The new policy meant that lands could now be exchanged without their farmers’ approval. Their collective consensus was replaced by the vote of a municipal commission of fifteen local inhabitants.²⁵ The remembrement then unfolded in three steps: evaluation, planning, and redistribution of the lands. First, all the agricultural lands of a given municipality were pooled, and all farmers and landholders’ future rights of use were suspended. All their plots were then evaluated to assess their ‘productive value’ as a number of points. The commission then mapped potential land exchanges and redistributed the plots so that all farmers recovered regrouped lands of approximately the same value, but with their lands now grouped as close to their farmhouse as possible. The state was then responsible for the further costs to ensure that the local rural space was adapted to contemporary agricultural technologies, including the felling of cumbersome trees and the construction of new roads, irrigation and drainage systems.

During the Occupation, there had been neither the time nor the means to put the remembrement into practice. But as the Second World War ended, the Gaullist administration

²³ In Geffosses, Jacqueline Moulin recalls her parents passing down a piece of the ‘three types of local land’ to her and her brother: ‘sandy land (for carrots and leeks), grassland (for cows), and the more acidic and humid *landes* for further grazing, firewood (historically) and hay’. JM-07/2020.

²⁴ René Dumont, ‘La structure optima de l’agriculture française moderne motorisée’, *Revue de l’économie contemporaine* no.20, (décembre 1943), pp.21-28.

²⁵ This ‘Remembrement Commission’ was named in equal parts by the local state body representing the Ministry of Agriculture (*Direction Départementale de l’Agriculture, DDA*), the majority agricultural union (*Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d’Exploitants Agricoles, FNSEA*) and the local municipal council.

adopted the Vichyite law as an advantage and a necessity.²⁶ Indeed, despite their post-war schemes supported by the Marshall Plan to introduce 250,000 new tractors into the countryside from only 25,000 in 1939, the majority of farmers continued to rely on horses and oxen until 1954.²⁷

Few farms were large and profitable enough to afford a tractor and even if they were, using it would often have been either inefficient or technically impossible due to the physical structure of the countryside.²⁸ As a result, at harvest time in the early post-war period, human and animal labour stacked the bales, carried the crop to the mill, and threshed the corn. Large landowners continued to celebrate the abundance of the rural population that allowed them to hire women and children at little if any cost, sometimes paid to the male head of the family land.²⁹ The remembrement appeared as the solution:

The law of March 1941 even makes it possible to consolidate the land against a majority of its owners who do not understand the multiple advantages of the operation. This is fortunate because for French agriculture, our times are a matter of life or death. [...] We will have to put an end to bad freedoms, and if necessary, impose on recalcitrant farmers land consolidation, drainage and irrigation, reforestation, grouping into cooperatives.³⁰

Furthermore, many of those ‘recalcitrant farmers’ needed to be transferred from the countryside to urban areas because a modern economy was built on industry and services. The *Commission Générale du Plan*, in charge of post-war reconstruction, set the target of consolidating one million hectares per year by 1950.³¹ This ambition illustrates how the government had understood the remembrement law to be more efficient than any previous land reform.

²⁶ The law was by the ordinance of July 7, 1945.

²⁷ Pierre Cheverry and Pierre Clergeot, *Paysages ruraux*, (Paris: Publi-Topex, 2005), p.17; Mendras, *Social change in modern France*, (1991), p.18.

²⁸ France, La Direction de la documentation, *Le remembrement rural*, p.13.

²⁹ Peter Amann, *The Corncribs of Buzet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp.203-208; Arthur Conte, *Les paysans de France de l'an 1000 à l'an 2000* (Saint-Amand-Montrond: Plon, 2001), p.222; Michel Augé-Laribé, *La politique agricole de la France de 1880 à 1940* (Paris: PUF, 1950), pp.93-94.

³⁰ Dumont, ‘La structure optimale de l’agriculture française’, (1943), p.25.

³¹ Cheverry and Clergeot, *Paysages ruraux*, (2006), p.17.

Looking at Resistance

In this context, policymakers expected local resistance but often portrayed it as a ‘psychological’ obstacle to overcome. In retrospective accounts, when comparing the remembrement to neighbouring European land consolidation schemes, social scientists tended to mimic this view.³² The French way was praised for its efficiency.³³ It had managed to convince (or coerce) local inhabitants and succeeded in ploughing through half of the national agricultural surface area. Such accounts considered it a technical feat to ‘balance’ both the collective and individual interests of the rural world, as well as the urgency of adapting the landholding patterns to the post-war imperatives of global market competition. One 1999 agronomic commentary, for example, celebrated the efforts of remembrement commissions to examine specific farmers’ needs during public inquiries and to develop a measurement scale adapted to the local topography to ‘attest to the fairness of exchanges, even with different types of lands and different crop cycles’.³⁴ Other more geographical analyses ignored local contestations entirely. Pursued as cost-benefit type evaluations of the rural ‘space’, they imagined the reform as a technical feat that sought to resolve the tension between economic success and environment limitations.³⁵

One 2009 policy review recorded that ‘each year 5% of the landholders concerned sent complaints to the departmental commission to ask for a reversal of municipal decisions’.³⁶ For its authors, this was a reason to applaud the remembrement as a ‘beautiful and long success’. However, given the breadth of the operations on the national scale, these ‘five percent’ might have represented up to two hundred thousand French women and men.³⁷ Furthermore, peasant memoirs suggest that this figure falls short of expressing the grievances of the rural

³² Jacoby, *Land consolidation in Europe*, (1959).

³³ René Robin, ‘Le Remembrement rural dans le département du Morbihan et ses conséquences’, (DPhil thesis in Geography, Université de Rennes, 1973) ; Agnès Guellec, ‘Le remembrement rural dans le département des Côtes-du-Nord’, *Norois* 70 (1971), pp.295-314.

³⁴ Auge, ‘La Bourse aux Arbres dans la Manche’, (1999), p.33.

³⁵ Jean-Pierre Husson and Eric Marochini, ‘Les remembrements agricoles entre économie et écologie’, *Norois* 173, (1997), pp.195-208.

³⁶ Philippe and Polombo, ‘Soixante années de remembrement’, (2013), p.34; Maurice Vallery-Radot, ‘Remembrement rural et jurisprudence du Conseil d’Etat’, *OCEP-ANDAFAR* (1994), p.258.

³⁷ This figure was estimated very roughly by considering that on average during the latter half of the twentieth century, there were 40 million people living in France, of which 25 percent lived in the rural space, and of which approximately 50 percent were concerned by the remembrement. Five percent of this total is 250,000 individuals.

population.³⁸ Complaints were rarely written, and if they were, they were rarely addressed to the départemental administration or the state. Since the remembrement regarded the agricultural lands of a given municipality and was systematically implemented by its own local inhabitants, if one had been wronged by the remembrement one was more likely to send a vengeful letter to a local member of the municipal remembrement commission. Grievances were experienced as personal or familial and quickly turned into local divides and conflicts. They rarely coalesced into larger local, regional or national movements. Exceptionally, the anti-remembrement protests led to mobs like in inland *Finistère* and *Côtes-d'Armor*, where they were tied to Breton nationalists struggles, but also in the village of Tourouvre in the *Orne*. Between 1971 and 1976, in various localities, there were hunger strikes, the maps of planned land exchanges were burnt, a townhall was occupied, mayors were sequestered, and the implementation of the reform was supervised by the riot police and accompanied by tear gas.³⁹ Yet these demonstrations hardly made it beyond local headlines.⁴⁰

The erasure of these voices of contestations from the national memory fits neatly into the conventional treatment of the history of agriculture in post-war France.⁴¹ French historians, geographers and sociologists have long strung the events that characterised agricultural modernization as a narrative of social and technical 'improvement': in agricultural productivity, in the working conditions of the farmers, and in the overall capacity to feed not only the national population but also – and with pride – the 'world'. These ambitions were an integral part of France emerging from the defeat and humiliation of Occupation. More than achieving food sovereignty and healing the memory of food rations that had lasted until 1949, De Gaulle's post-war strategy was a question of national 'rebirth'. Farmers were involved in efforts to make farms larger and rationally organised; to integrate chemical inputs such as fertilisers and pesticides into the farming routine; to increasingly select the animal and plant species to be reproduced and become supermarket products; to dot the landscape with tractors and combine-threshers; and to develop the infrastructure to ship farm products to domestic,

³⁸ See Montpied, *Terres mouvantes*, (1965); Peneff, *Histoire du foncier et du remembrement de Cadours*, (1980); Beaufils, *Origines, implantation, conséquences*, (1991).

³⁹ 'Le bocage breton menacé par le remembrement', *Le Monde*, August, 1973; 'Une nouvelle manifestation contre le remembrement à Trébrivan', *Télégramme*, August 27, 1974; 'A Plonevez-du-Faou, pour un remembrement raté', *Ouest France*, April 2, 1976; Remembrement: situation explosive à Tourouvre (Orne): le maire séquestré pendant six heures', *Ouest France*, September 20, 1976.

⁴⁰ Léandre Mandard is currently addressing this gap in the historiography with his DPhil at Science Po on the relationship between remembrement contestations and identity movements in Brittany.

⁴¹ Pierre Bitoun and Yves Dupont, *Le sacrifice des paysans*, (Paris: L'échappée, 2016).

European, and international markets.⁴² Agricultural modernisation became synonymous with progress. It would be the story of how, in a little over thirty years between the close of the war and 1980, the French agrarian structures and agricultural practices were radically transformed for France to become a leader in the global agricultural export market.⁴³

Meanwhile, certain anthropologists who had turned away from the territories of the dwindling French colonial empire, studied the ‘vanishing peasant civilisation’ that agricultural modernisation was erasing in its steps.⁴⁴ The seminal interdisciplinary study *Plozévet*, for example, focused on the penetration of ‘modern culture’ into a rural Breton village to immortalise what was being lost, what was being gained, and how it felt.⁴⁵ However, studies like these tended to focus on modernisation as series of choices located in the private space and did not address imposed structural changes like the remembrement. Furthermore, they were pursued separately from research on the newly named ‘Silent Revolution’.⁴⁶ Because these approaches did not contribute to one another, it appeared that the cultural losses caused by modernisation could not be integrated into existing cost-benefit analyses. The grievances seemed to be of another kind – personal and local – and could not be considered as outweighing any modern benefits. They were acknowledged by some but could not be incorporated to ‘disorient’ the master narrative of progress that was being constructed.⁴⁷

To reconcile these two approaches, this dissertation builds upon the invaluable work of the current revisionist movement in French environmental history. With *Une autre histoire des Trente Glorieuses* in 2013, Céline Pessis, Sezin Topçu and Christophe Bonneuil initiated a movement that was followed by anglophone historians like Caroline Ford, Sarah Farmer and Venus Bivar. Their method involved re-examining the triumphalist accounts of the decades of economic expansion that followed the Second World War in the light of contestations that were not accounted for in master narratives. The recent essay collection *Une autre histoire de la modernisation agricole* (2021) offers a historicised approach to the consequences of the industrialization of agriculture in terms of pollution, of new forms of psychological degradation

⁴² Sylvain Brunier, *Le bonheur dans la modernité*, (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2018).

⁴³ Pierre Cornu and Jean-Luc Mayaud, *Au nom de la terre*, (Paris: La Boutique de l’histoire, 2007).

⁴⁴ Henri Mendras, *La fin des paysans*, (Paris: Actes Sud, 1992 [1967]); Bitoun and Dupont, *Le sacrifice des paysans*, (2016).

⁴⁵ Many books came out of these interdisciplinary studies including Edgar Morin’s *La métamorphose de Plozévet*, (Paris: Poche, 1967); Bernard Paillard, J.-F. Simon and L. Legall summarise these contributions in *En France rurale*, (Rennes: PUR CRBC, 2010).

⁴⁶ Michel Debatisse, *La révolution silencieuse*, (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1963).

⁴⁷ Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, ‘Pour une histoire désorientée de l’énergie’, *25èmes Journées Scientifiques de l’Environnement*, (Créteil: February, 2014).

of farmers and of increased dependence on market logics.⁴⁸ By returning to evidence of historical unrest in scientific, political, and farming communities, this movement also opens up the possibility to re-examine emotional and cultural contestations in the footsteps of the 1970s anthropologists.

This is what Venus Bivar succeeds in doing in her *Organic Resistance*. The environmental historian rescues some of the human grievances that were not accounted for in historical narratives of what happened during the remembrement and asks whether one of the reform's consequences may have been to fundamentally transform and homogenize farmers' relationship to the land. She argues that the remembrement was a time when 'the rationalizing logic of productivity stripped the land of its ancestral ties and affective bonds, reducing it to a tool of production'.⁴⁹ Her argument is built on an analysis of the policy itself, and on the array of written complaints she found in the archives of the Ministry of Agriculture:

A woman lost a piece of land that had been given to her by her godmother as a gift on her first communion. [...] a family lost its vines and the plum trees that had surrounded them. It had been a yearly tradition to gather the fruit to make eau-de-vie—a tradition that was lost once the lands had been given to a neighbour. [...] an elderly woman who had previously held pasture was given arable lands that she was too old to plant.⁵⁰

Bivar presents these testimonies as evidence for 'ancestral ties and affective bonds' being 'severed' in the rural space. She plants the seeds for a seminal argument that the remembrement constituted a historical event, a turning point in the modes of relating to the land.

⁴⁸ A new historiography deals with these topics : Soraya Boudia and Nathalie Jas, 'Gouverner un monde contaminé', in *Histoire des sciences et des savoirs* edited by Christophe Bonneuil and Dominique Pestre, (Paris: Seuil, 2019); Armel Campagne, Léna Humbert and Christophe Bonneuil, '1962, Le nouvel ordre agricole mondial', in *Histoire mondiale de la France* edited by Patrick Boucheron, (Paris: Seuil, 2017); and certain classics are republished or revisited: Pierre Müller, *Le technocrate et le paysan*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014 [1984]); Michèle Salmona, *Souffrances et Résistances des Paysans Français*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994).

⁴⁹ Bivar, *Organic Resistance*, (2018), p.34.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p.33.

Getting Closer

My study is a continuation of Bivar's exploration. This dissertation uses the oral microhistorical method to delve further into the lived experiences of the inhabitants of a single territory: Geffosses, where the National Monument to the Victims of the Remembrement was built. It aims to understand how their remembrement came to be, who was 'repressed', whose 'rights' suffered and why some of the inhabitants chose to resist in this dramatic way by building a monument. It follows the chronology of the remembrement of Geffosses, from when it was suggested by the local leader of the farmers' union in 1982 to the moment when the lands were officially exchanged and the hedgerows were razed in 1989, and until 1994 when the monument was inaugurated. I interviewed seventeen inhabitants of the village who had partaken in the remembrement, whether by resisting it or by promoting and implementing it.

Early on in my research, I realised that I had to let go of my assumption that the remembrement had been harmful in order to encounter the diversity of lived experiences of the reform. My initial impression, borne of my encounter with the monument, had locked me into a dichotomy of victims versus victors and blinded me to the historical conjuncture that had made the remembrement feel utterly necessary in 1982 for many farmers in Geffosses, their union and their départemental government. The victor-victim dualism was all the more fruitless that it had been reversed in the past thirty years with the growing public awareness of environmental issues and it was now bogged down by guilt and shame. Those who had historically 'won' by ensuring that the remembrement be implemented were now humiliated by a monument that implicitly blamed them for environmental and cultural suffering. On the other hand, the original 'victims' who had vehemently resisted against the reform were now the ones being celebrated. In our initial conversations, the latter comfortably expected me to agree that 'they had been right all along', de-historicising their own experiences.

Microhistory gave me a precious research process to address the remembrement more openly as a diversity of lived experiences. This historiographical current inherently questions the assumption that individuals and communities automatically align themselves with structural change. Instead, it consists in interrogating sites previously assumed to be 'automatic' or dependent on some higher explanatory force (and thus not worthy of deep consideration) and finding them as complex sites of negotiation which reveal a different

experience of history.⁵¹ Through the microhistorical investigation of a site of resistance, I could thus reframe the history of the remembrement as one of ideological domination, and shed light on the diverse responses to it that coexisted on the local scale: protest, collaboration, and accommodation.⁵² Geffosses, specifically, was a kernel of the past that escaped my expectations as a historian and questioned what was possible to once have lived. It seemed to embody the ‘exceptional normal’ case study that the founding Italian microhistorians so avidly sought out.⁵³ The inhabitants of Geffosses underwent the remembrement in the 1980s like the majority of the municipalities in the Manche. Yet, many of them gathered to fight against the reform and experienced their failure to stop it a historical event of nation-wide gravity.

My choice of the remembrement of Geffosses was also grounded in it being recent history.⁵⁴ The oral testimonies of those who had experienced the remembrement first-hand were available to enliven the uniqueness of the microhistorical. Indeed, my seventeen oral history participants shaped what follows. They consistently brought me back to personal dramas and interpersonal conflicts, reminiscing their actions and words at the time. They rushed to give me their private compendia of press clippings, photographs and letters – sources upon which this dissertation rests alongside oral accounts – while threatening to ‘kill me if any were lost or ripped’.⁵⁵ They wanted me to grasp the intensity of their experience; to understand that by March 1989 – by the time 150 riot police officers marched in line across the field at *Hotel aux Lièvres* to ward off the protestors and permit the completion of the road that would replace their river-path and allow, one wet October day, a tractor to take a shortcut into a neighbouring landlocked field and sow its wheat – Geffosses had become infamous. The regional and départemental dailies *Ouest-France*, *Presse de la Manche* and *La Manche Libre*, displayed jaded attitudes: ‘*Encore police forces in Geffosses.*’⁵⁶

⁵¹ Giovanni Levi, ‘On Microhistory’, in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, edited by Peter Burke, (State College: 1991), p.94.

⁵² Muriel Blaive, “‘Hidden Transcripts’ and Microhistory as a Comparative Tool: Two Case Studies in Communist Czechoslovakia’, *East Central Europe* no.40, (January 2013), p.75; James F. Brooks, Christopher R. N. DeCorse, John Walton, *Small Worlds*, (School for Advanced Studies, 2008), p.4.

⁵³ Edoardo Grendi, ‘Micro-analisi e storia sociale’, *Quaderni storici* no.35, (1977), p.512; Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi, (Baltimore, 1989), pp.112-15.

⁵⁴ Unlike Alain Corbin in *Le monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), it was an active choice.

⁵⁵ SD-07/2020.

⁵⁶ J. Lavalley, ‘Les gendarmes mobiles sont de retour’, *La Presse de la Manche*, April 14, 1989; Olivier Clerc, ‘Pot de terre contre pot de fer dans la Manche: Quand les gendarmes mobiles imposent le remembrement’, *L’événement du jeudi*, April 26, 1989.

This dissertation is shaped by stories whose intensity was emphasised in interviews. The events recalled by the Geffossais and Geffossaises are transcribed in an almost-chronological order that reveals the tensions that underlay them.⁵⁷ Ultimately, they shed light on the remembrement as a battleground that opposed different ways of belonging to the land, of relating to the natural world and to the agricultural profession at this pivotal time in the evolution of modern farming and of the French countryside.



Figure 4. A tagged road sign at the entrance of Geffosses, 1986 (Lebreuilly private archive).

⁵⁷ Geffossaise and Geffossais are the feminine and masculine demonyms of the inhabitants of Geffosses.

Chapter 1: For the Survival of the Municipality

‘We have to take this Geffosses remembrement affair out of its passionate context. There is a painful period to go through, but if the administration sets up a land consolidation, it is for reasons of economic efficiency.’

– Public Prosecutor Kantor⁵⁸

A room of worried farmers

Twelve years before the National Monument to the Victims of the Remembrement was erected, on 18 April 1982, Emile Ryckeboer gathered the local members of the farmers’ union in the Geffosses townhall to discuss land consolidation plans. The charismatic and successful local farmer and départemental president of the union had planned on introducing the opportunities that the remembrement presented for the commune and on having an informal vote to gauge the overall motivation. Everyone in the room was already well aware of what the remembrement meant.⁵⁹ Two of the immediately neighbouring communes had experienced a remembrement within the past decade – the process had been heavily conflictual in Montsurvent. The press spoke of the recent inundations in the South of the département; floods

⁵⁸ Indictment speech cited in Michel Tanneau, ‘Geffosses et Saint-Malo-de-la-Landes : ils avaient arraché des bornes, les opposants au remembrement devant le tribunal’, *Ouest France*, 17 February 1988.

⁵⁹ MV-07/2020.

caused by the disappearance of hedgerows following its ‘clean slate’ remembrement in the early 1960s.⁶⁰ But acknowledging social and environmental risk was the background noise. When these unionised farmers heard ‘remembrement’, it rhymed with ‘economic opportunity’. They heard the hope to become more time and labour efficient, and an enhanced capacity to compete in an increasingly crowded European milk market. They needed to ‘modernise’ to survive.

The twenty farmers who had come to the Sunday meeting were worried. Of the fifty-eight farmers in Geffosses, mostly the ‘young ambitious ones’,⁶¹ were a part of the majority agricultural union, the FNSEA. Although the European Union regulation had kept the commodity price afloat, they feared that the government would put limits on their livelihoods since the ‘butter and milk powder mountains’ of the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁶² Those of them who had the closest ties with the union had just been told, or were about to be told, about the upcoming quota legislation to regulate milk production in France.⁶³ They would have to plan their upcoming year strategically: 1983 would be used as a reference to fix production allowances. They would be based on the number, breed and life cycle of their cows, but also the amount of grassland that they used. The most motivated among them would leave behind some of their Normand cows in favour of the more milk-productive American Prim’Holstein and grab as much land as possible.⁶⁴ From 1984 onward, producing more would mean paying a levy. In the words of Jacqueline Moulin, the sentiment was eerie in the commune: ‘you’d better be enjoying your current farming situation, because the government was just about to make it last’.⁶⁵

Furthermore, as a municipality that bordered the coast in the early 1980s, Geffosses was seeing neighbouring local governments leave their agricultural past behind and dedicate their landholding strategy to the development of tourism on the littoral, heralding the proliferation of fallow agricultural lands and requests for holiday home building permits.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ ‘Anti-remembrement : Geffosses sera-t-il le dernier verrou ou une nouvelle péripétie ?’, *Presse de la Manche*, 17 February 1988.

⁶¹ According to Simone Lebreuilly, SL-07/2020.

⁶² D. Barthélemy and J. David, *L’agriculture européenne et les droits à produire*, (Paris: Éditions INRA, 1999).

⁶³ Jacques Renouf mentioned knowing about the quotas in 1982 (JR-07/2020), and Jacqueline Moulin mentioned that her neighbour knew (JM-07/2020).

⁶⁴ Jacques Renouf spoke of their farm’s transition to the more productive Holstein cows from the original Normande breed to prepare for the arrival of the quotas (JR-07/2020).

⁶⁵ JM-07/2020.

⁶⁶ For a potent example, see Sophie Laligant’s ethnographic study of Damgan, where the remembrement did not inhibit the emergence of tourism in this coastal town: *Un point de non-retour*, (Rennes: PUR, 2008).

They were seeing villages around them be emptied out of their future farmers as the young moved out into urban professions, factory work, or even whelk fishing – the latter being ‘far more profitable than milk production!’ as some of my interviewees laughed ironically.⁶⁷ Farmer Marc Villedieu, thirty-three years-old at the time, showed me some of his newspaper clippings from the 1980s to describe the atmosphere in the room: in one of them, *Ouest France* wondered about the ‘obsolescence of farmers by 2000’, a profession which might ‘only survive to entertain tourists visiting the French countryside by the new millennium’.⁶⁸ He looked to me: ‘How could we not react?’⁶⁹

The meaning of ‘modernisation’

Although Geffosses was considered to be ‘backward’ as a commune of the ‘deep *bocage*’, its young farmers had attempted to modernise their farming methods since the early 1970s.⁷⁰ Although they had not undergone a remembrement, they had expanded and consolidated their properties, making the most out of the departure of twenty older farmers from the land, encouraged out by the early retirement state allowance (*indemnité viagère de départ* or IVD). They had bought and exchanged lands to gather the 2,900 individual historical plots into 596 groups of parcels. However, the land market remained crowded by a resilient population of retired and active smallholders practicing some form of subsistence agriculture.⁷¹ As a result, ‘not a single piece of Geffossais land laid fallow’,⁷² and the restricted access to land frustrated young farmers’ ambitions. The average farm size in the village had grown by 36% in ten years to reach 20.24 hectares in 1982. The Geffossais surpassed the average farm in the Manche (15.2 hectares) but remained far behind their contemporaries who farmed an average of 42 hectares on the national scale.⁷³ In practice, only ‘four or five farms’ out of the

⁶⁷ Claude and Serge Villedieu (SCV-07/2020).

⁶⁸ Francis Louapre, ‘Demain: des TUC ou des paysans?’, *Ouest France*, September 27, 1989.

⁶⁹ MV-07/2020.

⁷⁰ ‘Anti-remembrement’, *Presse de la Manche*, 17 février 1988.

⁷¹ Vince and Doligez, ‘Geffosses remembrement pre-study’, (Caen, 1983), p.5.

⁷² Antoine Moulin, AM-07/2020.

⁷³ France, La Direction de la documentation, *Le remembrement rural*, pp.6–7. and ‘La France a perdu le quart de ses exploitations agricoles en 10 ans’, *Le Monde*, September 13, 2011.

fifty-eight 'were well grouped and large enough' to function on modern terms according to the national land surveyor mandated for the remembrement pre-study in 1984.⁷⁴

The land reform was arriving late in the Manche. Until the 1980s, the département had been low on the priorities for land consolidation. Its grasslands and tightknit hedgerows made expanding agricultural surfaces costly and the state preferred leaving cattle farmers to convert to factory farming.⁷⁵ However, by 1982, the technology had advanced, and the meaning of 'modernising' the rural space had changed since the *Trentes Glorieuses*. It had become possible and desirable to transform meadows into arable land through extensive drainage paired with fertilizer and herbicide input.⁷⁶ For the Geffosses farmers, it was no longer a case of tearing the landscape into large homogenous wheat fields.

George Lebreuilly and Gerard Godefroy were among the ten lucky farmers to have a milking parlour. Their lots were grouped enough to have built stables at the entrance of their largest field and by their home. They could bring all their cows in at once to milk them. The others still travelled by foot or tractor with a mobile milking unit to different fields to milk twice a day. Jacques Renouf recalls:

At least twice a week, we left in the early morning to change the cattle from plot to plot. We had to change plots because we only had plots that were half a hectare at most. It will seem silly to you, but within three days, the animals had nothing left to eat. I remember when the other plot we had to put them into was on the other end of the municipality and we had to walk two kilometres on the roads with the cows... We had to get up very early in the morning so that there was not too much traffic on the roads. [...] There had to be many of us to guard the small paths to stop the cows from wondering off. We got up, my father, my mother, the workers (*ouvriers agricoles*) ... yes, we had to be at least four to five people [to move the cows on foot].⁷⁷

[I dreamt of] having a real sized lot, on which the cattle could stay for two months. The hope was to no longer see cattle on the roads, whereas before

⁷⁴ Vince and Doligez, 'Remembrement pre-study', (1983), p.23.

⁷⁵ Louis Rieucan, 'Où en est le remembrement rural en France?', *L'information géographique* vol.26 no.4, (1962), figure 2; M. Roche, 'Les aspects essentiels du remembrement rural en France', *Bulletin de la Société française d'économie rurale* vol.3 no.4, (1951)

⁷⁶ Marc Villedieu (MV-07/2020).

⁷⁷ JR-07/2020.

there was cattle on the roads every day. I wanted to have cattle ‘parks’ at the entrance of each field and cattle trucks... to bring the animals into the park, then put them in the trailer and then *the work is over*.⁷⁸

The farmers also needed a way out of their full dependence on milk production. They had historically grown carrots and leeks on the municipality – most of the farms at least a slim patch of vegetables to ‘*put butter in their spinach*’ and complement the milk income on years of good weather.⁷⁹ However, the arable surfaces were too small to mechanise, and carrots remained produced solely through hand labour into the 1980s.⁸⁰ In addition, many of the farmers had started growing corn in the mid-1970s to secure the more cost-efficient feed source for their cows. Mechanised and competitive cereal production was a core cost-saving concern:

I told you, we just couldn’t anymore. There were paths, but we could no longer use them. They were too narrow. And the machines sunk under their own weight in the mud on their way to landlocked fields!... Because that time was the beginning of the combine harvester. They were getting bigger, bigger, bigger, and there was no way to get into our fields. There was no more way to go. If there was no remembrement, many young people wouldn’t be able to settle down. Because of the machines, eh.⁸¹

Wetlands represented a significant proportion of the municipal territory, particularly to the east and north of Geffosses and along the streams. The lack of maintenance of the existing hydraulic network, the poorly permeable substrate, and the very low slopes (1%) did not allow the natural drainage of water during rainy periods and favoured the development of what I was repeatedly told was a ‘hydromorphic soil’.⁸² Ameliorations were technically possible but would need a wholesale infrastructural investment:

It seem[ed] difficult to make big improvements in most wetlands without opting for the buried pipe drainage solution. Prior to the drainage, it [would] be necessary to set up a network of outlets allowing the discharge of the underground drain networks. Such development [could] only be carried out

⁷⁸ Idem.

⁷⁹ A French expression used by many including Gérard Godefroy (GG-07/2020).

⁸⁰ Marc Villedieu (MV-07/2020).

⁸¹ Idem.

⁸² Vince and Doligez, ‘Remembrement pre-study’, (1983), pp.30-34.

effectively as part of a collective operation involving the entire municipal territory.⁸³

‘Drainage’ was on the lips of most of my interviewees. Portrayed as the technology of modernization, it betrayed the hope that the remembrement could ‘change the quality of the land’⁸⁴ and ‘reverse hundreds of years of specialization in cattle grazing’⁸⁵, although this was not always technically possible. While the traditional cattle farmers were sometimes too proud to say it, cereals were the new ‘modern’. They secured cost-efficient cow feed and Common Agricultural Policy benefits simultaneously.

A backward landscape

Further than merely considering the appeal of the remembrement in technical terms, the farmers had grown to consider the state of Geffosses as paradigmatically backward. What was trapped in the landscape of hedgerows, sunken lanes, sparse apple trees, and wetlands was not just the hardship of agricultural practice, it was a negative vision past. In their stories, the interviewees dwelled on the years that followed the Second World War to emphasise the benefits of the remembrement. Marc Villedieu moved swiftly from anecdotes about cow keeping in his childhood under his parents’ tutelage to his installation on the farm with his wife in the early 1980s. The two merged into an argument in favour of the remembrement:

There [in that small plot of land with no hedgerows at the South of Geffosses], thanks the remembrement there are four owners instead of twenty at the time. [...] My parents owned one of those slim strip-shaped pieces of land, and when I was young, people... certain people... The cows were not free on this land. The milking cows were ‘on third’ (*au tiers* in Normand patois).⁸⁶ Because without

⁸³ Ibid, p.34.

⁸⁴ Simone Lebreuilly (SL-07/2020).

⁸⁵ ‘Anti-remembrement’, *Presse de la Manche*, 17 février 1988.

⁸⁶ René Lepelley, ‘L’élevage des bovins en Normandie. Etude lexicologique’, *Annales de Normandie* no.2, (1968).

the hedges, and with such small lots, they would have gone and ate on the neighbour's lot and the neighbour would have grumbled.

So, we attached them to a pole. They had a headpiece between the horns (*tétière*), and they had a chain with a ring. They were tied to the pole. They were *fiquée*, we used to say. It was the patois word. You had to drive the pole into the ground with a chain 3 meters long so the cow could go around it. I did that when I was little. [...] And afterwards, they would shout, 'Go on kid! "Dethird" the cow!' And so, I moved the cow with its pole a little further. So that it could eat where grass remained. That was before the electric fence, you know. After that, you had poles too, but with wire. And you just had to turn on the current.

Marc's story was pushing us into a dialogue. He seemed to test my tolerance for animal cruelty, conscious that it could affect my comprehension of the 'need' to pursue a remembrement. We were suddenly co-constructing what 'progress' might have meant for a Geffossais in 1982.

When I asked Jean-Marie Ourselin, Serge and Claude Villedieu if they missed the apple trees that dotted their pasture fields and that had been torn down to allow tractors to pass, two of them shouted 'no! no! no!'. Later it would be made clear to me, this animated response was motivated by the hidden history of alcoholism in the village. The mention of apple trees consistently led to similar anecdotes:

Serge: It was the generation of our parents and grandparents, you know. But our parents already drank less than our grandparents. We used to drink cider when we were kids, you know.

Jean-Marie: my grandparents, they had sixteen children at home. Sixteen alive! There were two who had died that I had not known. And so, when grandfather was drunk... [pauses] Grandmother would set the table, hop! Sixteen plates! Soup on all plates, hop! Grandfather would see the soup, he'd topple the table, all the dishes would go on the floor, and he'd say 'zou! Into bed you go kids!' He was nothing but a good fellow, [my grandpa], adorable as anything. But as soon as he had had one too many... [silence] We had learned at home...

I still remember. He had big red plums, *quetsche* plums, I think. So... when August came around, they were ripe. Grandmother, she didn't want us to touch

them. She was counting them. She knew how many there were. We knew that mustn't touch the fruits, that we must only eat them when she was there. But Grandfather, when he had had one too many, and all his grandchildren were there... he would grab the plum tree and shake it while shouting 'eat, little ones! Eat little ones!' ...Us. We were happy. We were eating plums.

One other time, [when he had had one too many,] grandfather had found a mine in the soil behind the house. A war mine he had found. So, he slammed it against the wall of the house. [Silence] It didn't explode, the mine. Otherwise... I wouldn't be here... Back then, my grandmother had two cows. She used to go to milk her cows in the heaths in the evening. So, us kids, we went with her to milk the cows. She had taken the war mine in her *trio* (Normand patois for 'milking bucket'). She walked up to 'the quarry'⁸⁷ and chucked the mine in there.⁸⁸

In most interviews with inhabitants of Geffosses who were in favour of the remembrement, stories about the destitution of the post-war period emerged alongside the desire for technical improvement as an argument in favour of the remembrement. These references to former hardships appeared as more than a symbolic reality. They gave a clue as to the atmosphere in the townhall meeting of the young and ambitious farmers with Emile Ryckeboer in 1982. Their anecdotes illustrated how the hedgerows, sunken lanes, sparse apple trees, and wetlands in which most of them had spent their entire lives were doubled by an 'invisible landscape'.⁸⁹ Their days of hard toil had transformed the trees and the humidity into *nuisibles* and the remembrement into a solution.⁹⁰ They were readying themselves to fundamentally transform that space.

So came the moment when 'Emile Ryckeboer distributed small, ripped, white pieces of paper'⁹¹ to each of the farmers and proposed an informal vote for or against the remembrement.

⁸⁷ 'The quarry' is the informal name given to the infertile and rocky fields northwest of Geffosses, a former quarry.

⁸⁸ SCV-07/2020; JMO-07/2020.

⁸⁹ 'Place is dynamic,' Kent C. Ryden reminds us, 'equal parts geography and imagination; it is a complex intermingling and, ultimately, fusion of mind and landscape, so that neither is finally separable or meaningful without the other.' *Mapping the Invisible landscape: Folklore, Writing and the Sense of Place*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), p.254.

⁹⁰ Serge Villedieu used this word in interview to describe trees and hydromorphic soil. It literally means 'pests' but is used to qualify all parasitic natural elements in modern French agriculture (SCV-07/2020).

⁹¹ George Lebreuilly, GL-01/2020.

G rard Godefroy reminisces that the atmosphere was ‘all for it in the room’.⁹² The ballots were secret, but almost all of the interviewees who had been there remember voting in favour of the remembrement. Only George Lebreuilly recalls standing out as the ‘only one in the room’ who already knew that ‘the remembrement was not a good idea’.⁹³ Simone Lebreuilly – George’s wife and co-manager of the farm – intimated to me that he was lying. And one day, a few months later, George came back on his words. He was sitting next to Simone as she recalled the way he had come home on that day of April 18, 1982. ‘George was flustered, heart racing at the perspective of such an enormous change coming to Geffosses’, Simone said. ‘He too had voted in favour of the remembrement without thinking twice of it. You told me you had George, remember?’⁹⁴ George flushed in embarrassed agreement and quickly retorted, ‘but I *soon* realised! ... When I saw how it was unfolding, when I spoke to the Geffossais outside the room, I quickly realised how wrong it all was!’⁹⁵ His unwavering opposition to the remembrement had yet to begin.

⁹² GG-07/2020.

⁹³ GL-01/2020.

⁹⁴ SL-07/2020. The role that Simone has in relation to George in this conversation is a power dynamic that I witnessed in the three farmhouses where I conducted interviews with couples, speaking to the man and the woman simultaneously. It felt reminiscent of the way Susan Carole Rogers describes the ‘myth of male dominance’ in peasant society. While the women spoke little in the presence of their husbands, they stayed in the room to correct them on the accuracy of dates, places, and figures. Their silence paired with their often-administrative roles in farm management and in politics makes me believe that there is further research to be pursued by interviewing women alone. See Rogers, ‘Female forms of power and the myth of male dominance’, *American Ethnologist* no.2, (1975).

⁹⁵ GL-07/2020.

Chapter 2: Which Majority?

There were no opponents to land consolidation at the start. When Emile Ryckeboer launched his thing, apparently in the town... all was going well. It did not seem to bother. And then it was all at once: pschuuuuit! Well, it was Mr. Lebreuilly who started the movement... that, we cannot deny.

– Jacques Renouf

From the source to the man

Bonjour, I am looking for George Lebreuilly.

It was a grey January day in 2020. Grey, even for the South of Normandy. An old man with a face of a thousand harvests and an uneven grey and white beard looked up vaguely.

Lebreuilly... You will find him at *La Hervure*. Follow the road.

A few kilometres further:

Ah, the remembrement...

Pierre answered in a breath.

George Lebreuilly is my father. Find him at *Hotel Es Rose*.

I parked in the courtyard of the farm George Lebreuilly had moved to when he had retired. His son had taken over the family farm George had been born into, *La Hervure*. The old farmer walked assertively towards me, slowed in pace only by his cane. He raised his hand proud,

insisting on shaking mine. His son had called and spoken of a young woman interested in the history of the remembrement.

Simone joined him, and both stood before me, unsure and immobile among the chickens, Lita the dog, and the pigeons. They grimaced. This was not a good time:

Unless you don't mind interviewing while we slaughter the ducks?

I walked into the farm kitchen where a wide pot was boiling on a wide fire. Dead ducks lay around. Simone and George picked up their knives. Scalding. Defeathering. Singeing. Removing feet and oil gland. Evisceration. I gauchely intended on starting with the 'life story', open interview method.⁹⁶ Without introduction, and making an effort not to mention the remembrement, I asked: 'can you tell me about your life?'. George dove in as though he had awaited my arrival. His lyrical narrative tone would go on never to leave the space we shared:

Ah, there you have it, there you have it, there you have it... So, me, history, I haven't studied it much. Because I... I was born before the war. I've known the whole war, the Germans everywhere. I've seen the Germans arrive in 1940. We were proud, eh. Pffff! We were proud at the time. And so, I saw them set off again in '44. Then, it wasn't the same... it wasn't the same song when they left: we weren't so proud anymore. Yeah, eh!

I've seen all of that happen. I even saw the war of... [George huffs and puffs] I was about to say something stupid! What I mean is... I know a lot about the war of 1914. Because... my father had a first cousin who had fought the whole war. He had done four years in the trenches, that cousin... And he was single, too. So, as he got older... And he did use to like his drinking...

When he had had a drink or two in the evening, he used to put his uniform and all his stuff from the war back on. He had had a hellish time in the war, the fella: he had had a frozen toe. And he would... He would re-enact the trenches and the assaults. When he had had a drink, he would tell me everything. That's why I know the whole business: that's why I've experienced the First World War too... I mean... The story of the First World War!

⁹⁶ Paul Thompson, 'Pioneering the life story method', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* vol.7 no.1, (2004), p.83.

Simone intervened quietly: ‘...th-th-th-that’s not the remembrement, George...’ George ignored her, visibly feeling as though he was answering my question, and looked up at me instead:

You, you couldn’t imagine how it was. [Pause] And then there was the war of the 1940’s that I saw from A to Z because I was already twelve years old. [Silence] And then, the remembrement came. That was my third war.

I gathered that George was pausing for the dramatic effect.

Until that January day, I had only heard about George from one source. The portrait of him I held in my head was the one painted by polemical journalist Fabrice Nicolino from the Charlie Hebdo pressroom.⁹⁷ In 2015, Nicolino had published a manifesto for a return to the French agrarian past before post-war industrialisation, pleading, through a radical anarchist and satirical lens, for a more small-scale and environmentally conscious agriculture in the French countryside. I had met George Lebreuilly in chapter seven, in a romantic aside from Nicolino’s description of the technocratic logic of remembrement:

In October 1983, Georges Lebreuilly, a small peasant, learned that a remembrement was planned in his commune. Until this day, an easy-going family man, with his twenty-five cows and twenty hectares of natural meadows, he would suddenly turn into an activist. [...] A knife battle began, which saw Lebreuilly become mayor, which saw Lebreuilly throw himself under the caterpillars of the bulldozers to save a sunken lane. 160 gendarmes were sent to re-establish official order, and finally, after Lebreuilly’s discovery of corruption practices concerning the ‘public’ works associated with the remembrement, an armistice was concluded. [...] Most of the land had been consolidated, for example, the old river path where Georges would go for a walk on Sundays had been concreted over.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Nicolino, *Lettre à un paysan*, (2015), chapter 7.

⁹⁸ *Idem*.

In conversation, I realised that George had never met Nicolino.⁹⁹ In fact, George had only been elected mayor at the end of the remembrement procedure, the remembrement had not happened while he had been in office. Furthermore, it had rather been his sister that had thrown herself under the caterpillars of the bulldozers. The journalist had probably been inspired to write George's portrait by a more widely read article I later discovered in the national news outlet *Le Monde* which described George Lebreuilly as a heroic 'croquant'¹⁰⁰ in 1990, at a moment when the tides had turned in favour of environmentalism.¹⁰¹ There, too, George's good and solitary nature was emphasised, along with his small, almost subsistence agriculture, ambitions: 'For thirty years, Georges Lebreuilly had thought only of his land. Not a gesture for the unions, not a word for politics, just the harvest'.¹⁰² In *Le Monde*, when George felt his militant courage waning as the remembrement pressed on north through the department, he went on Sunday walks down the soon to be former river path. There, he was portrayed as a man who 'trembled with fear when he spoke [publicly]'.¹⁰³ In 1990, it had been a little over five years since George had 'turned' into an activist, 'travelling from village to hamlet, inciting people to resist the remembrement'¹⁰⁴ and he was portrayed as a man who wondered about his happiness. George told to the interviewer 'When will I be able to go back into my shell? I love my farm and my land. But for the past five years I have lived in paperwork. I am no longer happy'.¹⁰⁵

A modern resister?

Together with Simone, they did much to confirm and challenge these sources, as they started colouring in the lines of their projections. Simone said that the man she had come to marry from a neighbouring village had indeed grown to be very different from 'the lonesome farmer' she had first met, 'who seldom got out of his farm'. For her, it was precisely because 'George had always stayed at *La Hervure* [that] local people did not know his character. They

⁹⁹ I ultimately gifted George the book *Lettre à un paysan* with a bookmark on the page on which he appeared.

¹⁰⁰ A 'poor peasant' in Old French.

¹⁰¹ 'Remembrements autoritaires, Les croquants de Geffosses', *Le Monde*, September 27, 1990.

¹⁰² Idem.

¹⁰³ Idem.

¹⁰⁴ Idem.

¹⁰⁵ Idem.

did not know that when he starts a fight, he goes all the way through with it'.¹⁰⁶ In a way, she had not known either. George left the room and Simone further confided. She 'could never have imagined that for about ten years, [she] would be managing the family farm *on her own*, sometimes with the help of her eldest daughter H  l  ne while George [...] often travelled here and there'.¹⁰⁷

Simone. Invisible in the press archives, she had been the typist and confidant of George who embodied the role of 'the anti-remembrement activist'. In and beyond their fight, she had remained the farm's accountant. 'She takes care of the numbers', George once intimated in passing, looking into the fire with his glass of *calva*.¹⁰⁸ I wondered whether she could help me arrive at George's metamorphosis from Fabrice Nicolino's sentence, 'George Lebreuilly would *suddenly turn* into an activist'. What had triggered this change? I wanted to overcome the convenient omission made in most accounts. George had been *in* the room when the remembrement had been presented and widely acclaimed. In 1982, he too was a unionised farmer who had voted in favour of the remembrement.

One of Simone's comments intensified my questioning. Proudly, she described just how 'modern' George was in 1982, digging a gap with the portrait painted by Fabrice Nicolino and *Le Monde*. She explained: 'G  rard Lemoigne – [a young pro-remembrement farmer] –, he used to say: "I don't understand. Lebreuilly is the most modern of us all in the village... and he doesn't want the remembrement... it doesn't make any sense".'¹⁰⁹ This same observation came back up in later interviews with pro-remembrement farmers through their resentful conclusions. In retrospect, they felt that it was precisely *because* he had been 'so modern' that George did not 'need' the remembrement. 'He could safely be against it without endangering his farm's survival in a way that we couldn't' exclaimed Marc Villedieu. In George's own words:

I had nothing to consolidate. I owned perhaps 18-20 hectares of land and it was already well 'grouped.' It had come from my father: it was family asset! There had been five of us... I had four sisters. So, my father had had to make five lots of land: I only received a small property, but I had enough to be happy. I also

¹⁰⁶ SL-01/2020.

¹⁰⁷ Idem.

¹⁰⁸ GL-09/2020.

¹⁰⁹ SL-07/2020.

enlarged it a bit when a neighbouring farm was let go of. That day, we doubled our farm's surface.

Trust me, there was no land 'on your doorstep' in these years [immediately preceding the remembrement] in Geffosses. There were a lot of people looking for land. And at the same time, we could not grow [our farm size] because we weren't allowed to produce more [milk]: there were quotas!

It's precisely because I did not want to 'dismember' myself by buying land left and right tens of kilometres away, that we set up a small pigsty under the breeder-fattener model [with Simone].¹¹⁰ I was never going about pissing off anyone in these days. And they came to piss us off with that remembrement affair!

Simone says I was one of the most modern farmers in the days of the remembrement. But some did say: 'Boh! He's late, that guy.' But no. I was the most modern in town. I always worked with a horse, but I had all my [larger scale] work done by farm contractors. It was much more profitable than buying the machinery. So, I never got into debt! Never! We always worked with the money we earned the day before.

Perhaps the Lebreuilly farm was most modern in the sense that it was not suffering as much as its neighbours as the agricultural crisis of the 1980s set in. On the one hand, George and Simone had built a milking parlour and mechanised their milking routine for their twenty cows in the 1970s. On the other, they had seen the milk quotas arrive early enough to diversify their activity, building the only enclosed pig farm in the village. As a result, George himself did not have anything to gain from the remembrement, nor did he have any land to lose to it. Marc Villedieu recalls that Lebreuilly did lose *one* piece of land he had been particularly attached to, a small patch of 0.6 hectares near *La Hougue*, at *La Prétrie*. George did not want it to 'be moved', Villedieu chuffed, because he 'loved that particular piece', but 'we just had to rationalise it'. During our interviews, George did not recall the loss of this parcel. He did not

¹¹⁰ Breeder-fattener model: taking care of all stages of breeding, from the birth of the piglets to the fattening of the slaughtering pigs. This is the most widespread production system in France. It's advantageous if the farmer also grows the cereals to feed the pigs.

make it appear as though it had weighed into his decision to resist: ‘no, no, we didn’t lose any land! We were fighting against the principle of land consolidation!’

Vultures

In our interview, George had grown to assume my ecological ethics based on my insistence on ‘nature’-oriented questions to which he did not know what to answer. When I asked, ‘why did you resist?’, he gave me connivant looks. He behaved as though we both obviously knew why he had resisted, leaving it to teleology. George shrugged; he was by far my most confident interviewee. The present had proved his struggle ‘right’ but he rarely mentioned ‘nature’ out loud. His favourite answer to me was ‘out of principle’ (*en principe!*) and ‘it was the *way* the remembrement was applied that bothered me, not the idea of it’.¹¹¹ Simone concurred: ‘in itself, land consolidation would not have been a bad thing if there had been no abuse. I mean... when you hear everyone say that the aim is to regroup all the land around the main buildings of each farmer... that can only be beneficial!’¹¹² The Lebreuilly couple recognised the need for a landholding reform in the commune, perhaps explaining George’s favourable vote in the first instance. When I pushed the question a little further, George’s favourite twin answers were ‘the problem is that the remembrement is an authoritarian protocol’, and ‘I was fighting for human rights’.

‘When did this “authoritarian” character of the remembrement become apparent?’ I turned to Simone:

When he saw how it was all beginning to unfold. [...] At that time when it all started, from the two of us, I was the one sitting on the municipal council. The remembrement was voted at half past two in the morning [on September 4, 1984]! It was voted by... There were eleven of us... Six votes in favour, there was one null, and maybe four votes against... I think. So, when I got home, I said to George: ‘well, that’s it. You’re going to have it, your remembrement’. And oh...

¹¹¹ GL-07/2020.

¹¹² SL-07/2020.

How angry he was! Because... In the meantime, he had done a little... research.¹¹³

George added: 'it is a question of power abuse.'¹¹⁴ He took a breath, and declaimed:

These birds, once so decimated,
Are now protected.

Nature had forgotten them,
So, a new breed was given us.

You find yourself wanting their names?
Go to townhall when it opens.

To protect this species,
The 'DDA'¹¹⁵ was invented.

These big birds with hard beaks,
Trust me, they will need space.

If the eagle above builds its eyrie.
These, below, will take on the surface.

To satisfy their appetite, of course,
We shall undergo the remembrement.

You little rabbits, be wary,
For this breed of birds, it has teeth.

They have talons, though we cannot see,
And beware for they fly low.

When it's over with our generation
Don't you worry they will certainly go
To eat each other also.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Idem.

¹¹⁴ GL-07/2020. See also citations in 'Le coup de sang de Geffosses: remembrement et remue-ménage', probably *La Manche Libre*, undated newspaper clipping, probably early 1987.

¹¹⁵ *Direction départementale de l'agriculture* is the departmental state representative of the ministry of agriculture, commonly referred to as 'DDA', host to the state-trained rural engineers.

¹¹⁶ George Lebreuilly, 'Les rapaces' (the vultures). This poem is estimated to date from 1987 given the notebook in which it was found.

George had written the poem ‘The Vultures’ to denounce the ambitious growth mindset of the farmers who were in charge of implementing the remembrement in Geffosses. Their involvement in the events that unfolded between April 1982 and September 1984 had yanked him into revolt.

After the FNSEA meeting of March 1982, many young farmers had decided to run for local office to ensure that the municipal council would vote the remembrement into place. For Jacques Renouf and Michel Neveu – municipal councillor and mayor respectively at the time of our interviews – the appeal of consolidating the Geffossais landholding had been pivotal to the start of their local political careers:

1982 was important. Because following that, I ran for municipal elections in 83, and then we were elected for the first time with Michel Neveu. I became municipal councillor. I was 33 years old, and Michel was... he must have been 28 years old. We were the young ones on the team. We didn’t know that there was going to be a remembrement. But hey, it was... you could feel it...

It hadn’t been voted on or anything at all. But hey, I had joined politics with the idea of making the remembrement happen for the municipality in the first place. I’d been pushed into it by several other farmers. We had made two [pro-remembrement] groups of candidates for election at that time. Not all of the members of our groups were elected. But still, there was a good mix. But the former mayor had stayed in office [Victor Lesnay]. [He was] an old guy, he must’ve been seventy already... easy!¹¹⁷

Simone, too, had been elected for municipal office, though without a remembrement-related purpose in mind. George Lebreuilly was in a privileged observer’s seat, with his wife on the council and himself a member of the FNSEA union.

Once the new municipal council was formed in March 1983, the DDA granted them funding for a ‘pre-study’ in which a national land surveyor evaluated the risks and the benefits of a remembrement on the commune, estimating the potential gains in productivity at 33% in

¹¹⁷ JR-07/2020.

his conclusion. Perhaps this is when George's activist mould began. In October 1983, before it had voted the remembrement into place, the municipal council invited some of the unionised landowning-farmers and tenant-farmers in the commune to a confidential pre-study meeting.¹¹⁸ The Chamber of Agriculture and the DDA were informally present to agree on the need for remembrement land in Geffosses. They were assisted by the national land surveyors to present the early proposed plans and amend them following the remarks of the select few invited stakeholders. The official pre-study would only be published publicly six months later following these amendments, in April 1984. Another six months later, the municipal council voted in favour of the remembrement project.

The remembrement had been initiated democratically to the extent that it was voted upon by the municipal council, and that the local population had elected the municipal council in March 1983. Marc Villedieu reminded me that the way it was implemented in Geffosses was 'strictly and conscientiously according to the law'.¹¹⁹ However, few among the population of approximately 400 Geffossais and Geffossaises knew precisely what the candidates referred to when they ran in favour of the 'remembrement', and in a letter to the Prefect in 1987, George claimed that no single candidate had ran with a campaign explicitly mentioning the remembrement.¹²⁰ 'Is it normal that all the owners concerned [by the remembrement] were not informed? Is it normal that the owners who sit on the municipal council can take part in the vote on the remembrement?'¹²¹ Georges Lebreuilly 'could not believe that the mayor and his council were both judge and party' in the procedure.¹²²

Following the municipal vote, a Municipal Remembrement Commission (*Commission Communale de Remembrement*) was formed, in which five members were nominated by the municipal council, five others by the DDA, and five by the FNSEA union. In accordance with the law, it was composed of:

- The magistrate of the local town of Coutances, chairman of the committee.
- 3 DDA engineers as delegates.
- The representative of the tax services of the Land Register of Coutances.

¹¹⁸ 'Remembrements autoritaires', *Le Monde*, September 27, 1990.

¹¹⁹ MV-07/2020.

¹²⁰ Simone Darchy (SD-07/2020); George Lebreuilly, 'Lettre au préfet', February 1987 (manuscript in private archives).

¹²¹ 'Remembrements autoritaires', *Le Monde*, September 27, 1990.

¹²² GL-07/2020 and GL-01/2020.

- 1 person qualified for ‘problems related to the protection of nature’ according to the law of 10 July 1975:¹²³ Auguste Poincheval, mayor of the neighbouring village, Montsurvent.
- The mayor of Geffosses, Victor Laisney.
- 3 farmers of the municipality – owners or tenants – and 2 substitutes (all appointed by the Chamber of Agriculture): Marc Villedieu, Pierre Lecouillard, Michel Renouf, Marcel Rigot (substitute), Georges Godefroy (substitute).
- 3 landowners of the municipality – farmers or laymen –, and 2 substitutes (elected by the municipal council): Eugène Lecouillard, Gérard Lemoigne, Emile Ledoyen, Michel Leduc (substitute), Emile Laisney (substitute).

These men would be responding to Mr. Soulat from the Vince and Doligez national land surveyor agency in Caen. Together, they would take over the implementation of the land reform from the governing municipal authority.

Notably, as I found out in George Lebreuilly’s private archives, although they behaved as though the remembrement was a given, the Remembrement Commission was the administrative body with the final say as to whether it would take place or not. In 1983 and 1984, George had acquired copies of the official guidebooks to the implementation of the remembrement policy and avidly annotated them. On a photocopy of the original statute book that dated back to 15 February 1961, he had underlined:

Before taking this decision, which seriously engages the responsibility of the members of the Commission, the latter must, in full view of everyone, inform all those concerned and obtain all opinions in order to make a decision with full knowledge of the facts.¹²⁴

And further in Lebreuilly’s files, on the photocopy of the technical manual published by the Land Tenure Services of the Chamber of Agriculture of the Manche in January 1982, the following was underlined with exclamation marks:

One can hardly imagine such a decision being taken without there being a favourable environment [in the municipality], at least for the majority of the

¹²³ Philippe and Polombo, ‘Soixante années de remembrement’, (2013), p.3.

¹²⁴ Chambre d’Agriculture, *Propriété-Expropriation-Remembrement*, February 15, 1961 (Lebreuilly private archives).

inhabitants. Providing prior information to all the landowners and farmers is not preferable, it is necessary. It is even likely that several letters or publications or meetings are necessary to promote a positive decision.¹²⁵

The responsibility to make all the stakeholders aware of a potential remembrement had visibly obsessed George. However, it was not legally binding. The Commission had gone ahead with the decision to consolidate and in October 1985, the Prefect (the départemental representative of the state) approved the procedure and secured state funding. No public invitation to discuss the procedure would be extended to the general Geffossais public until the negotiations within the commission had come to an end, and the drafted plans were posted in the townhall in June 1987 to record formal complaints.¹²⁶ ‘Nothing could stop the machine’ was a comment repeatedly made by anti-remembrement farmers in recalling these early years.¹²⁷

Mobilising the troops

As soon as the remembrement had been voted in by the municipal council on September 4, 1984, George’s pent-up anger compelled him to change tactics. In tandem, the pro-remembrement brothers Serge and Claude Villedieu described his tours around the Geffosses households:

Claude: George, he went to people who loved their apple orchard and said ‘ah, boy, you know... they’re going to take it from you, your apple orchard. They call it the remembrement, haven’t you heard?’

Serge: And he made them say, ‘This is the land of my father! And my grandfather before him!’ ...He was tugging on their heartstrings!

¹²⁵ Chambre Départementale d’Agriculture de la Manche, Service Foncier, ‘Le Remembrement’, Janvier 1982, (Lebreuil private archives).

¹²⁶ ‘Le coup de sang de Geffosses’, probably *La Manche Libre*, undated clipping, probably early 1987.

¹²⁷ For example, Jacqueline Moulin (JM-07/2020).

Claude: For example, he saw that it was obvious that Renouf was going to want to take Jean Marie's parents' patch [because it was enclaved in theirs], so he went to tell them.

Serge: It was just people who did not have much and who cared a lot, eh, who were convinced by him. Marthe Lebeury, for example, she only had one hectare...¹²⁸

Accounts differed on whether George Lebreuilly had been a curse or a blessing for Geffosses. However, all agreed: by rallying troops of resisters, he had shaped their exceptional fate. The Villedieu brothers one-upped each other in their comical fashion to portray his influence:

Serge: The main character was Lebreuilly. [Silence] Because in all the municipalities [where the remembrement happened], there was the same protest. There were the same opponents. But they didn't have a leader.

Claude: Or rather a ringleader, as they say!

Serge: And we had one. And not just anyone, eh! A guy who was...

Claude: Virulent,

Serge: Enchanting, and all.

Claude: He also managed to gather people...¹²⁹

Although the Villedieu brothers hardly meant this characterisation as a compliment, their words were similar to those George used to describe himself :

In many communes, there were people who wanted to fight and then... They capitulated. They surrendered to the administration. But I had a sense of what was right from wrong. [The pro-remembrement inhabitants] could do whatever they wanted; they were not going to strike me down. A letter with an anonymous death threat did not bother me.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ SCV-07/2020.

¹²⁹ Idem.

¹³⁰ GL-01/2020. Simone responded with emotion: 'Oh yeah, the anonymous letters! And the anonymous phone calls too. "We'll have your hide..."' Simone recalls: 'It was Helen, she was home one day, and she gets a phone call like that. She didn't have a job and she had stayed at the farm to help me because George was away

Who were the other Geffossais who had followed George? Why did they not ‘surrender’ like the majority of the farmers and landowners in France, who took the remembrement quietly or wrote to the Ministry of Agriculture without making a fuss?

It was George. He was very good friends with my ex-husband and he was more or less our mayor. I mean... at some point, he became mayor. He often came to see my husband, to chat and everything. And then, one thing led to another... And we shared his opinion.

He would pass by our house. We were usually having lunch. My husband was a dentist in Gouville, a neighbouring village. My husband used to come back to Geffosses at lunchtime, to have a quick lunch.

And then when we drank the coffee... Hop! Georges would arrive and we would discuss. They chatted together more than they did with me, to be honest. And oh... George did not need to convince my husband! My husband was already convinced. I was too.

But hey, George came to discuss the reports, the meetings... He informed us of what was happening, really.¹³¹

If Lebreuilly was a solitary farmer – not one to participate in the informal mutual aid network of *corvées*, for instance – he had strong connections with the non-farming inhabitants of Geffosses, and the retired smallholders. Simone Darchy’s husband – the ‘dentist’ as he was called in the village – would become one of the most adamant resisters along his side.

The distortion of Simone Darchy’s memory revealed George’s political influence at the beginning of the remembrement, years before he was actually voted into office in 1989. For Jacques Renouf and many of George’s detractors, it was because ‘the Lebreuilly family was well implanted in the commune’ that an entire movement grew out of George’s personal convictions.¹³²

These people... They did not have the same ideas [as us], and they also had real power over the village. This is the only reason why [their protest] grew so

a lot... And, one day, she got the phone call and some man said to her: “we will have the hide of your father.” Oh la... you have no idea... it troubled her, eh.’

¹³¹ Simone Darchy (SD-07/2020).

¹³² Jean-François Lecolley (JFL-07/2020).

wrong: the Lebreuilly family was very established in the town... Very established in terms of landownership also but in terms of politics. Well, it makes sense: there were five Lebreuilly children [in George's generation], four of them had remained in the village. Now, add all the nephews and the nieces and all that... They made a block. That is how they rounded up all the small landowners and convinced them that the big landowners were going to eat up everything they owned. That was their political message, basically: that we were going to take everything from them.¹³³

The 'amicable' way?

Nineteen days after the remembrement had been agreed upon by the municipal council, George had gathered the signatures of 110 of 392 inhabitants in a petition against the reform.¹³⁴ Their letter to the mayor, presented an ultimatum: either the 'pro-remembrement' inhabitants made their own petition to settle the score for who held the majority, or a local referendum was to be held. This was the last remembrement-related document that Simone handwrote before taking up the typewriter.

Through a broad and inclusive argumentation, the letter included the signatures of smallholders who were not unionised and had not heard that the remembrement was arriving on the commune like the Ledoyens, the Le Tourneurs, the Lebeurys and the Moulins. George had also convinced the small property owners who had inherited land from farming parents but had often left the farm for urban professions. The Darchys, Monsieur Le Bon, and the Painsecqs, for example, returned to the countryside with a nostalgic expectation that the land would have kept its value, both affective, economic and environmental, and that the landscape would have kept its shape. They were the owners of the deteriorating apple orchards, initially groomed for cider but left to overgrowth – a 'frustrating sight' for those who considered themselves modern farmers.¹³⁵

¹³³ Jacques Renouf (JR-07/2020).

¹³⁴ 'Non au remembrement' manuscript petition letter to the Mayor Victor Laisney, September 23, 1984.

¹³⁵ Marc Villedieu (MV-07/2020).

The petition also included a few medium-sized farmers like the Godefroys, and other Lebreuilly relatives, who had participated in the beginning of the process but feared that the remembrement would not go in their favour. These farmers also had a faith in ‘modernising’ the municipal landholding structure differently... ‘naturally’.¹³⁶ They believed in another path to the modernisation of the landholding that relied on amicable land exchanges between neighbours, and on the expected retirements of numerous family farmers. ‘You did not have to be against progress to sign against the remembrement’, exclaimed George Lebreuilly. The petition put it more formally:

Given the small number of young people who remain on the land in Geffosses, and the disappearance of the elders, the remembrement will be done automatically. Our incomes, us small and medium-sized farmers, do not allow us to take on such a burden for ourselves. With our children, we are discouraged by the current agricultural crisis – milk quotas, drought, falling [prices] of our agricultural products, and the rise in the costs of equipment.¹³⁷

As Claude and Serge Villedieu point out, this argument for ‘another road to modernisation’ gradually disappeared from the communications of the anti-remembrement activists.¹³⁸ Indeed, it is largely absent from the press coverage that intensified in 1987 with their occupation of the townhall. Nonetheless, some of the medium-sized farmers who had joined the struggle continued to emphasise the contrast between their ‘mentality’ of regrouping land amicably and that of the ‘modern’ farmers who made up the *Commission de remembrement*. In the words of Antoine Moulin:

In the commission, there were some farmers who had never wanted to make amicable land exchanges before... And they were the ones who were in charge! Marc Villedieu’s uncle for example. He was an old lad who had a piece of land next to Roger Le Tourneur’s house. Roger had a very small farm. So, Roger had bought land near Villedieu’s other plots to make an exchange. And Marc Villedieu’s uncle, with his mentality – the same mentality as Marc –, he had said: ‘no! That would suit you too much, wouldn’t it? If I gave you that plot?!’ Of course, Villedieu was right. It would have been good for Roger to get a hold of

¹³⁶ George Lebreuilly (GL-07/2020).

¹³⁷ ‘Non au remembrement’ manuscript petition letter, September 23, 1984.

¹³⁸ SCV-07/2020.

that land because Roger had very little land and that way, he could have had a plot next to his house. Because the rest of his land was on the other end of the village, you see. 'No, that would suit you too well!' Villedieu had said to him. And then it was people like him who oversaw the remembrement... Them who had refused to regroup whenever it had suited others more than themselves. So of course, we couldn't agree with the whole thing!¹³⁹

The splinter lines of the pro- and anti-remembrement inhabitants represented ways of weighing cooperation against competition in a crowded land market at a time of crisis and capitalistic growth mentality. The divisions were deeply interpersonal and pre-existed the remembrement. They were not only familial, and identity based, or even opposing what one might have once binarily called 'modern' and 'backward' farming practices. For both pro- and anti-remembrement farmers mutual aid was essential to their rural existence, and competition was inherent to the commercialisation of their products. The question was 'with whom'. Serge and Claude Villedieu spoke bitterly of the Lebreuilly family's way of managing land through a fable-like retelling of one of their acquisitions:

The Lebreuilly family loves the land above all else. They would abandon a friend... They would renege on their promise... to buy a piece of land. Here is the story: There was a piece of land for sale near us. So, we came to an understanding with our neighbour, who was an old friend and who is from the Lebreuilly family. He said to us 'I won't outbid you'. Our other neighbour said, 'I wouldn't put it on you!' [I won't outbid you]. The last neighbour said 'I don't care' without promising anything. So, we went to the notary... and we made an offer on the plot. And then, no one stepped in.

And then, all of a sudden, there was someone outbidding us! And we didn't know who it was! So, the neighbour who hadn't promised anything, he bid above. And the other, the unknown bidder, he stepped in too and he bid on top of the other. So, Serge and I, we made a higher offer. And we kept outbidding each other like that three times in a row! And then finally... [Claude turns to his brother] who was it that asked him, again?

¹³⁹ GG-07/2020.

Yeah, I was the one who asked Gérard. I asked Gérard if he wouldn't happen to know the guy who kept bidding on that plot because it could only be people from around us. It's rare that a guy would come in to buy land from far! Well... .. It was him. And Gérard said: 'it's me.' So, I said 'but you gave me your word, are you stupid or what?!' 'Ah, bah, it's because father said, "we're landing that piece of land"', he replied... [Serge paused in silence, bursting with anger]. But we were friends at the time! We'd painted the town red together!¹⁴⁰

The anti-remembrement activists preferred a system of interpersonal land exchanges based on affinities over the remembrement, referring to it as 'amicable' and as the 'natural order' or the 'natural path to modernisation'. However, it was not an all-inclusive, egalitarian ideal. It carved networks of cooperation as well as rivalries and exclusions, upon which the remembrement only worked to shed a sharper light. If the Lebreuil family was a stronghold of soft power due to the sheer number of Geffosses inhabitants it represented, the web of relationships that secured its access to land certainly excluded certain other farmers for emotional, familial, ancestral, or political reasons. Similarly, other networks of family farms excluded the Lebreuil clan or negotiated with it on less amicable terms. As the story of the uncle Villedieu shows, exclusion from certain webs of amicable land transactions was a way of regulating competition and retaining power.

The numbers

The young, unionised generation of farmers wished to do away with this mentality. 'Size' was entering the system of land transactions as a criterion for selection. Those who identified as medium to large farmers aspiring to grow had started favouring collaboration among themselves and breeding disregard for the needs of smallholders to encourage their sell-out.¹⁴¹ Their culture mimicked the state apparatus that had been put in place to incentivise the elders' and small farmers' early retirement at high costs. It was also a way of marginalising the

¹⁴⁰ SCV-07/2020.

¹⁴¹ 'We were a strong team. Gérard Lemoine, Jacques Renouf, Michel Renouf... We were a team that supported each other.' MV-07/2020.

opposition to the remembrement. In the words of Jacques Renouf: ‘you want to know the number of opponents to the remembrement?! Boh... when we counted the number of small landholders that they were, surely, we arrived at a significant number. But when we looked at the farming surface they occupied in the municipality, that was nothing!’¹⁴²

The signatories of the petition had organised themselves into the Defence Comity against the Authoritarian Remembrement (*Comité de défense contre le remembrement autoritaire*). Ensued a battle in the columns of the local newspapers over who had the ‘majority’ between the Defence Comity and the Remembrement Commission; a battle which lasted all the way until George Lebreuilly was elected mayor in 1989 with an ‘anti-remembrement’ campaign.¹⁴³ ‘We represent 80% of landowners, our petition has collected more than 120 signatures!’ George exclaimed in one of his first press appearances.¹⁴⁴ Monsieur Cornière, an engineer from the Départemental Direction of Agriculture, in charge of ‘problems related to the remembrement’ was particularly vehement in response: ‘These protesting landholders exploit a total area of 329 hectares. The total land to be regrouped on Geffosses is about 1,450 hectares [...] Should we stop the remembrement as soon as a minority opposes it although a majority wants it? When you calculate the signatures, they only represent 20% of the surface area affected by land consolidation.’¹⁴⁵ This latter citation was found in Marc Villedieu’s private archives with the argumentative ‘20% of the area’ underlined in the original article.

Two worlds were meeting on the site where the remembrement penetrated the Geffossais society. On one hand, the anti-remembrement petition had accounted for the signatures of households under the name of their male head. For the Defence Comity, family names mattered, and so did the number of inhabitants that were represented in the petition. On the other hand, the pro-remembrement farmers held the ‘majority of the land’ in the commune. Their influence could be measured based on the size of the land they worked, and, in this case, they held a kind of ‘economic majority’. Implied was also their role of securing the economic prosperity through their continued and ambitious work. These farmers were entrepreneurs. They opposed the logic of interpersonal webs of influence that had governed land transactions until then, and wished to create a new order.

¹⁴² JR-07/2020.

¹⁴³ One example: ‘Deux tiers contre un tiers et vice versa ou l’arithmétique élastique’, *La Presse de la Manche*, 21 February 1987.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Le coup de sang de Geffosses’, probably *La Manche Libre*, undated clipping, probably early 1987.

¹⁴⁵ Idem.

Chapter 3: Peasants and Citizens of the République

By the end of it, we knew what the remembrement was. But everyone also got to know what the remembrement was.

– George Lebreuilly

In the dock

They were five. Five to have outspokenly taken the blame for the removal of the plastic, orange boundary markers set by the land



Figure 5. The 'Martyrs of Geffosses' in Coutances, March 11, 1988 (Lebreuilly private archive).

surveyor to define new property boundaries in the wake of the remembrement. Five to have appeared before the magistrate's court in Coutances on February 16, 1988. Five now 'martyrs' who had received their sentence. It was March 11, 1988, and they walked out of the tribunal quietly, got changed, picked up their placards and readied for performance, accompanied by their thirty supporters and family members.¹⁴⁶ Echoing the long history of festive cross-dressing in rural revolts, they demonstrated down the streets of the town in 'homespun grandmas' frocks' with 'hangmen's ropes around their necks'.¹⁴⁷ Led by George Lebreuilly, they held the collective banner: 'Geffosses: the martyrs are still standing' (Figure 5 and 7).



Figure 6. Madame Daniel walks with her placard 'I am a "manant" of Geffosses. I have neither killed, nor stolen, nor assaulted... And yet. I was sentenced because someone violated my property', March 11, 1988 (Lebreuilly private archive).

The judgement had been rendered: 4 months suspension of drivers' licenses for Madame Daniel (Figure 6), George Lebreuilly and his brother-in-law Daniel Moulin, and Joseph Allix and Pierre Ledoyen (all farmers with land in Geffosses). They had been judged alongside seven fellow farmers from another village of the Manche département, Saint-Malo-de-la-Lande, which was experiencing similar anti-remembrement unrest in the footsteps of Geffosses. The trial sought to be 'exemplary [...and to be] the last of its kind'.¹⁴⁸

In theory, all were charged with the same accusation: 'degradation of objects of public

¹⁴⁶ 'Les arrachages de bornes pour protester contre le remembrement : 2,000 francs d'amende à Saint-Malo-de-la-Lande, 4 mois de suspension de permis de conduire à Geffosses', *Presse de la Manche*, 11 mars 1988.

¹⁴⁷ Examples of subversive peasant cross-dressing in protest in Christina Bosco Langert, 'Hedgerows and Petticoats: Sartorial Subversion and Anti-enclosure Protest in Seventeenth-century England', *Early Theatre* vol. 12, no. 1 (2009); Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe', in her *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford University Press, 1975), p.148.

¹⁴⁸ Tanneau, 'Geffosses et Saint-Malo-de-la-Landes', 17 February 1988.

utility'. In both villages in the winter of 1986, protestors had removed hundreds of boundary markers that had been tentatively placed to visualise new property attributions.¹⁴⁹ However, as they stood in court, the Geffossais' sentence was heavier. Their neighbours got away with individual fines of 2,000 Francs while the driving licenses of the protestors from Geffosses were suspended.

'Two very different cases, indeed', insisted prosecutor Kantor in his indictment. If in

Saint-Malo-de-la-Lande, the progress of the remembrement has been able to continue without too many clashes and the accession to the newly attributed lands would soon be complete, it was



Figure 7. Geffosses defendants immortalised by a TV cameraman, March 11, 1988 (Lebreuilly private archive).

not the same in Geffosses. The behaviour of the protestors towards the surveyor and the commission, 'disrupting public order' had troubled the assessment of the value of the lands, the necessary first step upon which the exchanges would be based. Furthermore, in the span of two years, Geffosses had made resistance to the remembrement feel possible in other municipalities. The very room where prosecutor Kantor delivered his indictment on February 16, 1988, was 'packed'. Two hundred women and men were present to show their support to the anti-remembrement defendants.¹⁵⁰ Two buses full had come from the Orne, a neighbouring département and were joined by the opponents of Geffosses and of neighbouring villages, and the families of the defendants of Saint-Malo-de-la-Lande.¹⁵¹ 'Now', the prosecutor noted, 'whenever there is a demonstration against remembrement, as it happened recently in Canisy or in Lingreville, there is a delegation from Geffosses'.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ 'Anti-remembrement', *Presse de la Manche*, 17 February 1988.

¹⁵⁰ Tanneau, 'Geffosses et Saint-Malo-de-la-Landes', 17 February 1988.

¹⁵¹ *Idem*.

¹⁵² 'Anti-remembrement', *Presse de la Manche*, 17 February 1988.

In the subscript, the defendants of Geffosses were accused of ‘wanting to make Geffosses a symbol’.¹⁵³ For Kantor, ‘without a clear understanding of the context’, one could not grasp how ‘these agitators were but an active minority who were going about preaching the gospel everywhere’.¹⁵⁴ The public prosecutor’s accusatory speech resembled a socio-economic genealogy of the ‘need’ for remembrement in the Manche département. He began with a history of land consolidation in France since the early sixties and traced the influence of Brittany on the South of the département, an area of the Manche ‘readied for the remembrement earlier than [the North]’¹⁵⁵ due to its more diversified polyculture model, less turned toward the problematic ‘mono-production of milk’ that wore the Geffossais down. According to Kantor, the rest of the département had come to reason about the need to modernise by diversifying,



Figure 8. Geffosses defendants march on the streets of Coutances, March 11, 1987 (Lebreuilly private archive).

and diversifying meant consolidating: ‘in the Manche, we now have a consensus on the remembrement. The general council has just voted 29 million [francs] to continue it. Of the

11,000 hectares regrouped in 1986, how many have complained?!’¹⁵⁶

The attorney of the defendants, Mrs. Frémaux, come from the Bar of Paris and funded by the Association of Defence of the Users of the Administration (ADUA),¹⁵⁷ expressed her

¹⁵³ Tanneau, ‘Geffosses et Saint-Malo-de-la-Landes’, 17 February 1988.

¹⁵⁴ Idem.

¹⁵⁵ ‘Anti-remembrement’, *Presse de la Manche*, 17 February 1988.

¹⁵⁶ Tanneau, ‘Geffosses et Saint-Malo-de-la-Landes’, 17 February 1988.

¹⁵⁷ One of the pioneer groups of the lineage of user-oriented organisations, the Association of Defence of the Users of the (French) Administration (ADUA), was founded in 1985, and presented itself according to its statutes as ‘a mutual aid organisation for victims of excess, deficiency, errors or delays for which administrations and public services are responsible’. The ADUA had been the first nation-wide entity to side against the remembrement, and with the opposition that was formulated in Geffosses. For more on the ADUA, see Pierre Grelley, ‘Contrepoint - Associations d’usagers : médiation et partenariat’, *Informations sociales* vol.2, no.158 (2010); Annie Collovald, ‘Défendre les gens. Entretien avec Jean-Claude Delarue, président de l’ADUA, présenté par Michel Offerlé’ in *Politix* vol.4, no.16 (1991).

surprise: ‘I feel as though I am hearing our Minister [of Agriculture], François Guillaume.’ She put her finger on the trigger point: ‘The agricultural interests of la Manche, yes. But what do we make of the interests of individuals?!’¹⁵⁸ Frémaux was speaking of those interests that were to govern the right to private property. In the French *Code Civil*, the opposition between the primacy of individual or economic interests over property rights was resolved with the well-worn article 545 ‘*si ce n’est pour cause d’utilité publique*’.¹⁵⁹ One may be deprived of their possessions if it is proven to be in the public interest and subject to fair and prior compensation. The attorney continued under the applause of the two hundred supporters:

It is because this case touches upon the fundamental right to private property that these conflicts, these natural resistances [arise]. If these brave men and women describe this as an authoritarian remembrement, that is because it is precisely what they are experiencing, especially when they are told: ‘No matter what you say or do, we will go through with it.’¹⁶⁰

While the lawyer reminded the court of the constitutional rights at stake, the defendants built their case on playful non-cooperation. There was a subversive joy in the prosecutor’s absence of evidence for who had destroyed and displayed the boundaries. The defendants said that they had come to the trial in solidarity, and most of them no longer admitted to having personally torn the markers.¹⁶¹ One farmer from Saint-Malo-de-la-Lande asked: ‘There were more than 30 of us, why judge only seven people?’¹⁶² Others declared that they had accidentally jolted the markers while ploughing. Lastly, as Philip Hoffman argues was surprisingly common in trials for anti-enclosure protests, the Geffossais were well aware of their rights and determined to use the courts to defend themselves against injustice.¹⁶³

We knew we could appeal! We would go to Caen! That cost at least a thousand... or thousands... of francs.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁸ Tanneau, ‘Geffosses et Saint-Malo-de-la-Landes’, 17 February 1988.

¹⁵⁹ France, *Code civil*, ‘article 545’,

https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI000006428866/2021-09-09 (accessed 9 September 2021).

¹⁶⁰ Tanneau, ‘Geffosses et Saint-Malo-de-la-Landes’, 17 February 1988.

¹⁶¹ *Idem*.

¹⁶² *Idem*.

¹⁶³ Philip T. Hoffman, *Growth in a Traditional Society*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p.22.

¹⁶⁴ GL-07/2020.

Peasants fighting for private property

Three weeks later, on March 10, 1988, the day of the announcement of the sentence, the ‘important deployment of police force’ in the streets of Coutances betrayed the violence that conflicting views



Figure 9. Protest placard, March 11, 1988: ‘Your driver’s license is in danger. The French justice system can touch it for anything other than a violation of the exam that issued it to you. For having contested a violation of our own home of which we were the victims, [we received] 4 months of suspension. When will they suspend our high school baccalaureates?’ (Lebreuilly private archive).

of the remembrement now represented. Yet, the defendants and their supporters were but thirty.¹⁶⁵ All were surprised at the prosecutor’s chosen sentence. ‘Your driver’s license is in danger’, announced one of the placards. By removing their licenses although there had been no driving infractions, the prosecutor attempted to make the resisters feel punished but only heightened their sense that the rule of law was being bent to allow the remembrement (Figure 9).

In the streets of Coutances, their slogans fought on all fronts, gesticulating for their ‘rights’ and ‘liberties’. The placards, like the trial, showed the uncanny cohabitation of several arguments against the remembrement as they were thrown together into the public space. While the defendants were cross-dressed like historic peasant rebels, each of them walked with declarations that simultaneously self-proclaimed each one of them ‘*manants*,’ in reference to the pejorative definition of ‘peasant’ as simultaneously ‘rural inhabitant’, ‘boor’ and ‘villain’ in *Ancien Régime* French, all the while alluding to their right to private property:

¹⁶⁵ ‘Les arrachages de bornes pour protester contre le remembrement’, *Presse de la Manche*, 11 mars 1988.

I am a *manant* of Geffosses. I have neither killed, nor stolen, nor assaulted...
And yet. I was sentenced because someone violated my property (underlined
in original, Figure 6).¹⁶⁶

On the one hand, the symbolism of their demonstration inferred notions of tradition, community, and the peasant identity as a resistance to the state and to capitalism; implying the legitimacy to speak on behalf of their rural community. On the other hand, they were vouching for their individual rights, with references to the ‘rights of Man’ and a lively sense of the rights of the citizen, a Republican, insurgent identity. The ‘antis’ were melding their insurrectional practices and discourses, as they moved into a more direct form of resistance.¹⁶⁷

This chapter sheds light on what is at stake in this shift from a personal perception of injustice to a wholesale rejection of something perceived as a planned cultural and constitutional catastrophe. 1986, the year of the removal of the boundary markers, had been the year when the antis had lost faith in their petition and with it, the hope that the remembrement of Geffosses could be annulled peacefully. The national land surveyors and the sub-committee of the Commission – local volunteers who had responded to the townhall’s open call – had started walking in groups across each one of the resisters’ plots with a theodolite, an auger (*tarière*), and a soil coring toolkit to measure the size and productive quality of their lands:¹⁶⁸

When we saw the plots, we referred to the control plots [we had established in the commune] and we classified them according to our local references of quality. The good land was land number one. It was the *best of the best land!*¹⁶⁹ Then there was land number two, land number three, and so on... The surveyors came with us; we did core samples. On each land, on *all* land. If a plot was one hectare, for example, several soil core samples were taken in the same field. It was the whole subcommittee that did this together. There were meadows, woods, and arable land, so we made categories of land so that people more of

¹⁶⁶ The citation is also mentioned in an interview with George Lebreuilly, GL-07/2020.

¹⁶⁷ The ‘antis’ (*les contres*) is short for anti-remembrement and the ‘pros’ (*les pous*) is short for pro-remembrement. These words are used by the Geffossais to speak about one another.

¹⁶⁸ Jacques Renouf, JR-07/2020. On December 10, 1985, the model parcels were agreed on. See Chambre d’Agriculture de la Manche, Service Foncier, Le Remembrement, (January 1982), (Marc Villedieu, private archives).

¹⁶⁹ Emile Ryckeboer was the farmers who owned and farmed the parcel used as an exemplar for the category of land number 1.

less received the same type of land as they had had before, with a twenty percent error margin. At the end of it, each person was awarded a number of points that represented the total productive value of their entire surface.¹⁷⁰

Between 1986 and 1988, as the evaluation phase was being completed, the protestors watched their symbolic acts of resistance fail one by one, and increasingly resorted to sabotage, violent physical means and interpersonal death threats. The primary message of the anti-remembrement Geffossais changed from ‘not on *our* land!’ to a wholesale rejection of the procedure and everyone responsible for implementing it.¹⁷¹ The antis were now fighting to avert something dramatic from happening both to their rights as citizens of the *République* and to their identity as peasants.

While this is a historically uncommon cohabitation of arguments (peasants fighting for private property), for the resisters of Geffosses, these two pillars appeared as mutually reinforcing modes of belonging to the land: the peasant belongs to a land and a land belongs to the citizen of the *République*. However, while the antis claimed that these two sites were being threatened by the remembrement, this is an argument that was actively contended by the pro-remembrement farmers. Like the antis, the pros believed both in the sacrality of private property and in their own embodiment of the true peasant. The pros retorted to their opponents that neither rights nor identity could be saved if one did not account for the importance of economic necessity.

¹⁷⁰ Jacques Renouf (JR-07/2020).

¹⁷¹ Gérard Godefroy (GR-07/2020).

Boundary removal, a symbolic gesture?

In my preparatory research before going into interview, I had steeped me in a historiography that emphasised the symbolic power of boundary marking. Postcolonial scholars have been particularly sensitive to the power dynamics and violence materialised by the act of surveying, marking, and fencing, as well as the dialogical act of resistance. They avidly retraced the subversive power of boundary removal back to the Old Testament, the Second King of Rome, British Colonial rule, and the Enclosure of the Commons.¹⁷² To name but two examples, ‘for the Maori, the surveyor’s theodolite – commonly referred to as the ‘taipo’ or ‘tipu’ – was also a symbol of uncertainty and possible conflict’, as it ‘signified an explicit and aggressive act of possession’.¹⁷³ Giselle Byrnes studies how, in late nineteenth century New Zealand, survey poles were repeatedly removed by those to whom the land initially belonged in common use. In the province of Transvaal, in North-Western South Africa,



Figure 10. Boundary markers ‘decorate’ the wiring in front of the Calvary, winter 1986 (Lebreuilly private archive).

Isabel Hofmeyr analyses how, in the first half of the twentieth century, fencing had been placed to restrict black farmers’ commons in favour of white farming properties and marked an unequivocal

‘boundary between black and white areas’.¹⁷⁴ By the 1920s, boundary disputes, ‘fence

¹⁷² Deuteronomy xix, 14; Allan Chester Johnson, Paul Robinson Coleman-Norton, Frank Card Bourne, *Ancient Roman Statutes: A Translation with Introduction*, (New Jersey: The Lawbook exchange, 1961), pp.4, 11; A. Oye Cukwurah, *The Settlement of Boundary Disputes in International Law*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), pp.10-11; Hoffman, *Growth in a Traditional Society*, (1996); Nadine Vivier, *Propriété collective et identité communale*, (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998).

¹⁷³ Giselle Byrnes, *Boundary Markers: Land Surveying and the Colonisation of New Zealand*, (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2001), pp. 38-39.

¹⁷⁴ Isabel Hofmeyr, ‘Nterata/The Wire’, *International Annual of Oral History 1990*, (New York: Greenwood, 1992), p.1.

destruction’ and ‘theft’ had become so common that native commissioners were ‘tired of the matter’.¹⁷⁵

Because the policy of *aménagement du territoire*, of which the remembrement was an integral part, has been commented on as a colonial project, a displacement of ‘vexed questions of territoriality’¹⁷⁶ prompted by the independence of Algeria and the loss of empire, I imagined the antis of Geffosses resisting on behalf of their community the state’s oppressive act of making their parcels commensurable and enforcing land exchanges.¹⁷⁷ The Geffossais were not suffering from any comparably systematic colonial, racial, or ethnic persecution, but they might have considered their own metropole/periphery situation as analogous. They liked to compare themselves to Asterix and Obelix, the last of the Gauls, resisting the invasion of the industrialising French state and I had heard some of them speak of themselves as having been ‘forcefully displaced from their “native land”’.¹⁷⁸

Yet, the antis explained to me that initially, when they had removed boundary markers in the winter of 1986, they were not attempting to sabotage the entire process of ranking the land, nor the state, but to ensure that their own land was not evaluated to be exchanged. Antoine Moulin, whose father Daniel was one of the accused, put it simply:

The guys from the DDA and the surveyors, they put boundary markers and all that stuff on our land. And we did not want that on our grounds. So, we tore off the boundaries. So, they took five of us in. And dad lost his license.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p.17.

¹⁷⁶ Sarah Farmer, *Rural Inventions*, (New York: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2020), p.25.

¹⁷⁷ Anthropologist Jean Malaurie created book series that interwove life stories to consider that ‘European peasants and indigenous peoples of third world countries shared an identity as bearers of authentic culture in the face of modernizing forces born in Europe’. For a detailed analysis of the series see Pierre Aurégan, *Terre humaine: Des récits et des hommes* (Paris: Nathan, 2001). Later, Pierre Bourdieu made this connection in a retrospective on his work between the Bearn and Algeria. Loïc Wacquant, ‘Following Pierre Bourdieu into the field’, *Ethnography* vol.5, no. 4 (2004); Deborah Reed-Danahay, ‘“Tristes Paysans”: Bourdieu’s Early Ethnography in Béarn and Kabylia’, *Anthropological Quarterly* vol.77, no. 1 (2004).

¹⁷⁸ George Lebrouilly, ‘La guerre des menhirs n’aura pas lieu’, *Ouest-France*, 15 September 1994; Jacqueline Moulin in interview (JM-07/2020).

¹⁷⁹ AM-07/2020.



Figure 11. Boundary markers 'decorate' the wiring in front of the Calvary, winter 1986 (Lebreuilly private archive).

My Geffossais interviewees must have felt the symbolic pressure I emphasised behind my 'why did you tear off the markers?'. They pointed to the absurdity of my question from where they were standing, and it became an occasion to mock my detail-oriented oral historical practice. George repeated my question with a grin, half-shouting:

Why did we remove the markers from our land?! From *our* land?! Well. ... We did not want markers on our land, we did not want the remembrement on our land.

So, there was no need for a surveyor to set markers.¹⁸⁰

The story was always quickly retold by the resisters, but George granted me a few more details when I pressed him on:

The sergeant major, he often came to see me. One day, I noticed that he was following us: if anyone came to our house, there were gendarmes following them. And I had the gendarmes on my back: they were trying to bust us, to corner us while we were doing something stupid, like while we were removing the markers. And they never managed! We removed all the boundary markers the

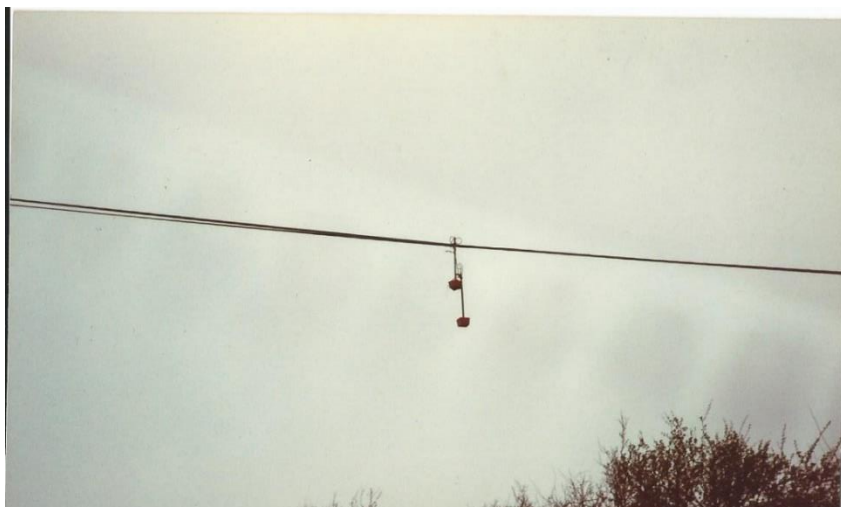


Figure 12. Boundary markers 'decorate' the electric wires, winter 1986 (Lebreuilly private archive).

¹⁸⁰ GL-01/2020.

surveyor had set; we were removing them as he was putting them on. There must have been 200-300 of them. I still have some lying around here, actually [nods to the farmyard]. And we displayed them. We attached them to the railings of the Calvary with a padlock! And we also put two of them together and hop! We sent them off around the telephone wires! We had to advertise, right?! They were hanging everywhere! Just to piss them off! Oh, and the 'remembristes'¹⁸¹ were upset, eh.

Beyond walking in their shadows to remove boundaries, the resisters also sought out confrontation, as George Lebreuilly likes to retell:

One day, the surveyor comes along. He walks discreetly behind the house. I say to myself 'there, there... there is the surveyor who sneaks into my plots...'. 'Well,' I said, 'you're not going to come out easy!'. I took the tractor, and I thrust it in his way. 'Huh!' So, the surveyor eventually comes to find me: 'Are you the owner of the tractor?' 'Oh yes. Why? Is it bothering you?' 'Uh yeah, I can't get out.' I said, 'you'll get out of there when you'll have taken all the boundary markers you put in my plot out of there.' I had not asked him to come and set my boundaries! The surveyor was angry. He said to me 'can I make a call from your home?'. 'Ah yes, yes, yes. Here, help yourself to the telephone.' So, he calls his boss. His boss says, 'alright, go remove the markers and then he'll remove his tractor'. We were happy.¹⁸²

Land is inalienable

For George Lebreuilly and the other resisters of Geffosses, it was precisely in the removal of boundary markers that the subversive peasant revolt met the defence of the right to private property. In our oral history interviews, George Lebreuilly was frustrated that I did not understand the natural cohabitation of 'private property' with the 'peasant identity'. I had

¹⁸¹ The *remembristes* is another name for the 'pros'.

¹⁸² GL-07/2020.

admittedly come to Geffosses to hear about how the sense of belonging to a place and a landscape could be grounds for revolt. I found it hard to engage with the idea that the battle for ‘belonging’ was also fought on the notion of ‘property’ rather than solely on grounds resembling a ‘harmony’ with ‘the rhythms of nature’, as Sarah Farmer proposes is a French urbanite’s socially constructed definition of the peasant.¹⁸³ ‘The right to property, it’s... s-s-s-sacred!’ George stuttered, looking for his words, ‘and, it’s... it’s... you know what I mean? It’s...’. The word George was looking for was ‘inalienable’. Originally mentioned in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of 1789, its preamble evoked ‘the natural, inalienable and sacred rights of Man’ and specified in its second article that ‘the aim of all political association is their conservation [...] The right to liberty, property, safety and resistance to oppression’.¹⁸⁴ *Inalienable*. Once George had found that word, he would keep on bringing it back. ‘The civil code said “inalienable!” Except for reasons of public utility! [...] But the remembrement was not for public utility! It was to produce more!’¹⁸⁵

His attachment to the word ‘inalienable’ and all its mobilization by the other antis in oral history interviews, though inaccurate to describe the legal status of modern French property rights, provides us a clue for the relationship to the land that they were attempting to defend. An inalienable right is a right directly attached to a person, because of who they are, due to one of their intrinsic qualities or to the position they exercise in society, and which cannot be transmitted, sold to another person, or surrendered by citizens to the sovereign. It is extinguished upon the death of the one who holds it.¹⁸⁶ In the German Enlightenment, Hegel proposed a refinement of what could be inalienable:

Like the possession of my personality, [...] of my substantive essence, [...] of my moral and religious life, [I] cannot lose them through lapse of time or from any other reason drawn from my prior consent or willingness to alienate them.¹⁸⁷

Hegel made it clear that a thing could in fact be transferred from one person to another and that the private property of land therefore did not constitute an inalienable right. But could a ‘place

¹⁸³ To trace the French peasant ideal I probably subconsciously inherited, see Farmer, *Rural Inventions*, (2020), p.87.

¹⁸⁴ José Féron Romano, *Les Droits de l'Homme*, (Paris: Hachette, 1987).

¹⁸⁵ GL-07/2020.

¹⁸⁶ D. Ellerman, ‘Inalienable Rights: A Litmus Test for Liberal Theories of Justice’, *Law and Philosophy* no.29, (2010). John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Nidditch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), Book IV, chapter III, section 18.

¹⁸⁷ Georg W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, translated by T.M. Knox, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967 [1821]), section 66.

of belonging’, a ‘home’? Such was the question that plagued the Geffossais debate. Was this ‘land’ they were fighting over an alienable ‘thing’ – a ‘working tool’ – or an inalienable ‘personal capital,’ a ‘feature of one’s sense of belonging’?¹⁸⁸

I heard Daniel Moulin retort: ‘*this* land, I will use all of my strength to keep it’ as he did in the courtroom for his defence on 17 February 1988. Moulin was a small farmer. According to his son and daughter who took over his and his wife Madeleine’s farm together, he had about twenty cows on twenty hectares at the time of the remembrement, with carrots and strawberries on the side. He would be tried again in the early 1990s for attempting to stay on his land although it had been reattributed to another farmer. So would George Dubosq, Madame Lemaesquier, Madame Godefroy, and tens of others. For the young antis who had watched their parents refuse to let their land go, the drama of these trials had caused the deaths of some:

Antoine: Georges Dubosq was summoned to court because he had supposedly not left his land, and on the morning of...

Jacqueline: Yes, he had not let go of his land, but he only did have one piece of land! So, he had been summoned to court with the others to be sentenced to 5,000 francs (or 800 euros now). And on the morning of the trial, he died. He was a gentleman who was old and who was against the remembrement and who only had one very small plot.¹⁸⁹

A few kilometres away, Gérard Godefroy was showing the parcels his mother had lost and those they had received in exchange on an old map of the commune. In 1989, his mother had only just retired, and he had started farming her land on his own. ‘How did she react to the land exchanges?’

Bah... Pfff... She did not... She did not really experience ‘all’ of the remembrement. Because she did not want to leave the fields – *her* fields – behind when we were told to let them go. Some owners attacked her in court for it. So, she was sentenced... like the others, eh.

¹⁸⁸ These contrasting ways of naming the land are taken straight out of a declaration by the President of the Departemental Council, Jean-François Legrand, in ‘Le remembrement dans la Manche: explosif!’, *Ouest France*, 7 April 1988.

¹⁸⁹ AM-07/2020 and JM-07/2020.

Uh... So, obviously... she could not stand that, eh. And then... She got sick. Sick, sick... It was normal, in a way. It was the heart. And then she had to have a heart surgery and it ended badly. That's how the story went. She did not experience the rest of the remembrement.

I eventually left the plots to their new owners... I left them, the plots... But hey, when mum did not want to let the lands go, bah... I made sure not to leave them on time: I reseeded them as best I could until I couldn't anymore.¹⁹⁰

For Jacqueline Moulin, there was a reluctance to accept land exchanges specific to women elders. Madame Lemaesquier was one of these, who boldly wrote to Marc Villedieu forbidding him to 'enter her property' until the Administrative Court had ruled on her appeal against the remembrement.¹⁹¹ It was on January 21, 1989, and it would soon be time to sow the corn for all the farmers of the newly attributed properties. For Marc Villedieu, who was a member of the subcommittee, her summon was made all the more absurd by her farming situation:

She had, if we round up, five hectares of land in one place and a separate two and half *vergées* – [a quarter of a hectare] – right in front of my milking parlour. Madame Lemaesquier did not want these two and a half *vergées* to be handled by us and moved over with the five hectares she had elsewhere. Apparently... You just 'must not touch her land'. These two and a half *vergées*, which were in front of my farm, oh no, 'you could not touch them'.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ GG-07/2020.

¹⁹¹ Lemaesquier, manuscript letter to Marc Villedieu, January 21, 1989 (Marc Villedieu private archives).

¹⁹² *Vergée* is an old French and English unit of measurement of surface area, still used today in the Channel Islands and some parts of the Manche. One *vergée* represents a quarter of an acre. MV-07/2020.

Land can be ‘moved’

For Villedieu, no one was being expropriated. ‘We were only *moving* their land. They were not *losing* anything’.¹⁹³ Two cultural worlds clashed on the terms used to describe what was being ‘done’ to the land in the remembrement:

For us, we gave them back land, land was not taken from them! We gave them the same thing in equivalence. But to them, it did not have the same value. Theirs was worth more than the one they received. Although it had been evaluated and carefully judged in the sub-committee and by the surveyor.¹⁹⁴

As the antis pointed out, some unhappy farmers would necessarily have to lose their ‘best land’, and some would necessarily have to receive the unwanted humid parcels. However, the antis’ denunciation of corruption fell short of the subcommittee’s broader belief that given enough agricultural input – fertilizer, pesticide, and fungicide – and an investment in modern machinery, lands of approximately the same quality, could be made equivalent. Land appeared as homogenous space that could be translated by mathematical and cartographical means. Even different types of land could be comparable in value and interchangeable. A pasture could be drained and turned into arable land ‘if its soil was not hydromorphic in nature’.¹⁹⁵

For other pros, the remembrement may have been an expropriation, but it was warranted. For Serge and Claude Villedieu, ‘true peasants’ had the strength to accept it because their capacity to produce more was ‘in the public interest’¹⁹⁶. For the brothers, the procedure in no way questioned their relationship to the land, but reaffirmed their peasant pragmatism:

- Land is vital!
- We live on it!
- It’s like the apple of our eye, land, it’s vital!
- Peasants are always frowned upon by people who do not depend on the land, like we do.

¹⁹³ MV-07/2020.

¹⁹⁴ Idem.

¹⁹⁵ JR-07/2020.

¹⁹⁶ SCV-07/2020.

- So Lebreuilly jumped at the chance to create a movement of landlords against peasants. Lebreuilly was a peasant, but he joined forces with all the non-farmers who did not want the remembrement: they did not want their plots to be moved. They did not like us peasants, these people.
- The non-farmers, they were afraid that *their* property would be taken away from them.

Land was indeed vital. And as the Remembrement Commission presented its preliminary plans for land exchanges in June 1987, epistolary threats of all kinds started reaching the homes of the members of the sub-committee, including death threats whose ardour Jacques Renouf found hard to comprehend:

It is not explainable... For them, land is... it is a good from their ancestor, it has sentimental value. You could almost understand this belief coming from a non-farming landowner... But not from a farmer! Someone like Christine Painsecq's grandmother, for example. For her, her land had a sentimental value. So, touching or moving her land, which had been the property of her parents and her grandparents, was... I think... different from the context of a professional farmer. She was a landowner, but she was not a farmer. They were earning an income from their land because they had tenant farmers, but they did not make a living from it: they were not *exploitants*. And to them, their land was... it was... inalienable [Jacques used this word unprompted]. Us farmers, we are looking for profitability and ease of work. It is our job. We are trying to improve our working conditions. Carrots, for example. Before we did everything by hand. Thanks to the expansion of the surfaces, we were able to mechanize the carrot harvest.

It must be said that this distinction between the peasant and the non-peasant attachment to the land did not hold the experiences of part of the Geffosses resistance. A minority of them were protesting the remembrement specifically because their work tools as professional farmers were being threatened. One of the first formal complaints recorded by the press was 'I have

three hectares of good land for vegetable production that I have left without fertilizers or pesticides to grow organically, and well, they're going to take them from me'.¹⁹⁷

Indeed, the pro-remembrement farmers did not account for landed sensitivities outside of the productivist model. For them, the peasant identity was adaptable to the beliefs and practices of a modern *exploitant agricole*. Defining oneself as a peasant stemmed from depending on the land for their livelihoods, and having an existence shaped by this unique bond of dependence. The essence of this bond could endure despite the arrival of machines and the transformation of the landscape in favour of 'larger surfaces'.¹⁹⁸ With a poetic prose rhythmized by emphases (indicated in italics), Jacques Renouf defined 'paysan' for me:

'paysan' means we were born *into* this. We are *attached* to the land. We try to *fructify* the land. We work *with* the land and *with* the animals. Even when we no longer work, we *enjoy* the garden. [...] Paysan is not about staying with the old techniques. Paysan is not 'retro'. [...] I feel as much a modern *exploitant* as I do a *paysan*. It's the same. Just because you are an *exploitant*, it does not mean that you are not *attached* to land and animals alike.¹⁹⁹

Sabotaging the entire process

The antis' intimidation strategy did not bear its expected fruits. In Hofmeyr's words, 'while fencing itself may, initially, have been easy to combat [for the resistant farmers], the other forces which it symbolised, were not. In destroying "the wire", one removed the consequences, rather than the causes of land alienation'.²⁰⁰ In Geffosses, because of the sabotage actions, two gendarmes started accompanying the sub-committee during its assessments. The sub-committee never returned to the Lebreuilly lands. Simone was once told

¹⁹⁷ 'Remembrement à Geffosses: toujours l'effervescence', *Presse de la Manche*, 18 June 1987. See another protestor mobilising a similar argument in 'Geffosses: remembrement, chacun dans son champs...', *Ouest France*, 3 February 1987.

¹⁹⁸ The very use of the word 'surface' here covers width and breadth but lacks vertical depth, precluding plant roots, soil and rock, air and atmosphere, alluding to the land as a flat space on which human life unfolds as opposed to humans being woven in interdependent relationships with the land.

¹⁹⁹ JR-07/2020.

²⁰⁰ Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Nterata/The Wire', (1992), p.32.

by ‘a guy from the sub-committee’: ‘your land, they have been evaluating it from out in the town hall’, to signify simultaneously the fear George had elicited in his adversaries and the sub-committee’s determination to assign a point-based value to the Lebreuilly lands although they were nearly perfectly grouped.²⁰¹ Nonetheless, the message of the antis had reached the sub-committee loud and clear. As Jacques Renouf articulated:

They wanted to keep their land as it was. But if we did not touch their land at all... how?! How could we consolidate anything?! We were forced to touch their land. It is impossible to do a remembrement with only the people who are in favour. We had to touch all the lands [of Geffosses]. If we had wanted to do a land consolidation with only the people who had wanted it, it would have been impossible because everyone had land everywhere.²⁰²

When the measurements had been recorded and the points assigned, the commission moved back into the small single room of the townhall to start discussing the possible land exchanges.



Figure 13. A ‘bouquet’ of boundary markers ‘decorates’ the Calvary, winter 1986, (Lebreuilly private archive).

We wanted to start working on the plans. But the opposition was there, and they prevented us from working. [...] They would come in, 15, 20, 25 of them. Every time we had a meeting, they were there. [...] They were sitting on the tables. They took the maps.

They tore up the maps.²⁰³

²⁰¹ SL-01/2020.

²⁰² JR-07/2020.

²⁰³ Idem.

George Lebreuilly testified of the same story. The protestors were realising that their removal of the boundary markers and intimidations to the land surveyors had not stopped the process. Their private properties had been measured and were being included. They could only try to sabotage the reform as a whole. He recalled the first townhall meeting of the sub-committee:

Someone had told me: 'Hey, they are gathering in the townhall'. My brother-in-law had told me that. 'Hey beh, we are going to visit them!' And then someone at the townhall didn't want to let us in. So, I said 'get out of my way!' We entered the townhall with the surveyor, the mayor, and the sub-committee. The mayor, he said: 'what are you doing here?!' 'Bah,' I said to him, 'this is the ... land consolidation commission, right? And this [points to an imaginary map] is our private property, I believe! And this [points to the townhall] is a public place! We are going to stay there. We are entitled to it, aren't we? It's public.' 'Ah! But in that case, you're not going to say anything!' the mayor said [in reference to the French law who allows any citizen to attend a municipal council meeting but forbids them to contribute a word]. 'Ah... Absolutely! We are not going to say anything.'

The surveyor was very embarrassed to see us listening to them. He looked at the maps on the table and resumed: 'So you, sir...' I can't remember who he was talking to... 'you have your plot which is here, and we could put it there for you.' 'Oh no! Ah no no no, no no no. Ah, this lot, I care about it a lot! Oh no. You are not going to take that one away from me, surely not.' 'Good.' So, the surveyor turns to the other end of the table (there was a large table with the maps) and he started again: 'So you sir, you are currently there... So that parcel, we would take it and give you that one.' 'Ah no!' the other guy replied, 'you are not going to take this one from me because I just made an amicable exchange to acquire it!'

So, I was behind, and I said 'go ahead, gentlemen, place your bets! The bets are closed!' Then the surveyor who was there said 'Well, well, it's over for today,' and the meeting was adjourned. We were there, catching them red handed:

they were helping themselves to whichever land they wanted! The committee served itself first. That is how it went.²⁰⁴

As it only happened rarely during my time doing fieldwork in Geffosses, the two men – Jacques Renouf and George Lebreuilly – were retelling the two sides of the same story, although they had not spoken in thirty years and were unaware that the other was interviewed on the same events. The pro-remembrement of the two continued:

Since we were not able to agree among ourselves, and since we were not able to work in the townhall, we asked the surveyor to make a full remembrement plan himself. That way, he could use his expertise without feeling pressure from each one of us and our opponents. So, he proposed his own plan and we relied on it to move forward. Well, it still had to be touched up a little because it had grouped together pieces that absolutely should not be moved. To be fair, he did not know anyone; he had made his plan ‘as it should have been’ without caring about whose land is whose. He had considered neither the pro-remembrement people, nor the anti-remembrement people, nor the preferences of each one. We also moved the sub-committee meetings to the administrative tribunal in Coutances.²⁰⁵

Jacques was admitting that there were some plots that ‘absolutely should not be moved’ while overlooking that everyone surely felt this way about some of their lands. George Lebreuilly added, as though he had heard Jacques:

²⁰⁴ GL-07/2020.

²⁰⁵ JR-07/2020.

They probably thought to themselves ‘we will never manage to meet in the townhall of Geffosses, George will come to piss us off every time. We’re going to the tribunal in Coutances’. ... First meeting in the tribunal of Coutances.



Guess who shows up at the meeting? Lebreuilly! [George is speaking about himself in the third person]. With one or two friends! There was the guy from the DDA who was there: Cornière. ‘What are you doing here?!’ He asked. I answered: ‘This is the meeting to share information. I am the chairman of the Defence Committee. I have documents to show you. And so, uh...’ ‘You get out of here or I will have you expelled

by the Prefect!’ ‘Do whatever you want. While we wait to be kicked out, we will sit down.’ We sat down and after an hour maybe, the cops who were downstairs took us out. And after that, they made all the meetings of the subcommittee – where they met to make perfectly grouped land lots for themselves and for their friends –... in the tribunal of Coutances. Guarded. We could not go back to protest. Oh but we had managed to piss them off though! And oh, we were happy when we frustrated them!²⁰⁶

Along with the animated dispute on whether the remembrement was a democratic or an authoritarian institution – accompanied as it was by perpetual counts of the supporters of both sides (surface versus inhabitants) –, the degree of ‘attachment to the lands’ thus joined the debate. In the years 1986-1988, the battlefield became about what a ‘true peasant’ was meant to be, to accept and to do in the modern world, and it would remain that way into the 1990s. Certainly, both sides acknowledged their vital dependence on the land. However, the anti-

²⁰⁶ GL-07/2020.

remembrement militants had adopted the subversive sabotage techniques and costumes of the historical insurgents.

Chapter 4: Fighting for ‘Nature’

The first victim

Between June 9 and 26 1987, the maps presenting the first draft of the remembrement plans were exposed in the townhall. When Mayor Victor Laisney invited all those concerned to participate in the consultation via a letter each one received in their mailbox, he reminded the Geffossais that ‘according to a prefectural decree, the felling of trees and hedges [was] strictly prohibited [from this moment on]’.²⁰⁷ This local ruling was informed by an economic and environmental lesson learnt during the prior thirty years of remembrement in the Hexagon. As soon as those concerned by land exchanges had been made aware of the plots they would have to leave behind, they had hastened to harvest all the wood from them, including ‘even the youngest saplings’.²⁰⁸ In a Game Theory logic, hedgerows that would otherwise not have been brought down to increase agricultural surfaces were razed to avert the loss of their timber and firewood. Farmers feared that the new parcel they had been allocated was not as well furnished or that its previous user had similarly decided to harvest all of its wood. Thus, the remembrement resulted in ‘bare embankments, incapable of protecting new lots from soil erosion; an overload of work for the farmers on the eve of land exchanges; the sterilization of the future economic value of potentially rich hedgerow timber; and farmyards littered with poor quality firewood’.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ Mayor Victor Laisney, Commune de Geffosses, Département de la Manche, ‘Consultation des intéressés,’ May 27, 1987, in private archives (Marc Villedieu).

²⁰⁸ Auge, ‘La Bourse aux Arbres dans la Manche’, (1999), p.33.

²⁰⁹ Idem.

This wood felling had had such aggressive consequences on the bocage soils and waterways that from 1975, despite the lobbying pressures of the agricultural union, the French government compulsorily introduced persons qualified for the protection of nature ('PQPN' volunteers) in Remembrement Commissions. In the case of Geffosses, Auguste Poincheval – the mayor of a neighbouring village – was appointed as a full and equal member. However, like other 'PQPN', he received little training and had no decision-making leverage in the Commission. His role was supported by the law on the protection of nature of July 10, 1976, which revealed a similar concern for environmental damage with none of the coercive power to avert it. In its article 2, the law made mandatory the inclusion of an 'environmental impact' section in the pre-remembrement impact assessment.²¹⁰ This section introduced the logic of 'ecological compensation works' as a type of 'remembrement-related works' (*travaux connexes au remembrement*) and held the state accountable for their costs on the same basis as all other productivity-oriented 'related works'. However, the law did not require the Remembrement Commission to follow any of the impact assessment's recommendations or to appraise the ecological losses at hand in order to demand compensation.

The conservation of tree also had an economic dimension. In Geffosses' case, it seemed that the Manche government, by locally prohibiting tree felling, had wanted to appraise the economic value of the département's landscape to avert the costly environmental catastrophes that had followed the destruction of the Breton bocage in the 1970s. Jean-François Legrand, the president of the Manche Départemental Council, had held a special meeting in the spring of 1987 when he promised landholders 'points in exchange' for 'leaving their trees alone'.²¹¹ Legrand's idea of exchanging points for trees was the harbinger of what would be called the 'tree market' (*la bourse aux arbres*), a point-based exchange system for trees that would be imposed for each remembrement in the Manche from 1996 onwards.²¹² However, it was too early for it to work in Geffosses. As the regional spokesman of the Green Party (*Les Verts-Confédération écologiste-Parti écologiste*), Didier Anger, lamented, no one had been appointed or was qualified to evaluate the trees and assign points to the farmers. There was no

²¹⁰ In Geffosses, this is illustrated by one page on the conservation of hedgerows in Vince and Doligez, 'Remembrement pre-study', (1983), p.41.

²¹¹ GL-07/2020.

²¹² Auge, 'La Bourse aux Arbres dans la Manche', (1999).

reference against which to measure the ‘value’ of a tree of the bocage, and the farmers had no incentive.²¹³

But the lack of environmental infrastructure did not matter to the Geffossais. For the inhabitants of the village, the myth that a fair tree exchange system could be overseen by the local government had already been debunked. A little over a week after he had sent the public announcement prohibiting tree felling (May 27, 1987), the mayor himself brought down the first tree in the village, in a felling related to the plans of remembrement, on June 6, 1987. That night, a municipal councillor and fellow resister to the remembrement came to see George Lebreuilly on his farm and exclaimed: ‘Mayor Victor Laisney! He cut down a big old oak tree on a small lot that he wants to get rid of!’ George Lebreuilly recalls his own reaction – ‘Oh, the bastard! Did he do that?!’ – and the events that ensued:

That night, I got together with two or three lads. One of them said ‘What if we brought it to the main square of Geffosses?’ He was a good guy, who was against the remembrement at first and who came out for it in the end. The father of the Boulang brothers.

All three or four of us got together and went down with a tractor to try to drag the tree trunk and bring it to the main square. But we did not have the right equipment: the tree trunk was at least four meters long. We could not move it! Trust me, if we had had a tractor like the ones they have today... we would have succeeded!

We came back to Daniel Moulin’s farm for a drink and Jean Boulang said, ‘What if we took only the head of the tree?’ The trunk had already been sawed off from the tree head, on which you could see all the ‘shoots’²¹⁴ from the repetitive pruning for firewood. So we went back there. It must have been midnight or one in the morning. We managed to load the top of the tree into

²¹³ *Ouest France*, February 13, 1989. It is only in 1992 that a ‘scale’ for valuing trees would be established in the Manche département. Even then, it would be based on the current market value of wood, crude and unscientific. An example of a table can be accessed in Auge, ‘La Bourse aux Arbres dans la Manche’, p.34.

²¹⁴ The type of pruning that George is referring to is *émondage*, a technique specific to the bocage landscapes of Normandie and Brittany and the shoots bear the particular name of *émondés*.

the tractor's trailer, and we took it to the main square of Geffosses, opposite the school.²¹⁵

Simone Lebreuilly took over the storyline, sharing George's enthusiasm: 'They did that on a Saturday night, and it was the Pentecost football tournament on the Sunday. So, there were *lots of people!*'²¹⁶ George continues: 'and I had put a sign on the tree that said [he declaims by heart]:

Dear Geffossaise, dear Geffossais,

Take a moment to reflect on my mortal remains and please observe a minute of reflection.

The first victim of the remembrance, I was just coldly cut down on order of my father and mayor to you all (he betrayed me). However, as your great poet George Brassens said so well: at my foot you once lived happily.²¹⁷

Though I am dead, my heart can live on for another thousand years if you take care of it. But if you, your heart is wounded by the remembrance, you could die.

I want to pay tribute to all those who had the courage to transfer me here. Their action I hope will save the lives of all my generation and many more.

Signed: the tree.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ GL-01/2020; GL-07/2020.

²¹⁶ SL-07/2020.

²¹⁷ This is a reference to the song by George Brassens, 'Au pied de mon arbre je vivais heureux', which speaks of the loss of the relationship between a man and his oak tree with all of its entwined uses. Song available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYB_zv2xYOc (accessed September 9, 2021).

²¹⁸ GL-07/2020.



Figure 15. A tree stump after the remembrement-related works, part of a collection taken by a Green Party activist and gifted to Simone Lebreuilly, April 1989 (Lebreuilly private archive).

Thus, on Sunday June 7, 1987, the ‘first victim of the remembrement’ was consecrated in Geffosses. George Lebreuilly continues: ‘Ah, sadly I don’t have photographs to show you! But many in the village started bringing flowers that day. They hadn’t been prompted... [it was] in commemoration! As though the tree was a person!’²¹⁹

What happened here

heralds the final transformation of the battleground on which the resisters fought against the remembrement. George turned the mayor’s logic of private property and accumulation into an exhibition of environmental insensitivity. This is striking because George Lebreuilly understood perfectly well why Mayor Victor Laisney chopped up his oak. The tree market system did not yet work, and the loss of the timber was frustratingly not accounted for in the system of remembrement. Yet, the arguments of the antis were shapeshifting to continue attracting the sympathies of local inhabitants and to reach the world beyond Geffosses.

Environmental claims became central to the anti-remembrement strategy in the last year of the land consolidation operations during the landscape planning works. Between 1987 and 1989, the fight had thus transitioned from a local (but well-mediatised) defence of the interests and sensitivities into an issue of party-political relevance. This led to the official visit to Geffosses of Antoine Waechter – the Green Party candidate in the presidential election (1988, 3.78%) and the Green Party leader for the European elections (1989, 10.8%). Notably, as I will aim to show, the mobilisation of the Green Party leader only confirmed the gap between the anti-remembrement protestors and the Greens’ view of ‘Nature’. This chapter traces this difference by retelling how the resisters blended environmental concerns with their existing resistance practice and placed them on the same moral continuum that had sought to present

²¹⁹ Idem.

patrimonial, cultural and constitutional losses as arguments against authoritarian modernisation.

The ‘remembrement-related works’



Figure 16. The machinery to bring down the hedgerows, April 1989 (Lebreuilly private archive).

While the exhibition of the tree indicated a change in the anti-remembrement strategy, the environmental battle itself only really began after the official remembrement plans were released. On November 22, 1988, 18 months after the felling of Mayor Lainsey’s oak, the map of new land allocation was put up in the townhall with the official announcement of remembrement: the new plans had been ratified by the département and decreed by the Prefect.²²⁰ On Monday

January 9, 1989, all farmers were to ‘enter into possession of their new plots of pastureland, grassland, and all crops except vegetable crops’.²²¹ This announcement was met with some farmers’ refusal to leave their plots behind, reseeding them as soon as they could to inhibit their exploitation by new users (see chapter 3). Collectively, the resisters also launched into a legal battle before the Administrative Court in Caen, filing an appeal against the prefectural decree itself, and requesting the suspension of the remembrement-related works. However, as their appeal did not apply during the lengthy ruling process, by the beginning of February 1989, the first machines appeared, and landscape planning work began on the hedges and the rivers of

²²⁰ Direction départementale de l’Agriculture et de la Forêt de la Manche, ‘Arrêté préfectoral ordonnant le dépôt en mairie du plan de remembrement et l’envoi en possession des nouvelles parcelles’, November 22, 1988, private archives (Marc Villedieu).

²²¹ Idem. The exception was made for vegetable crops, which would only be exchanged March 31, 1989, due to seeding cycles.

the village. Police patrols started crisscrossing the roads of the bocage at night to prevent damage to the construction machinery.²²²

The landscape planning works were called ‘remembrement-related works’ (*travaux connexes au remembrement*). They referred to the construction and demolition works made possible by the now-consolidated landholding and aimed at further facilitating the use of the local territory for modern farming. They included the demolition of hedges and the levelling of their respective embankments to increase the surface area of newly grouped land lots (a hundred kilometres of hedgerows planned to be torn in Geffosses);²²³ the construction and renovation of municipal roads to access isolated fields, farm buildings, and scattered dwellings; and importantly, in the case of a commune like Geffosses with a flat topography and often waterlogged, hydromorphic soils, the straightening and deepening of rivers and the digging of collective water channels at the entrance of all fields to help all farmers convert to drainage.²²⁴

On the pro-remembrement side, these works were experienced as an opportunity to renovate as much of the municipality’s infrastructure as possible, both agricultural and urban.²²⁵ Indeed, 62% of the works’ costs were subsidised by the state and the rest were paid in the form of a tax per hectare by all the local landholders. Furthermore, the state was made the prime contractor, which kept the municipality from taking on operational concerns. In the words of the national land surveyor charged with the remembrement impact assessment: ‘Never has arisen and never will arise such a favourable situation for the municipality outside of the remembrement!’²²⁶

For the protestors, however, the role of the state in financing the construction and training the engineers who oversaw it, played into their imaginary of fighting against an authoritarian measure, and added an environmental dimension to it. Indeed, the realisation that the rural engineers were paid more if more construction works were undertaken soon led to the belief that the engineers’ fees were directly established ‘according to the number of kilometres of hedgerows torn down’.²²⁷

²²² *La Manche Libre*, February 12, 1989

²²³ MV-07/2021.

²²⁴ Vince and Doligez, ‘Remembrement pre-study’, (1983).

²²⁵ JR-07/2020.

²²⁶ Vince and Doligez, ‘Remembrement pre-study’, (1983), p.51.

²²⁷ JM-07/2020 and AM-07/2020.

On Mardi Gras 1989 (February 8), while the machines were making their way through the Geffosses landscape and the resisters awaited the outcome of their court case, George Lebreuilly started a hunger strike. Performed as an ultimate gesture of non-violent protest, it sought to emphasise the antis' determination. It aimed to mark a turning point before the resisters 'responded with violence to the violence of the [state] administration to which they were subjected'.²²⁸

A coalition of little known local and national associations were now firmly gathered in the same fight against what they collectively called the 'authoritarian remembrement'. Activists hailing from the Green Party and their regional representative in Normandy Didier Anger, the Bocage Federation (Fédération Bocagère), the ADUA (Association of Defense of the Users of the Administration) and the FNCEDA (Committee for the study and defense of agriculture) were on the Geffosses main square to support Lebreuilly in his strike.

Apart from the tame words of the Green Party, the speeches one-upped each other in intensity, comparing the remembrement – naming it 'SRO,' *Service de Remembrement Obligatoire*, to the forced labour service imposed under Vichy – 'STO' *Service de Travail Obligatoire* – and decrying the law's Petainist origins. Others declared that 'morality no longer counted' and that the 'thugs [on bulldozers] should be demolished'.²²⁹ Issues related to the loss of the moral economy were entangled with the loss of biodiversity as the yellow posters of the ADUA, placarded in the village testified: 'protecting the environment by hunting down crooks' (see Figure 17).²³⁰ The organisations' respective stakes melded into a general reason to start opposing the bulldozers physically.

²²⁸ Speech by Jean-Claude Delarue, president of the ADUA, in *Presse de la Manche*, February 13, 1989.

²²⁹ Speech by Claude Travers, president of the *Federation Bocagère*, in *Presse de la Manche*, February 13, 1989.

²³⁰ Original: '*La défense de l'environnement passe par la chasse aux ripoux.*'



Figure 17. Jean-Claude Delarue, President of the ADUA, alongside posterboard at George Lebreuilly's hunger strike rally, February 8, 1989 (Lebreuilly private archive).



Figure 18. Banner with names of anti-remembrement organisations at George Lebreuilly's hunger strike rally, February 8, 1989 (Lebreuilly private archive).

While the intensity of the hunger strike was portrayed as decisive for the fate of the remembrement in the local press, George Lebreuilly had forgotten to mention it in our interviews. Simone nonchalantly once recalled when I pointed to a press clipping: ‘oh yeah, he did do that’.²³¹ Their forgetfulness perhaps illustrate how, in the moment, the hunger strike had flopped in its attempt to halt the construction works.²³² However, it marked the beginning of Georges’ recurring appearances in the press as ‘The Peasant’ of Geffosses, formalizing his role

²³¹ It had mobilized the local press daily from February 8 to 19, 1989.

²³² As Yvette Guillou, who had fought against the remembrement with her family in Brittany in the 1970s, testified in her memoirs *Aux temps des seigneurs*, (Quimper: Nature et Bretagne, 1983): the hunger strike, aimed at being a powerful non-violent disruption of the structures in place, was not a resistance gesture familiar to the French peasant milieu and proved to be an ineffective protest strategy.

as the anti-remembrement spokesperson and concurring with the planning for his campaign to become mayor of Geffosses.²³³ He was growing accustomed to spinning his metaphor on the lost trees in reference to the George Brassens song and repetitively referred to ‘the tree’ as the ‘first victim of the remembrement’.²³⁴

Taking to the fields

Six weeks later, George’s ‘anti-remembrement’ group of candidates received 43% of votes in the municipal elections. The newly constituted municipal council, with its polarized mix of a small majority of antis, as well as equal amounts of pros and ‘remembrement-agnostic’ (socialist) councillors, worried the Remembrement Commission. ‘Two-fifths of the hydraulic works remained to be completed.’²³⁵ If the new municipal council named George Lebreuilly as mayor, the landscaping works would likely be stopped. The election of the mayor by the council took four days rather than two. For the pros, this was due to the indecisiveness of the new municipal council. For the antis, the Remembrement Commission was actively slowing down the process to do as much work as possible before Lebreuilly was elected.

After the first round of elections, as soon as [the pros] sensed that George was going to be elected, the heavy-duty machinery sped up the work. Normally, the first round of elections is on the Sunday and the second round is on the Tuesday or the Wednesday, but in this case, [the municipal council] moved the second round to the Friday to have time to do their business.²³⁶

²³³ *La Manche Libre*, February 12, 1989.

²³⁴ *Ouest France*, February 8, 1989.

²³⁵ ‘A Geffosses, les pro-remembrement manifestent’, *Presse de la Manche*, March 30, 1989.

²³⁶ SL-07/2020.

During that week, outside of the townhall, between 120 and 150 *gendarmes mobiles* (riot police) were deployed to accompany the backhoe loaders and bulldozers in their headway. George was named into office on the Friday, two days after most other mayors in France.²³⁷



Figure 19. A protestor lies down before a bulldozer under the gaze of the *gendarmes mobiles*, March 30, 1989 (Lebreuilly private archive).



Figure 20. The brigade of *gendarmes mobiles* and the backhoe loaders, April 1989 (Lebreuilly private archive).

On the day of his election, the first clashes occurred at the river-path of *Hotel Aux Lièvres*. Galvanized by the election of the anti-remembrement mayor, a group of protestors stood fearless before the bulldozers and the brigade of riot police. The clashes were brief and several men and women who laid down in front of the machines were taken out before the works could begin. Simone recalled:

That day... They broke... a nice path. We had an ancient path. The river was running all along it and all that. Sometimes, the path even became a river. Well, you know, it's true that with the tractors, it wasn't easy at all to go there in the winter... Now it's an avenue I

would say. [Silence] That day, they concreted it alright, they made big pits on either side. We don't recognize the path. We don't recognize the path at all anymore. [Silence] So when George saw it, the river path after the bulldozer, ah... he said: 'There's gonna be something, I don't know what. But there will be

²³⁷ He was elected with six voices out of eleven. This was the outcome of an agreement between the 'anti-remembrement' group and the socialist group in the council. See follow-up interview GL-07/2021. See also: 'Election du maire à Geffosses : La poudrière', Presse de la Manche, March 30, 1989.

something! We will erect something so as not to forget, so as to keep the memory of time.’ And that’s when we decided to make a monument.²³⁸

The river ran through a rocky sunken lane. ‘With its small but beautiful waterfall in the corner, the only of its kind in Geffosses’, it had a particularly scenic character for the protestors (Figure 22).²³⁹ Although they knew that it was too narrow to allow contemporary agricultural machinery to pass, the razing of its hedgerows, the levelling of its embankments, and the replacement of the river with a concrete road and water channels seemed senseless. It was the first – and often the only – environmental grievances mentioned by my interviewees. In the following years, photographs of the river prior to its destruction (Figure 21) circulated among the resisters, and an enlarged version was framed above the fireplace in the Moulin farmhouse.²⁴⁰ For Simone Lebreuilly, the destruction of the river-path marked the moment when she ‘had been sure of it, Geffosses would never be the same’. For George, it had made the construction of a memorial necessary.

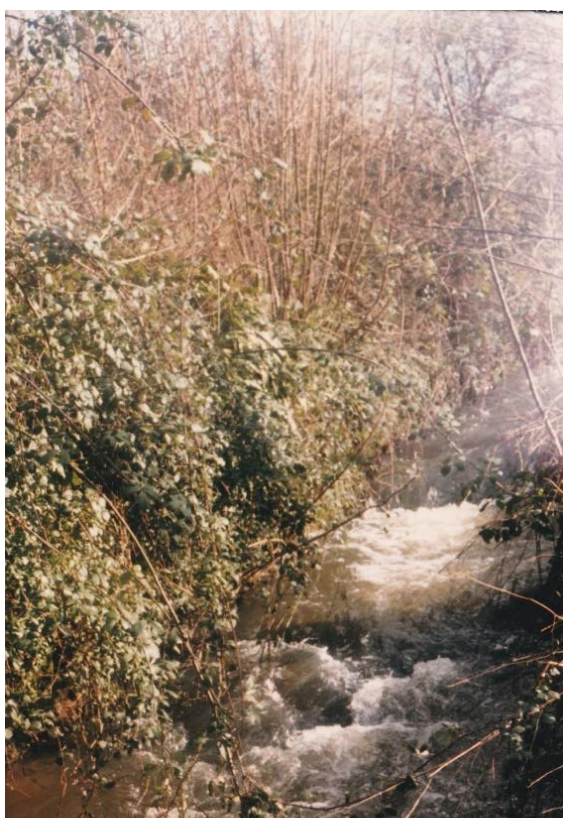


Figure 22. The waterfall of the river-path before the remembrement, undated, (Lebreuilly private archive).



Figure 21. The river-path before the remembrement, undated. This one was framed above the fireplace at the Moulin farmhouse. (Moulin private archive).

²³⁸ SL-01/2020.

²³⁹ Jacqueline Moulin (JM-07/2020).

²⁴⁰ Every self-declared ‘anti-remembrement’ household I visited had a photo of the river-path somewhere at home.



Figure 23. The river-path after the remembrement, April 1989 (Lebreuilly private archives).

There was a brief respite after the election of Lebreuilly. Confusion reigned over whether he could formally stop the works and reverse any of the remembrement operations. It remains unclear until today whether George had that power as mayor but in early April 1989, the remembrement-related works began once again.²⁴¹ By then, some resisters had come to terms with their fear of the police and a small group of bold Geffossais and Geffossaises started taking turns getting in the way of the heavy-duty machinery. The presence of gendarmes to enforce the remembrement had been mediatised and they were joined by about fifteen activists of the Green Party from further afield. Together, they gave their collective revolt its most explicit ‘environmental’ connotation to date. In an interview with *Ouest France* in front of a hedgerow, one activist compared them to Raoni Metuktire, the Chief of the indigenous Kayapo people in northern Brazil who had come to France to denounce the destruction of the Amazon Forest: ‘Except that the forest is replaced by the bocage’.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Lavalley, ‘Les gendarmes mobiles sont de retour’, *La Presse de la Manche*, April 14, 1989; Clerc, ‘Pot de terre contre pot de fer dans la Manche’, *L’événement du jeudi*, April 26, 1989; GL-07/2020.

²⁴² ‘Remembrement à Geffosses : Les Verts s’affirment aux côtés des opposants’, *La Presse de la Manche*, April 18, 1989; ‘Remembrement: Les écologistes s’en mêlent...’, *Manche Libre*, April 23, 1989.

Their presence in the fields during the second phase of remembrement-related works while George Lebreuilly was in office ‘changed the atmosphere in the village for six months,’ Nicole Renouf recalls in conversation with her husband Jacques.²⁴³

Jacques: The opponents were preventing us from accessing their plots. If we had been allocated a plot that had initially belonged to them, the opponents did not want us to go in. So, we did everything with the gendarmes, the gendarmes mobile and all that: the army. Ah, what a strange time.

Nicole: Yes, yes, it felt like in a time of war. [...] There is a moment which particularly struck us. It happened over there, above, in the fields... [The opponents] would lie down in the caterpillar tracks of the excavators so that when the workers arrived in the morning, they could not start. The gendarmes had to come to pull them out. It was in the field up there, in Courty... back when it was called Courty. Because, you know, now it is called Quatre Chemins because it was grouped together with others plots like Hotel Ganne, Le Tédian and...

Jacques: Do you remember when we took Hotel Doyen?

Nicole: Oh, yes... I was not in good shape that morning, but I thought to myself, ‘Hey, I am going to go check out the construction works’. There were the soldiers who were there with machine guns. I swear it made an impression on me. They said, ‘what are you doing here madam?’ ‘Well, I am on my land, I am coming to see the works’. It was strange... Seeing the soldiers with the weapons on our land! That hit me. Fortunately, I was alone, there were no children. [...] And they were there to help us do the works... I mean, so that the construction companies could do the works. Because otherwise, everyone came either to pump the fuel or to lie down in front of the bulldozers. Pffff... it was an ordeal.

²⁴³ NJR-07/2020.

Real ‘Green’ support?



Figure 24. ‘Remembrement-related works’ on a hedgerow, part of a collection taken by a Green Party activist and gifted to Simone Lebreuilly, April 1989 (Lebreuilly private archive).

Against the riot police, the small group could do nothing but slow down the works.²⁴⁴ Helpless before the progression of the bulldozers, a handful of Green Party activists appealed to Antoine Waechter to express his support in Geffosses during his campaign tour for the European elections. They hoped that his presence would be a media sensation and that the leader of *Les Verts* would weigh in on the public opinion to put an end to the destruction of the hedgerows. For the recent presidential candidate (1988) and party leader, going to Geffosses meant taking an important political risk: no party had ever taken an explicit stance against (or for) the remembrement and all agricultural unions, including the *Confédération Paysanne* who claimed to represent those who

identified as *paysan*, were explicitly in favour of it. Furthermore, Geffosses had gained an infamous anti-remembrement aura and shortly after the rumour of Waechter’s visit spread, the president of the FNSEA himself attempted to dissuade the leader of *Les Verts* from going to the fraught commune.²⁴⁵

Waechter nonetheless arrived in Geffosses on May 25, 1989, leading to a confused uproar in the village. A crowd of 200 pro-remembrement farmers representing the FNSEA union assaulted him upon arrival.²⁴⁶ Meanwhile, George Lebreuilly, eager to greet him under the proud title of anti-remembrement mayor, had been ‘sequestered in his home by the cars of

²⁴⁴ Clerc, ‘Quand les gardes mobiles imposent le remembrement’, April 26, 1989.

²⁴⁵ J. Lavalley, ‘Mais qu’est-il venu faire dans cette galère ? Antoine Waechter hier à Geffosses’, *Presse de la Manche*, May 26, 1989.

²⁴⁶ Lavalley, ‘Mais qu’est-il venu faire dans cette galère ?’, May 26, 1989.

his opponents'.²⁴⁷ The regional press was puzzled: what had a national politician come to do in this 'mess', in 'these trenches of the remembrement'?²⁴⁸ In reality, Waechter was interested in hearing both sides of the conflict and weighing the pros and cons of the remembrement. For him, no one had successfully embodied the role of 'mediator' for Geffosses, and he attempted to lay claim to it, holding a hearing in the townhall for all stakeholders to speak their truth. As such, the viewpoints of the departmental branches of the FNSEA, CNJA, and *Confédération Paysanne* were exposed before him, followed by the group of opponents to the remembrement.²⁴⁹

Antoine Waechter's concluding address betrayed the unexpected distance between the party's 'environmental' stance and the one taken by the anti-remembrement protestors, borne out of their local demands and engagement with Green activists in the fields. Waechter celebrated what he saw as 'an obvious and possible reconciliation' between the different points of view he had heard. There was a possible marriage between 'the necessity to question a certain type of agriculture' on the one hand and 'the desire to create a true solidarity with farmers' on the other.²⁵⁰ Waechter was far from the notions of morality, rights and patrimony that had been constantly mobilized by the protestors. Unknowingly, while the dissenters 'grieved the loss of specific plots of land, hedgerows, places and paths', he implied that Nature was at least as economic and technical a matter as it was personal.²⁵¹ In these final moments of the remembrement of Geffosses, the Green leader expressed grief at 'these disagreements which are felt in the breaks in the landscape', and advocated for 'their resolution' through an impossible 'democratic consensus' that had long been broken into two immovable enemy camps in the commune.²⁵² The political environmental conservation suddenly seemed very far from the local 'attachment to the land'. It was as though Waechter concurred with Hegel: lands were no more inalienable than 'things'. They needed to be moved around and adjusted to suit current social, environmental and economic needs, and that could include the protection of nature.

²⁴⁷ GL-07/2020.

²⁴⁸ Lavalley, 'Mais qu'est-il venu faire dans cette galère?', May 26, 1989. Jocelyn Rat, 'Hier à Geffosses: Antoine Waechter dans les tranchées du remembrement', *Ouest France*, May 26, 1989.

²⁴⁹ Lavalley, 'Mais qu'est-il venu faire dans cette galère?', May 26, 1989.

²⁵⁰ Rat, 'Hier à Geffosses', May 26, 1989.

²⁵¹ GL-07/2020.

²⁵² Lavalley, 'Mais qu'est-il venu faire dans cette galère?', May 26, 1989.

Conclusion

*Quand les corbeaux voleront blanc
Et la neige tombera noir
Les souvenirs du remembrement
S'effaceront de ma mémoire.*

When the crows fly white
And the snow falls black
Memories of the remembrement
Will fade from my memory.

– George Lebreuilly²⁵³

It was erected twenty-seven years ago, on July 27, 1994, and to the great surprise of



Figure 25. George and Simon (couple to the left) in front of the Monument on the day of the inauguration, July 27, 1994 (Lebreuilly private archives).

those who conceived it, the National Monument to Nature and Men Victims of the Remembrement still stands today, unharmed:

Not a graffiti. Not a bit of damage. The pros did not even try to bring it down! [...] Maybe the conflict over the remembrement had already gone too far by the time we erected it.

²⁵³ George Lebreuilly, 'Quand les corbeaux voleront blanc' poem, undated, probably early 1990s (private archives).

[...] I think it was also because the remembrement was already complete anyway. Us antis, we knew we had lost.²⁵⁴

It has been one year and a half since I started pursuing my research in Geffosses and Antoine Moulin now feels confident enough to confide: ‘we scattered mum’s ashes there’. He points to the hedgerow behind the monument:

In 1994, some pro-remembrement unionists came to the inauguration of the monument. They were a group of young local farmers from the CNJA (*Centre National des Jeunes Agriculteurs*, the Young Farmers’ National Union) who wanted to make a joke out of the ceremony. They had brought a wreath. Mum took the garland, threw it on the floor, and trampled it herself. She made sure they knew they were in the wrong place, and they left. [Silence]. When she died, we scattered her ashes in the same spot.²⁵⁵

The remembrement had left behind a divided Geffosses with a ‘National Monument’.²⁵⁶ In 1989, the sacristan exposed his chagrin to the press:

The town is cut in two. [...] On Sunday, the church bell ringing the hour of mass fails to bring all the parishioners together [...] people no longer bump into each other. They no longer look at each other, they no longer speak to each other. Worse, they don’t go to the cafe after the service anymore.²⁵⁷

Today, the quarrels are as lasting as they are woven into the landholding structure and embodied by a landscape whose transformation is outliving the original protestors. The café has closed. When hunting season comes around, the inhabitants of Geffosses divide into two groups with distinct hunting territories: those who were for the remembrement can hunt on the lands of those who welcomed the reform and vice versa. ‘To hunt in Geffosses, you better know the landholding patterns like the back of your hand. You cannot set foot on a farmer’s land from the opposite side.’²⁵⁸ One retired farmer suggested to me that he refuses to lease one of his plots to a young farmer who needs it for the survival of his farm because he is the son of an ‘anti’.

²⁵⁴ Antoine Moulin, AM-07/2021.

²⁵⁵ AM-07/2021.

²⁵⁶ The monument was erected by George Lebreuilly as mayor on July 27, 1994

²⁵⁷ Clerc, ‘Quand les gardes mobiles imposent le remembrement’, April 26, 1989.

²⁵⁸ MV-07/2020.

In this context, interrogating both sides often felt fraught. The dividing lines were sometimes unclear, charged with interpersonal rivalry and tied to greater political or symbolic power struggles. Yet straddling both sides revealed worlds views that conflicted in the management of local landholding patterns and landscapes. The stories uncovered divergent beliefs on how local agriculture should survive the global market competition of the 1980s; on how important kinship should be in land management; on how attached one should be to their land and who were the ‘true peasants’; and on how one should care about nature.

In the thirty years since the remembrement of Geffosses, these conflicting views and the accompanying definitions of what ‘winning’ and ‘losing’ the battle of modernisation might have meant have proven fragile. They have been blurred by the successful adoption of the regrouped lands by next generation of farmers. Like Gérard Godefroy, most of the ‘antis’ who continued on in agriculture do not dwell in fantasies of a past in which the resistance would have succeeded in stopping the progression of the bulldozers:

I don't know if it's useful to talk about the remembrement as the cause of all the change in our lives. All I can say is that I see Pirou, the village next door, where there was no land consolidation. When we compare the two municipalities, the other has practically lost all its agriculture. [...] While in Geffosses, there are still ten, eleven farms that hold up. And good farms, eh! It could be that it was the remembrement that allowed that. It could be. It's not all bad, eh. They made water channels; they did land remediation. [...] Well... drainage, today, it's not needed: it does not rain anymore. It rains in winter but because of the water channels, perhaps the water leaves the soil too quickly.²⁵⁹

Moreover, the dividing lines between victors and victims have been trampled by the mainstreaming of environmental awareness. A decade after the remembrement was completed in Geffosses, an agronomic review celebrated:

In the bocage, the quality of a remembrement is now judged not only in terms of the increase in the surface area of the land, but also in the proportion of hedges [...] preserved.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁹ GG-07/2020.

²⁶⁰ Auge, ‘La Bourse aux Arbres dans la Manche’, (1999), p.33.

This environmental awareness gave the antis a belated feeling of victory and a new meaning to their monument that had named ‘Nature’ a victim. In response, the pros made sure that I knew that they had been ‘moderate in the hedgerow tearing’ and that they were already a part of the new ‘transparent, equitable, concerted and efficient’ way of pursuing remembrements in the Manche that sought not to reproduce the mistakes of their predecessors in Brittany.²⁶¹

If it does not succeed in answering the question of victimhood, but rather poses it indefinitely, it is worth wondering what benefits our shifted lens, focused on contestations on such a local, personal scale, might provide. Now with nearly fifty years of hindsight since the end *Trente Glorieuses*, the revisionist movement in French environmental history has reopened the ‘cost-benefit’ analyses of the last century, in order to re-examine the triumphalist consensus of ‘modernisation’ in depth. It has succeeded in questioning the ‘progressive’ nature of the modernisation of agriculture. Modernisation has not only led to the disappearance of the peasant cultures and beliefs. It has made way for the opening to the international market and its laws, for the massive arrival of chemicals in the countryside causing significant pollution, and for the disappearance of the small peasantry in favour of a new managerial and entrepreneurial way of conceiving agriculture.²⁶² This historiographical movement has also shed light on how the essentialization of the period between 1945 and 1980 as that of technical progress might have participated in making opposition movements invisible or illegitimate, and continues to incite historians to rescue contestations like those of Geffosses from the historical memory.²⁶³

However, the story of Geffosses brings to the fore emotional and cultural experiences of agricultural modernisation that at first do not seem to weigh heavily in a rational evaluation of modernity. Perhaps they speak of another kind of grief that has not yet been integrated into the national narrative. This may be an important question to ask at a time when environmental ethics are calling upon individuals and communities to recognise in thought and in practice

²⁶¹ Marc Villedieu (MV-07/2020) citing supporting evidence in *La Manche Libre*, 20 November 1986.

²⁶² Boudia and Jas, ‘Gouverner un monde contaminé’ (2019); Campagne, Humbert and Bonneuil, ‘1962, Le nouvel ordre agricole mondial’, (2017); Müller, *Le technocrate et le paysan*, (2014); Salmona, *Souffrances et Résistances des Paysans Français*, (1994).

²⁶³ Céline Pessis, Sezin Topçu and Christophe Bonneuil (eds.), *Une autre histoire des « Trente Glorieuses »*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2013).

their dependence and imprint on local and global ecosystems. Today, the relationships between humans, their land and all of its non-human inhabitants that make human life on earth possible are materially and scientifically undeniable. Historically, indigenous and local cultures have developed ways of acknowledging these bonds and acting upon this knowledge in a logic of mutual self-preservation. With economic and technological growth, capitalism in Europe (and elsewhere in a place often called the ‘West’ or the ‘Global North’) has increasingly abstracted the human-ecosystem interdependence and subsumed it under an emancipatory veneer of humans rationally controlling and producing their ‘external’ living conditions (hence the word ‘environment’).²⁶⁴

It is now common to read anthropological and philosophical theses that imply a chronology for the ‘disentanglement’ of the bonds between capitalist humans, their land and its non-human inhabitants. Agriculture, whether in its very discovery or in its fossil-fuelled modernisation, tends to be pointed to as a foundational moment.²⁶⁵ Such statements echo some of the 1950s technocritical fears related to the disappearance of ‘the tiller of the soil’ as ‘the link, a bond of union between man and the vitality of nature’.²⁶⁶ However, the same words appear uncritically in argumentative texts inciting their readers to ‘re-entangle’, to ‘reconnect’ with ‘the natural world’ as their world-saving, ecological duty. These latter injunctions originate in anthropological studies of indigenous peoples with strong and sustainable bonds with the natural world. Yet, it is difficult to ‘learn’ from this cultural knowledge while decolonising our imaginaries and debunking the idealisation of an exotic, remote and stable ‘other’. The impulse to ‘reconnect with the land’ also tends to encourage the marginalisation if not the vilification of conventional input-using farmers, a phenomenon known as agri-bashing in France. I wonder how much these fixed characterisations are born of a de-historicisation of the experiences of farmers in Europe.

Indeed, I believe that the challenge of creating local cultures that reaffirm and formalize the entanglement of humans within the living mesh of their ecosystem is an inherently historical endeavour. It implies facing that the relationship to the natural world has been

²⁶⁴ Maxime Prével, ‘Le productivisme agricole socioanthropologie de l’industrialisation des campagnes françaises’, *Études rurales* no. 181, (January-June, 2008).

²⁶⁵ Kyle Keeler, ‘Before Colonization (BC) and after Decolonization (AD): The Early Anthropocene, the Biblical Fall, and Relational Pasts, Presents, and Futures’, *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, (August 2021); Sarah Vanuxem, Guy Kastler and Aliénor Bertrand, ‘Des savoirs paysans, entretien avec Guy Kastler’, in *Cahiers Philosophiques* no.152, (2018); Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, (2004).

²⁶⁶ Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2013 [1948]).

‘transformed’ in the West, and that this historical process is much more complex than the ‘loss’ of peasant tradition or cross-continental anthropological travel. I particularly challenge the narrative of ‘loss’ to invite interdisciplinary collaborations. In the stories of the remembrance of Geffosses, the protestors often expressed their grievance as the ‘loss’ or ‘death’ of bonds within the community and with the land. However, a new relationship with the landholding patterns was not ‘gained’. It was already formed and coexisted with the other mode of relating to the land. The clashes between these visions of the world as they interpenetrated and clashed were particularly visible because of the remembrance. To reconcile this dualist opposition of relationships ‘lost’ and ‘gained’, Science and Technology Studies scholars argue that relationships are never lost; that they may only be stretched, mediated, transformed.²⁶⁷ Bill Cronon adapted this statement for the environmental historian: we are always *of* the Earth. ‘There cannot be people outside of nature; there can only be people *thinking* they are outside of nature.’²⁶⁸ Just as absence of thinking is a thought in itself, so too is absence of bond a historically situated, distended bond.

Thus, this conclusion hopes to be opening up questions and conversations: How did the distension of the bond occur between the modern European farmer, their land and its non-human inhabitants? What is the role of history and historians in tracing this development? What important events constitute this transformation? What different shapes have these bonds with the natural world taken in different localities? What does it entail to historicise this shape: in terms of historical accountability? In terms of reckoning or reconciliation with history in the present? The impossibility of the future inheres in the present. If we carried a different view of our local past into our present, I wonder if it would equip us with the imagination and trust that a place-based and historically sensitive cultural regeneration is possible.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Bruno Latour, ‘Ein Ding ist ein Thing - a (Philosophical) Platform for a Left (European) Party’, in *Concepts and Transformation* vol. 3, no. 1/2, edited by Benjamin (Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 1998).

²⁶⁸ William Cronon, ‘The Uses of Environmental History’, *Environmental History Review* vol.17, no.3 (1993), p.19.

²⁶⁹ ‘If people can imbue old practices with new meanings, communities should be able to decide which traditions to remember (e.g. agroecology, seasonal diets, hempcrete buildings) and which ones to forget (e.g. sacrifices, patriarchal division of labour, and lynching). This is not a travel *to* but *through* the past – becoming aware of many possible modes of existence as to educate our desire for a wider palette of desirable futures.’
Timothée Parrique, ‘A response to Yanis Varoufakis: Star Trek and Degrowth’, Blog, January 3, 2021, <https://timotheeparrique.com/a-response-to-varoufakis-start-trek-and-degrowth/>.

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- JMO-07/2020: Jean-Marie Ourselin, July 2020 interview.
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