

“René Riesel: Right in his Boots”

By Philippe Nassif¹

When we had him re-read his portrait, René Riesel reformulated and specified his remarks, which appear within quotations marks, as is the custom, but he rewrote the entirety of the portrait, as well. We have agreed to adopt the modifications of his own remarks, as well those that concern purely factual elements, but not those concerning the rest of the article, which derives from our journalistic work.² René Riesel has asked us to make it clear that he hasn't responded to this article; and so we have.

He has been an Enragé in May 1968, a situationist, and a saboteur of GMO crops. And this farmer and authentic libertarian hasn't disarmed – far from it! Who are his adversaries? The (post) industrial society and capitalism, of course, but also the State. An encounter with a free radical who shows that one can raise sheep *and* advocate emancipation.

It is a common error concerning what one calls the “1968 generation” that it has betrayed its youthful commitments, enriched the spirit of a capitalism with a *sexy*³ lyricism, and stormed positions of power the day after the election of François Mitterrand.⁴ No doubt this is true if one keeps to the official version of history: [for example] the one found in Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman's voluminous *Génération* (Seuil, two volumes, 1987-1988), which has long been an authority on the subject, but which, as has often been pointed out, was written in the middle of the 1980s from the point of view of the “victors” (Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Serge July, and Bernard Kouchner). The proof? René Riesel's name is only mentioned once, in passing.

That's a shame, because, along with several other authentic libertarians, he was one of the principle initiators of May 1968. It was indeed Riesel who, at the head of the Committee of the Enragés, conducted an administrative tour of the University of Nanterre on 22 March 1968 (Cohn-Bendit, outflanked, had been obliged to follow), and it was the Enragés who wrote the first famous half-surrealist, half-situationist graffiti that called for upheaval: “The unions are warehouses, the UNEF⁵ is a whore”; “Never work” and “Take your desires for reality.”

Become a sheep farmer on the Causse Méjean, he reemerged in 1998, his radicalism intact, among the coordinators of the “sabotage” (his word) of the genetically modified organisms (GMO) that ended up in national awareness of the dangers of transgenic dreams.

And so, to meet the ex-fellow traveler of the situationist pope, Guy Debord, is to open a different history of May 1968, its origins and effects: profoundly anarchist, not recuperable, still relevant.

¹ First published in *Philosophie Magazine*, #88, 13 April 2015. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! on 17 April 2015. All footnotes by the translator.

² And very lazy “journalistic work” it is, too: this article relies very heavily on the information provided by the piece that Hervé Kempf wrote about Riesel in the 3 December 2003 edition of *Le Monde*.

³ English in original.

⁴ 10 May 1981.

⁵ Union nationale des étudiants de France (National Union of Students in France).

It is to throw better light on the “creation of situations” that, today, is [visible] in the “defense zones”⁶ (ZAD) at Notre-Dames-des-Landes, Sivens, or Roybon, unexpected theatres of experimentation into a libertarian return to the land. It is to take the measure of an “anti-industrial” thinking that resists capitalism and the interventions of the State, that is nourished by Hegel, Marx and Orwell, and that at first presents itself as a philosophy of going into action: it only emerges in “direct action,” which, obviously, is peaceful.⁷

But to meet René Riesel on a winter’s Sunday in Paris, where he came to deliver his shipments of lamb’s meat to various individuals, was also to discover an astonishing trajectory. Which began with the Algerian War.

Born in Algiers in 1950, Riesel’s childhood was primarily marked by falling bombs and killings. His father, a watchmaker and former Communist militant, saw several of his Arab friends killed by the Organisation de l’armée secrète (OAS).

“It was nothing for a kid to step over the body of the vegetable seller, to figure out the state of the siege, the deeds of the French Army or the Delta commandos.”

He developed a “disgust mixed with fascination” for violence. And he loves to recall the “bluster of the putschist generals who, fleeing like rabbits, proclaimed ‘No, I regret nothing.’ It was quite farcical.”

The first lesson of political philosophy: the intrinsically violent nature of the State’s apparatuses and the hidden fragility of established power.

Upon his arrival in Paris in 1962, he was enchanted.

“I took long walks in Saint-Cloud, where we lived, as far as Barbès, the souk-like atmosphere of which I loved and that excluded the Algiers of the ‘Europeans.’”

Riesel fell in love with the surrealist saga and drew from it the Sadean certitude that “liberty is the crime that contains all the others.”

“I love to read the new genealogists who slave away, denouncing Sade as the uncle of Adam Smith, as an inventor of ‘liberal brutality’! Moral rearmament and the hatred of liberty have made a triumphant return.”

He read avidly and, at the age of 14, founded an anarchist group named Sisyphus in homage to Camus’ *Myth* and discovered the London counter-cultural *underground*.⁸ The artistic inspiration of the Provos in Amsterdam and the French situationists, whom he met, fascinated him. Having obtained his baccalaureate, which he received as an independent candidate, he enrolled in philosophy at Nanterre, the young university of “modernist” ambitions that was, at the time, a muddy construction site surrounded by slums.

The agitation there was intense.

“In January 1968, I wrote to the SI [Situationist International] that, ‘this time, things can go further.’”

He would later make good use of radical provocations in the ‘thug’ style. On 6 May, when he and seven Leftist leaders were summoned by the disciplinary council of the Sorbonne due to the events in Nanterre, the Latin Quarter had already been demonstrating, dancing and rebelling for three days.

But the positions of the Enragés were soon judged to be too radical. Riesel was elected to the Sorbonne Occupation Committee, but, three days later, the auditorium turned against him –

⁶ *zones à défendre*.

⁷ False. The celebrated action with Bové and others in 1998 involved smashing up a McDonalds.

⁸ English in original.

“they thought we were only kids!” No matter, for the May Revolution was there, a graceful instant that lasted and spread for a whole month and in which multiple loves, incandescent occupations and awakened dreams flourished. In June, Riesel was dubbed [a situationist] by an admiring Debord.⁹

The “situ” years would be more difficult.

“Debord’s enthusasim was rapid but fleeting. And no doubt he was too prejudiced towards me. You can’t expect a kid of 17 years to have read and understood *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.”

Thus Riesel enjoyed both the best (the charm and intellectual virtuosity) and the worst (the paranoia) of the theoretician of *La société du spectacle*. Riesel was finally excluded [from the SI] in autumn 1971 due to murky love affairs and stolen money.

“It’s true, I made off with a part of ‘The International’s Gold,’¹⁰ but no one asked me where I got the money for food and drinks.”

“The SI functioned in a sectarian way, but this devastated me, nevertheless: disalienation is painful, and I didn’t sober up for almost two years.”

His new girlfriend, Françoise, with whom he would live for 14 years, helped him back on his feet and, when les Halles was destroyed, the two decided in 1973 to exile themselves to a withdrawn corner of the Western Pyrenees.

“I saw myself as Athos,¹¹ retiring to go cultivate roses.” The couple lived near a ruined medieval hamlet that was surrounded by underbrush, and he lived by his wits, seasonal work and masonry.

“We had four chickens, some corn, books – a peaceful life.”

When a shepherd died, they decided to take on his work and push back against the scrubland.

“I’m not a painter or a designer, but at least I have learned the infinite pleasure of redesign the countryside.”

A war broke out with the “natives,” who refused the *forasters* (“foreigners” in Catalan) use of the communal roads.

“I heard whistling lead.”

A good occasion to make it clear that “there’s nothing to regret in the passage of the last survivors of ‘peasant civilization.’ To define oneself as ‘anti-industrial’ doesn’t mean one is a partisan of the *Ancien Régime*. But keep the best of the past.”

The war had become tiresome and the couple left the Pyrenees in 1993 for the splendid steppes of the Causse Méjean, in Lozère. One must imagine René Riesel refining his understanding of the dialectic in contact with nature.

“The tripod shepherd/dogs/herd, especially if you let the sheep live in a quasi-wild state, is an edifying refinement. According to the time of day, the weather, the hills and the grass, the equilibriums are unstable, furtive. These are trivialities, but they are finer than sophistries about complexity. There’s been eleven thousand years of this, without the help of a single algorithm!” he confirms, smiling.

⁹ Not only Riesel, but several other Enragés, including Christian Sebastiani.

¹⁰ Cf. “Touched by enemy hands, the gold of the International turns to coal,” published in *Internazionale Situazionista: Journal of the Italian Section of the Situationist International*, #1 July 1969. <http://www.notbored.org/touched.html>.

¹¹ Cf. Alexandre Dumas, *The Three Musketeers*.

Deeper still, his is an anarchist naturalism that is a priori in conflict with a political Left that hastens to classify any return to the land on the side of the Extreme Right.

“I leave such categories to the priests of the ‘meaning of History.’ As we see today in the ZADs, what’s important is appropriating the essential, reducing statist and commercial mediations *a minima*¹² – in other words, to experience real human relations.” That means that work relations are also friendly relations. In brief, Riesel experiences a return to the etymological roots of the word “emancipation”: “to take” one’s life “in one’s hand.”

And there’s the thing not to miss: the anti-industrial current to which he belongs doesn’t only target financial capitalism and the commodification of existence. According to Riesel, the enemy is also “citizenism.”

While the quasi-totality of the Left of the Left – ecological politics, activism in favor of decreases, “peasant” unionism – appeals for “more State [intervention],” which, Riesel says mockingly, will know how to “reeducate us in happy sobriety” and is only an expansion of the “bureaucratization of existence.”

“It is through the idea of ‘participatory democracy,’ exhumed by Hollande¹³ after the death of Rémi Fraisse,¹⁴ that the peasant world was, starting in the 1960s, integrated into the State machine. And this is what I have always found weak among the ecologists: the ‘*bottom up*’¹⁵ side, ‘let’s discuss this with our elected officials,’ ‘let’s present our counter-experts,’ which only ends up in a bureaucratic stranglehold that grows ever-tighter.”

Here’s the origin of Riesel’s fundamental disagreement with José Bové, which broke out into the open after the destruction of GMO plants at Nérac in January 1996 and Montpellier in June 1999. Become the National Secretary of the Confédération paysanne due to a kind of misunderstanding, he’d teamed up with Bové, whose recklessness had seduced him. But when sentencing time came around (eight months in jail), Bové fell back upon his union membership and appealed for a presidential pardon. Riesel broke with him clearly: it was a matter of fighting against “not only GMOs, but also the society that produces them.”¹⁶ The destruction of transgenic plants wasn’t “an alarm” or the “citizens’ contribution” [to the debate], but a deliberate act of “sabotage.”

Riesel served his four-month-long sentence¹⁷ within a high-security establishment where “90 percent of the inmates were young Arabs.” To Riesel, “the experts’ excitement at discovering ‘Islamization’ in prison is comic. In Mende, the clandestine sermons were held in the bathrooms.”

This was also the time for books. Riesel was approached by the post-situationist publishing house Encyclopédie des Nuisances (the EdN), founded by Jaime Semprun. Its superb books are produced at one of the last French printing presses to use lead characters. The EdN published translations of George Orwell’s political writings and Günther Anders’s *L’Obsolescence de l’homme*, otherwise unavailable. In brief, the EdN was the intellectual center

¹² Latin for “to a minimum.”

¹³ François Hollande, Socialist, elected President of France on 15 May 2012.

¹⁴ On 26 October 2014, a young French botanist and activist named Rémi Fraisse was killed by French police at the ZAD de Testet, aka the Sivens Dam Project.

¹⁵ English in original.

¹⁶ Cf. Riesel’s letter to Bové dated 2 November 1999.

<http://www.notbored.org/riesel-2November1999.html>.

¹⁷ See his “Declaration before the Tribunal of Agen.” <http://www.notbored.org/agen.html>.

of the anti-industrial current.

Through the EdN, Riesel published several works written in a pugnacious and ironic style and given eloquent titles: *Remarques sur l'agriculture génétiquement modifiée et la dégradation des espèces* (1999); *Déclarations sur l'agriculture transgénique et ceux qui prétendent s'y opposer* (2000); and *Aveux complets des véritables mobiles du crime commis au CIRAD le 5 juin 1999* (2001). Riesel's very practical philosophy also demonstrates that the "progress" constituted by the manipulation of DNA and the scientific discourses that justify it reveals nothing but *Du progrès dans la domestication* (2003).¹⁸ His most recent book, co-written with Jaime Semprun, *Catastrophisme, administration du désastre et soumission durable* (2008), reaffirms the anti-industrial political position. Namely, that the management of "citizens" through a permanent state of catastrophe allows the State (with the cooperation of the ecological movements) to appear, not as an obstacle to emancipation, but the only desirable outcome. Much like Orwell in Spain when he fought against both the Stalinists and the fascists, Riesel and Semprun envisioned a struggle against both capitalism and "the Statist propaganda" that is based upon "the risks of ecological collapse" and manipulates "unanimous good feelings."

But times change and sometimes more quickly than expected. The victories of the ZADs in public opinion and against the government testify to a tipping point.

"Our anti-Statist message, largely inaudible 15 years ago, seems to be shared these days. To be opposed to the State has now become a kind of foregone conclusion. For the last 50 years, our administrators have assured us that they have the situation under control, but their self-assurance no longer deludes anyone: all over the world, the conditions of life are collapsing, the ocean levels are rising, garbage, too . . . So we go out armed with sabers and drones."

This is the time of "lasting collapse," as he said in an article co-authored with Jacques Philipponneau and published in *Le Monde* last December.¹⁹ And the eternal libertarian made clear to us that "the period that is beginning will be interesting." Not only because of the growing defiance against the system of representative democracy, but also because of the "experiments with direct democracy, which are certainly hard work but necessary, in both the West and the developing countries of the world."

Because this is what is essential: "More and more young people have no other choice than to revolt. They no longer find a place at the feast of artificial abundance, which, moreover, they've realized is inedible."

There remains a problem: "the transmission [of revolt] hasn't taken place." Didn't many people think it was happening during the anti-GMO battles? "Yes, but we were no doubt a little too stiff. . . . The anti-speciesist or *gender studies*²⁰ naivety of the ZADs bothers me, but I tell myself that this is also the time for us to abandon the tone that no one finds attractive."

In sum, it is a question of being attentive to what's going on here and there. And always "knowing when it's time to come out of the woods." Thus, in the autumn of 2009, Riesel got people talking about him when he addressed an open letter to the Departmental Director of Veterinary Services that firmly stated that he would not comply with the Orwellian injunctions to

¹⁸ Cf. also "The Progress of Submission Moves at a Frightening Speed: An Interview with René Riesel." <http://www.notbored.org/riesel-interview.html>.

¹⁹ "Above the Volcano." <http://www.notbored.org/volcano.pdf>.

²⁰ English in original.

vaccinate livestock against hoof-and-mouth disease.²¹

The interview having ended, it was time for a photograph. Riesel agreed, but on the condition that there wouldn't be any staging. What strikes me is the expression on his face, which is both flinty [*minérale*] and sweet, an alliance of the stubborn and the tender, a sober presence, a sorrowful one, as well, that comes from afar and that Riesel hasn't stopped crossing and re-crossing in all directions. In short, a portrait of a very discreet anti-hero. And in his case, no doubt, we must restore positivity to the word "posture": the total absence of imposture, the strong verticality, fashioned by a half-century of patient adventures that, obstinately and fragilely, signals to us that yes, decidedly, another kind of life is possible.

²¹ "Open letter concerning vaccine propaganda." <http://www.notbored.org/vaccine-propaganda.html>.

