



Roundtable Discussion

Role Reversal: When Activists Are Treated Like Criminals. Conversations on the Criminalization of Environmental Activism in Belgium, France, and the UK

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a hardening of repressive and surveillance measures against protest and contentious activities in Western societies. Although these measures are not socially neutral and primarily target marginalized populations, they are now increasingly targeting environmental activists and the latest wave of resistance practices that denounce the capitalist contradictions at the heart of liberal democracies. In this piece, we bring together insights and discussions from a roundtable on the criminalization of environmental activism (October 19, 2023, Brussels) as well as empirical insights from the French, UK, and Belgian context where a “role-reversal” between environmental activism and criminality can be observed. Our roundtable text discusses and documents the types of legal, political, and discursive practices that are being deployed by Western states to delegitimize and criminalize environmental contestation—e.g., through state surveillance practices, new legal instruments, court procedures, and the rise of the “eco-terrorist” discourse—while also reflecting on the simultaneity of environmental activism criminalization with a broader authoritarian tendency and increasing legitimization of far-right practices and ideologies.

Introduction (Louise)

Democratic systems are increasingly faced with their own ecological contradiction: the material conditions that ensured the expansion of liberal democracies are threatening their own perpetuation (Fraser 2021; Malm 2023; Mitchell 2009; Plumwood 1995). While this contradiction is not new, it has recently taken a new shape in Western countries through the most recent wave of environmental activism. From the mass mobilisations spurred by Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion in the pre-COVID-19 years (2018–2020), to the emergence post-COVID-19 of Just Stop Oil, Insulate Britain, *Dernière Rénovation*, or *Les Soulèvements de la Terre*, among many others, environmental activists around the world denounce this ecological contradiction with different intensities and different repertoires of action. This recent wave of environmental activism has been marked, among others, by the combination of an escalation towards more

confrontational modes of struggle and a diversification of contentious practices (Berglund 2023; Brown 2021; Hasler, Walters, and White 2020; Jadoul 2021, 2024) through which activists denounce the lack of political and social action in the face of ecological collapse and, in some cases, the historical responsibility of Western states in the perpetuation of neo-colonialism, social exploitation, and environmental extractivism.

The evolution of tactics in the recent wave of environmental activism is noteworthy. This is not so much for the nature of the repertoires of action themselves—civil disobedience, occupations, blockades, sabotage, and direct action have long been part of the history of radical environmental activism (Manes 1990; Sommer, Hayes, and Ollitrault 2019) and of other contentious cultures (Graeber 2009)—but rather for the way these are being responded to by public authorities and governments. From the soup-throwing of Just Stop Oil, to the road blockades of Insulate Britain, to the occupation of fossil infrastructures by the Belgian coalition Code Rouge, to the direct actions against agro-industrial projects by *Les Soulèvements de la Terre* in France, activists are being met today with a renewed arsenal of repressive actions, surveillance practices, and criminalizing legal measures in Western countries (Codaccioni 2019; Hasler, Walters, and White 2020; Schlembach 2018). Throwing soup at artworks as a form of protest against ecological inaction may cause activists a disproportionately long jail sentence; Phoebe Plummer, twenty-three years old, and Anna Holland, twenty-two years old, were sentenced to two years and twenty months in jail respectively. Being an activist has become a semantic and discursive neighbour of terrorism. The act of protesting itself is becoming increasingly surveilled, constrained, restricted, and ultimately sanctioned (Page and Robinson 2025). Contributing to the emergence of a social movement may be categorized and policed as conspiracy, as was recently illustrated with Roger Hallam and the criminalisation of his role in Just Stop Oil.

While repression and surveillance are not socially neutral and have a long classist and racist history that extends far beyond environmental activism (Choudry 2019; Dufour and Depuis-Déri 2022; Harris et al. 2022; Lyon 2001, 2003, 2007; Monahan 2010)—both as a common practice in other protest cultures such as anti-police (brutality) movements (Reynolds-Stenson 2017) and as daily experience for socially and racially marginalized communities (Fassin 2013, 2019)—the hardening of the relationship between environmental activists and the state tells us something important about the right to protest in Western societies (Bocquet and Knops forthcoming). Whether in the form of arrests and police brutality at protest actions (Hamilton 2021; Neal, Opitz, and Zebrowski 2019; Wood 2014), the more extensive use of surveillance tools (Clarke 2023; Melgaço and Monaghan 2018), the passing of anti-protest laws (Bocquet and Knops forthcoming; Page and Robinson 2025), changes in court procedures, or the prolongation of jail sentences (Cammiss, Hayes, and Doherty 2025), environmental activists are increasingly sanctioned and repressed. The criminalisation of actors offering a systemic critique places these actors outside the bounds of the political, reducing the remaining political space to those actors who support and maintain the current system; in this way, the neo-liberal mantra, there is no alternative, is held in place through the active exclusion from political space of those offering an alternative (Bessant and Grasso 2019).

This all happens while the systemic and structural violence by colonial and extractivist actors in society remains tolerated and legitimized by existing political institutions (Losada Cubillo et al. 2023). From this perspective, the current context might be described as a kind of “role-reversal” where non-violent activists are treated like criminals, and where criminals are in power.¹ Those subject to state surveillance and increasing repression are people who denounce capitalist practices that destroy life rather than ecocidal companies that are singled out and benefit from considerable opacity (Monaghan and Walby 2017). Indeed, there is an overlap between state and private interests, which derive their power from the asymmetry of information they have over citizens, raising many democratic concerns (Bocquet 2025). The resulting situation is consonant with broader “illiberal” and authoritarian trends observed in Western countries, where

¹ This idea of role-reversal is well captured by a video produced by the independent and activist media channel Blast (2024).

increasingly forceful measures are being deployed to protect existing privileges and interests and shut down the available space for contesting the existing configuration of power and engaging in political participation (Croissant and Tomini 2024; Pencolé 2024; Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes 2021).

While this “role-reversal” between activism and criminality is starting to attract worldwide attention, as testified, for example, by the recent appointment of a new UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders (Michael Forst) who monitors abusive cases of state repression against environmental activists, the empirical documentation of how this role-reversal takes place remains fairly limited. What does it look like in practice? Through what kinds of operations do so-called democratic states turn their backs against protest and activism by equating them with criminal activities? How does this role-reversal become normalized, legitimized, and ultimately institutionalized?

In this contribution, we attempt to grapple with these questions in the form of a collective discussion rooted, among others, in exchanges that took place on October 19, 2023, in Brussels on the occasion of a roundtable on the criminalization of environmental activism organized by the Institut Interfacultaire des transformations socio-écologiques hosted by the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). During this event, a group of researchers—Graeme Hayes, Nicolas Bocquet, Sophie Del Fa, Louise Knops, and Fanny Vrydagh—coming from different countries and backgrounds, gathered to discuss some of their observations of the increasing criminalization of environmental activists in Belgium, France, and the UK.² This conversation remains ongoing to this day, and in the following pages, we bring together the material discussed during the roundtable together with more recent insights and reflections we have collected and developed since then on the basis of field-work and exchanges with activists, as well as between us.

The goal of this piece is threefold. By drawing on observations in three specific countries (France, Belgium, UK), we aim, first, to document some of the state of play on the criminalization of environmental activists and show the mechanisms and steps that structure the role-reversal through which states turn activists into criminals. Second, on the basis of these empirical insights, we address broader questions on dynamics of inclusion and exclusion from protest practices, on relations of domination and marginalization at protest actions, and on the notion of “violence” itself in a context where environmental activism is being repressed under the pretence of “eco-terrorism” while systemic state violence remains the norm. Third, we hope that these exchanges may also contribute to the strategic reflections of social movements themselves by bringing to light some of the ongoing resistance tactics used by activists to reject the dominant narratives of criminalization and raise the cost of surveillance and repression.

The first part of this collective discussion lays out a few general observations on the issues of criminalization, repression, and surveillance, together with recent evolutions in the environmental activist landscape in the UK, Belgium, and France. The second part dives into specific events, such as the Sainte-Soline demonstration in France, court cases in the UK, and the field of surveillance tools and practices. In the third part, we attempt to discuss a set of broader questions on the basis of these exchanges.

² This roundtable was organized by the Inter-Faculty Institute for Socio-Ecological Transformations (iiTSE) of the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) on October 19, 2023, in Brussels. It brought together different scholars and activists: Chloé Mikolajczak (from the activist coalition, Code Rouge), Graeme Hayes (Aston University, UK), Sophie Del Fa (UCLouvain, Belgium), Nicolas Bocquet (UCLouvain, Belgium), Emmanuel Slautsky (ULB, Belgium), and Romain Didi (Climate Action Network).

Participants

Louise: I am an Assistant Professor in Environmental Humanities at the Université libre de Bruxelles and my research focuses on environmental social movements, the crisis of representative democracy, and ecological emotions. I co-organized and moderated the roundtable of October 19, 2023, that initiated our ongoing discussion on the criminalization of activists. I will attempt to provide a coherent thread throughout our discussion.

Nicolas: I am a PhD researcher in political science at the UCLouvain and the University of Geneva. My research interests lie at the nexus of democracy and technology, including issues of data protection, privacy, surveillance, security, regulation, and governance. I will share my observations on the extension of state surveillance practices to protest activities in liberal democracies and other evolutions in the Belgian legal landscape that testify to a criminalizing role-reversal.

Graeme: I am a Reader in Political Sociology at Aston University (Birmingham, UK) and former editor in chief of *Social Movement Studies* and former editor of *Environmental Politics*. My research focuses on environmental protest, civil disobedience, and the criminal trials of activists for their participation in disruptive non-violent direct action. I will speak about recent evolutions on the UK environmental activist scene by focusing, among others, on changes in court procedures against environmental activists.

Sophie: I am an Assistant Professor in Communication at UCLouvain in Belgium. My research focuses on contemporary radical resistance practices, militant ecological collectives, and radical alternatives. I conduct militant ethnography with environmental and anti-capitalist collectives. I participated in actions organized by *Les Soulèvements de la Terre*. I will share some thoughts on the repressive turn observed in France by drawing on, among others, the testimonies of activists who took part in the Sainte-Soline demonstration against an agricultural mega-basin project on March 25, 2023.

Role Reversal: When Activists Are Treated Like Criminals

Louise: As an introduction to our discussion and before we start with concrete empirical observations, I wanted to ask you each to give us your general take—an important point or argument—that you would like to bring forward. What is, in your view, the main aspect to keep in mind today when we discuss issues of repression and criminalization of environmental activists, and perhaps, more broadly, contentious activities all-together? Something that might be too often overlooked and that needs to be taken into account to better understand today's context....

Nicolas: I think it's important to take a step back and briefly re-situate the notion of surveillance and repression, which, in a way, should be considered as two aspects of the same continuum. Talking about surveillance and repression means talking about control and power, about sorting and exclusion, about the space in which people are or are not allowed to express their needs, or even their opinions. Practices of surveillance and control of populations—including social movements—and the progressive creation of government databases concerning citizens, is not a recent phenomenon. It is part of a long history shaped by inequalities and the struggles that have emerged in response to them. In fact, one could argue that reducing political uncertainty, by anticipating and preventing any potential challenges to their authority, is in the DNA of all forms of government. This is why they have progressively developed techniques for monitoring citizens' activities, which increasingly include digital technology and allow governments to massify their control of any form of political contestation.

Although, it is essential to understand that the history of control and surveillance of the population is primarily shaped by colonial, racist, and classist dynamics, which is why it must first be considered in parallel with the history of discriminated and marginalised populations. By extension, the ways in which

states “treat” social movements is strongly determined by their sociological composition, their modes of action, or their demands. Until recently, and in contrast to other social movements, environmental activists have been relatively little surveilled and repressed in liberal democracies, notably because they are often predominantly white, urban, relatively well-educated, and generally pacifist in their modes of action. But the recent “radicalization”—i.e., the gradual adoption of more confrontational and disruptive forms of struggles—of certain environmental activists’ tactics, including civil disobedience, blockades of state or private infrastructures, Zones to Defend (ZADs), and attacks on property, is progressively resulting in a heightened level of state repression.

Graeme: We’re talking at a very specific moment, where the post-2018 wave of radical climate action—at least, radical in so far as it adopted publicly confrontational and law-breaking action as a standard mode of organization—has undoubtedly lost its definition and capacity. There are many reasons for this, but one of them is the way that the specific tactic of public mass disobedience became quickly trapped in the conditions of civic accountability that underpinned it; and another is that the very public challenge to fossil capital that the protest wave articulated has produced an unprecedented (and still intensifying) reconfiguration of the relationship between protest, public space, and the criminal justice process. This speaks more widely to ideas about the nature of liberal democracies and their diminished capacity to promote and safeguard civic rights under the conditions of the multiple ongoing social crises that the chief political formations in these democracies seek to manage.

Sophie: The increasing criminalisation of environmental activists in Europe reflects, in my view, two phenomena: on one hand, the authoritarian hardening of states that want to protect their privileges as powerful players and therefore perpetuate an extractivist capitalist system, and on the other, a radicalisation of environmental movements that are prepared to go outside the law to increase the balance of power (often at the risk of their lives). The end result is an intensification of the conflict at the crossroads of these two worlds. Criminalisation is used as a lever of intimidation to dissuade activists and to create precedents in the judicial sphere.

Louise: Building on the arguments you have each brought forward, let’s take a closer look at how this materializes in practice. Graeme, you have been observing and analyzing many social movements over the past years. What can you tell us about some of the evolutions you are witnessing today in the UK? How does this compare to other evolutions you may have witnessed in the past, or in other contexts? The UK, I feel, is a particularly interesting case to start our discussion with, because this is where civil disobedience has massively returned on the environmental activist scene via the emergence of Extinction Rebellion; but also, it is a place where there seems to be a variety of tools increasingly used by the state to repress and criminalize activists. How would you describe the current state of play in the UK?

Graeme: We’re currently seeing four interrelated dynamics playing out, essentially—although not exclusively—as a response to Extinction Rebellion’s actions in London in 2019 and their blockage of the print distribution centres of the right-wing media in September 2020. Most obviously, we’ve seen a political response through the introduction of new legislation (the Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Act 2022, the Public Order Act 2023) designed to place restrictive conditions on public protests and criminalise specific practices, such as locking-on, tunnelling, and slow walking, and introducing sometimes severe penalties for these offences. Second, prosecutors are choosing to bring more severe charges against protesters. So, when Insulate Britain disrupted major roads and motorways in September 2021, they expected to be charged with the relatively minor offence of wilful obstruction of the highway. Instead, they were charged with causing a public nuisance, which carries a maximum sentence of ten years imprisonment. Third, the Court of Appeal has steadily reduced the ability of activists to argue in court that their actions were justified, removing necessity and lawful excuse defences from protest cases. Finally, the courts have started sending environmental activists to prison for causing non-violent disruption. This includes the four-year prison sentence still (at the time of publication) being served by Extinction Rebellion co-founder Roger

Hallam for conspiracy to cause a public nuisance. This is shocking and unprecedented. But it is also a logical outcome of the other three dynamics, and the approach of the main political parties to disruptive protest. Taken together, these developments point to a significant hardening of the criminal justice process towards non-violent protest.

Louise: Okay. So, in this hardening of the criminal justice process towards non-violent protest, what are, in your view, the specifically “new” elements that you observe in the UK? Or, in other words, the elements that should give us particular reasons to be concerned. And how can these insights be helpful for activists’ strategies in a context of increased repression and criminalization?

Graeme: The point about defences is perhaps the key one. If we go back a few years, the four activists who were prosecuted for pulling down the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol in June 2020 were able to argue in court that, yes, they did cause criminal damage, but they had a lawful excuse for doing so. They argued in court that they had a lawful excuse because they were acting proportionately to prevent a crime, as they believed the statue’s continued presence in Bristol was an act of public indecency. And they argued that their Article 10 and 11 European Convention rights gave them legal protections. The jury found them not guilty after a two-week trial where they able to explain Colston’s leading role in the Atlantic slave trade. This sort of acquittal is generally how civil disobedience actions had been treated in Britain: juries, when able to hear the reasons and motivations that protest defendants were able to put forward, have consistently found them not guilty. It is now much harder for protest defendants to make this sort of legal argument.

But there is also a wider sense that protest itself is being deliberately constructed as illegitimate and existing *outside of* democracy. Non-violent but disruptive action is being framed legally and politically as violent; non-disruptive action is being framed as disruptive. Disobedient action is being framed as extremist—for example, by influential right-wing think tank Policy Exchange and by Lord Walney, a former Labour MP who became the Conservative government’s advisor on political violence and disruption in November 2020. All these developments are very concerning, but they are perhaps also—again more widely—a logical development in the restriction of democratic space that is required by the latest stage of neoliberalism. Where protecting the conditions for capital accumulation is patently unable to bring wider benefits to the electorate, such as functioning public services, adequate housing, secure and well-paid employment, or climate protection, governments also must respond to the building of democratic demands for these things. As they cannot provide these things, their response is to reduce the public space available for these demands to be made whilst designating all those who nonetheless make these demands as extreme.

Louise: Your point about the deliberative attempts to frame protest as illegitimate and violent is very interesting, and I feel that this resonates significantly with what we observe in Belgium through the introduction of laws, or articles in existing legal texts, to frame protestors as violent “breakers,” and protest itself as a “malicious attack” against the authority of the state. I am not joking. An article has recently been added into Belgian law that seeks to repress the “malicious attacks” against the authority of the state (in French “*atteinte méchante à l’autorité de l’Etat*”).

Nicolas: Yes absolutely, in recent years, we have seen a few legal evolutions in the Belgian legal landscape that significantly reduce the room for manoeuvre for protest activities. And there is, indeed, as you just said Louise, in the recent reform of the Belgian penal code, a new article that punishes what it calls “malicious attacks on the authority of the State.” Because this article is seen as a direct threat to all forms of civil disobedience, it is of great concern to civil society actors who are currently trying to have it annulled by the Belgian Constitutional Court.

But unfortunately, this is not the only legal development in Belgium aimed at reducing the scope for contestation. For example, while the Minister of the Interior already published, in 2022, a controversial

circular on individual and preventive bans on demonstrations based on the suspicion of trouble only, which raised many democratic concerns in civil society and was considered “a serious attack on the rule of law” by the Federal Institute for Human Rights, the Minister of the Interior introduced in 2023 a new bill quickly became known as the “anti-breakers law” (in French “*la loi anti-casseurs*”). This bill includes a three- to six-year protest ban for anyone who committed “offences” during demonstrations. Although the government was finally forced to back down in the face of strong popular pressure, particularly from trade unions and civil society, the bill is being reconsidered today by the right-wing winning parties of the 2024 June elections (Coppi and Sante 2024).

Louise: This makes me think of something that we also recurrently hear about in the current context, and that contributes to the legitimization of state violence and repression: the reference to so-called “state of emergency” or “state of necessity” discourses. Somewhat paradoxically, these discourses can be both mobilized by activists to demand more drastic actions by states and governments and, in a totally different way, by states to legitimize a series of extremely repressive measures (like in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance).

Graeme: We are obviously living in a time when social crises, perhaps most obviously the climate crisis but equally a series of urgent problems in the public sphere, require concerted political action. But one of the effects of the removal of legal defences available to protest defendants is that these defendants are no longer able to argue a necessity defence (and, therefore, invoke the “State of necessity” to defend themselves) in court; in other words, they cannot argue that they acted under duress of circumstances, or in order to prevent crime, by taking direct action. This decision was made by the British Court of Appeal in November 2021, following the conviction of fifteen activists for locking-on around the wheels of a charter airplane at Stansted airport in 2017 in order to stop the deportation of sixty people to west Africa from an immigration detention centre. These activists were prosecuted on terrorist-related charges; in a trial that lasted ten weeks, they argued that they acted to stop the immediate harms that these deportees would be subjected to on their forced return to their country of origin. They were found guilty when the trial judge argued that, in a “functioning democratic state,” the defence of necessity was not legally available to protest defendants (Hayes, Cammiss, and Doherty 2021). Although this verdict was overturned by the Court of Appeal, which agreed that terrorist-related charges were not appropriate and therefore there was “no case to answer,” the Court agreed with the trial judge that the defence of necessity could not be available to protest defendants. In other words, in the midst of multiple urgent crises that desperately require social intervention, activists may no longer seek to legally justify their actions, and thus attempt to turn the public spotlight on these crises, in these terms.

Nicolas: To add to what Graeme says, concerning the “state of emergency,” it’s important to understand what this specific legal situation engages and what it includes when it’s used by the state. Concretely, and as explained by Agamben (2005), a state of emergency is the more or less extensive suspension of the rule of law in favour of a reinforcement of executive power. Over the past twenty-five years, liberal democracies have mainly resorted to these special legal provisions for security reasons, or more recently because of the COVID-19 pandemic. What is important to understand is that the use of a state of emergency, whether justified or not, systematically leads to a reduction in public freedoms, including those linked to the possibility of protesting and challenging political decisions, as we saw quite clearly during the pandemic. And, since September 11, we have seen a trend in all liberal democracies towards normalising certain provisions initially introduced under the state of emergency, which are gradually being incorporated into ordinary law. This is happening despite the fact that it significantly restricts certain fundamental democratic freedoms and directly affects the potential for political mobilisation. One example that illustrates this tension particularly well is the introduction of significant restrictions on freedoms, including house arrest, in France under the state of emergency following the 2015 attacks. While these measures initially targeted people from the Arab-Muslim community in an often-arbitrary manner, the same provisions were ultimately also

used against environmental activists during COP21 in Paris to prevent them from leaving their homes and taking part in political action during the summit.

Louise: Before we go any further, I wanted to also address a discomfort that, I think, we share collectively when denouncing repressive actions against environmental activists while more systemic, daily, and systematic forms of repression remain largely invisible. How can we talk about the criminalization of environmental activists, and take into account their specific—and mostly privileged—position, without underestimating or exaggerating their vulnerability vis-à-vis the state, and without invisibilizing those who are systematically under threat?

Graeme: This is absolutely true. When I mentioned at the start of our discussion that the post-2018 climate disobedience wave became quickly trapped in its conditions of civic accountability, this is what I was thinking of: deliberately bringing activists into a situation where they will be arrested and prosecuted effectively reinforces the predominantly white, middle-class, and highly educated nature of environmental activism, excluding people of colour and working-class activists. It is a protest tactic produced by a very specific social base. Equally, these are activists who have, by and large, explicitly chosen to be prosecuted. There is no comparison here between the criminalisation of environmental activists and the everyday criminalisation based on, for example, race and class in the UK.

But I think we also have to see the criminalisation to which environmental activists are subjected within two wider developments in neo-liberalism, certainly in the UK. The first is that austerity is not just a political and economic project; it is an ideological and civic project (Hayes 2017). The systematic reduction of the public sphere that is visible in the transfer of wealth from poor to rich, the managed decline of public services, the delegitimization of welfare and those who rely on it—all this depends upon the erasure of the idea that there can be an alternative, a different politics, that centers social solidarity and organises collective life around public and equitable provision. The second is that the UK, at least, has abandoned one of the central tenets of liberal democracy, where the rights of minorities are protected as fundamental to the social settlement. Instead, post-austerity, we have seen the rise of a new majoritarian conservatism. This is perhaps most obvious in the application of the Brexit referendum result, but it is equally so in the construction of refugees as a policy problem, as we saw last summer in the wave of violence against asylum-seekers housed in hotels, and the spectacle of cruelty that plays out day by day, week by week, in their incarceration and mistreatment. The criminalisation of activism is a perhaps inevitable outcome of these two developments. Equally, and although we have not really discussed it here, the imprisonment of Palestine Action Group activists for their campaign of sabotage of Elbit's drone-making factories in the UK speaks to the same dynamic: the UK seeks a domestic criminal justice solution to the wider crisis of its obvious complicity in genocide.

Louise: Let's now turn to the French context to see how some of these dynamics and evolutions play out there. Some of what Graeme and Nicolas said echo recent events that have taken place in France. In particular, in relation to *Les Soulèvements de la Terre*, which came under the spotlight after the brutal and violent confrontations with the police that took place at the Sainte-Soline protest against agricultural mega basins on March 25, 2023. Sophie, can you tell us a bit more about this specific event? What does this tell us both on the ongoing repressive turn in France, and perhaps more broadly, on the question of the state's violence.

Sophie: Yes, some of the evolutions that are underway in the UK and Belgium are concomitant, albeit different, with evolutions in the French landscape. To understand those evolutions, it is interesting to dive into what happened at Sainte-Soline on March 25, 2023, which is an important event in and of itself and also says something crucial about broader evolutions in France. First, we need to go back to the first

demonstration against the Sainte-Soline mega basins project, which took place on October 29, 2022 (known as Sainte-Soline I) led by *Les Soulèvements de la Terre*³ and *Bassines Non Merci*.⁴

In October 2022, clashes broke out between the four-thousand people present and the 1,700 military forces deployed (and equipped with numerous vehicles and helicopters). At the end of the day, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin used the term “eco-terrorism” to disqualify those taking part in the event. The use of this particular term is quite significant. As Truc (2023) reminds us, calling people “terrorists” (and its variations) delegitimizes groups of individuals and justifies the implementation of an anti-terrorist arsenal. With this discursive gesture, Darmanin positions certain people as “outsiders” and disqualifies them as enemies of the so-called “republican order” (and therefore of the State).

The protest that took place in Sainte-Soline on March 25, 2023, five months after Sainte-Soline I, brought this time around 20,000 people in the Deux-Sèvres region and was marked by an unprecedented violent police repression regarding an ecologist gathering. In my view, this case is particularly illustrative of the arsenal of repressive measures—both discursive and non-discursive—deployed by the French government to discredit and effectively exclude activists.

Indeed, what happened in Sainte-Soline I & II in terms of repression is not only criminalization but also what could be called disciplining and securitization in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault 2004). The French government presented the mobilization of Sainte-Soline II as a continuation of the first mobilisation, maintaining the same type of discourse to characterise it and prepare for the presence of so-called “eco-terrorists” on site. In particular, the authorities “prepared the ground” in advance to justify the heavy repression, notably by tweeting about the seizure of dangerous materials in the days before the demonstration (which were, in fact, nothing more than gardening or building tools). This allowed the government to discredit the organizers and their real or supposed supporters. This general context of systematic criminalization of anything that threatens the republican order as conceived by those in power makes the site of the Sainte-Soline events a zone of exclusion, illustrating how the state can grant itself the right (outside any legal framework) to set up a repressive disciplinary mechanism. The construction of this “enemy within” is also highlighted in the report produced by the *Ligue des droits humains* (2023) (LDH, a French human rights watch organization) after observing the demonstration.⁵

The LDH (2023: 12) report also points out that “the radical” environmental movement has become “the media scarecrow of the moment and civil disobedience actions have been quickly labelled ‘low-intensity terrorism.’” As the report points out, the government, by describing activist practices as “eco-terrorist,” stigmatizes and therefore criminalizes an entire social movement, which contributes to justifying the police repression against it.

In Sainte-Soline II, the criminalization also materialized in the form of eight prefectural decrees banning demonstrations, gatherings, rallies, and even the sale, transport, and purchase of flammable and explosive products. In addition, the police blocked the roads to limit the scope of the demonstrators’ actions. In fact, this traffic management was a means to distinguish the “good” from “bad” traffic (i.e., activists coming to

³ *Les Soulèvements de la Terre* is a French radical environmental collective founded in January 2021, opposed to land grabbing, and dedicated to fighting against mega-projects, including “mega basins projects,” highway constructions, and the Lyon-Turin high-speed rail link.

⁴ *Bassines Non Merci* is a citizens’ group committed to preserving water and natural resources. Since 2017, it has been campaigning against mega basins projects in the Deux-Sèvres region and more widely across the country within regional collectives.

⁵ In fact, the report states that “Government communication from autumn 2022 onwards, and particularly in the run-up to the March demonstration, consisted of disqualifying the movement and equating the demonstrators with delinquents and even terrorists, which set in motion a policing approach that mirrored this analysis” (LDH 2023: 11).

protest). According to the LDH report, law enforcement carried out 24,010 traffic controls over three days, and given that there were some 20,000 demonstrators, the disproportionate scale of the disciplinary mechanisms at work is crystal clear.

In addition, Sainte-Soline II was characterized by a massive deployment of law enforcement forces: with three-thousand gendarmes surrounding the fortress-like mega basin, including twenty mobile gendarmerie squadrons and a motorized intervention and interposition platoon comprising forty people on twenty quads. Nine helicopters, four armoured vehicles, four water cannons, and four heliportable platoons were also deployed. A large array of weapons was also deployed, including 56mm cougar launchers that fire projectiles at fifty, one-hundred and two-hundred meters; LBD 40mm GL-06 grenades, which can be fired at speeds in excess of 350 km/h (eight-one shots recorded); tear gas grenades (5'015 recorded); GENL dismantling grenades (eight-nine recorded); GM2L tear gas stun grenades; and ASSD stun grenades. FAMAS assault rifles were also seen. In total, five-thousand grenades were fired during Sainte-Soline II in just two hours, equating to forty tear-gas grenades per minute or one every 1.5 seconds. This left over forty people seriously injured, two of whom remained in a coma for several weeks, and twenty others severely maimed.

What happened in Sainte-Soline thus illustrates the multi-layered nature of the repressive strategies deployed against environmental activists; what Foucault (2004: 19) would have called a triple levels of power mechanism that organizes circulation, aims to eliminate what is considered dangerous by the state, divides good and bad circulation, and maximizes good circulation by diminishing bad. This repressive strategy was also employed during the water village event organised in July 2024.

The impact of the eco-terrorist discourse was felt long after the events in Sainte-Soline and continues to be felt at a legal level. On March 28, 2023, Gérald Darmanin initiated proceedings to dissolve the ecologist coalition by accusing the collective of “repeated violence, attacks on the forces of law and order, and calls for insurrection” during the Sainte-Soline demonstrations (BFMTV 2023). However, on November 9, 2023, the French Conseil d’État annulled the dissolution procedure, representing a judicial victory against the state. Furthermore, the threat of dissolution has led to the formation of hundreds of local *Les Soulèvements de la Terre* committees across France, as well as in Belgium and Switzerland, taking the movement to another level.

On November 22, 2024, Léna Lazarre and Basile Dutertre, two members of *Les Soulèvements de la Terre*, appeared in a court in Paris for failing to comply with a summons to testify before a National Assembly parliamentary inquiry commission in July 2023, following an investigation into violence in Sainte-Soline. This is the first time in the history of the French Fifth Republic that individuals have been prosecuted for this offense (Marlier 2024). The prosecutor has requested a suspended sentence of two months’ imprisonment, a €1,500 fine, and deprivation of civic rights (the right to vote, stand for election, and be represented in court) for one year for Léna Lazare. Basile Dutertre faces a suspended sentence of four months’ imprisonment, a €3,000 fine, and the deprivation of his civic rights for two years. It is also noteworthy that they received different treatment based on gender, even though the charges are the same for both individuals.

To conclude on the case of Sainte-Soline, it is clear that this event has become a moment of definitional struggle over the notion of “violence.” In fact, the National Assembly’s Information Report No. 1864 on violent activism, dated November 15, 2023, states that, according to a person interviewed at a hearing and whose identity and authority to speak about the protest remain unsubstantiated, “the primary aim of the Sainte-Soline mobilization,... was violence; the peaceful, family dimension of the mobilization only came later, with ad hoc communication to attract people to act as cover for the activists” (Iordanoff and Pulliat 2023). This statement cannot be taken at face value. Neither contextualised nor clearly sourced, it

perpetuates a myth surrounding violence, making it the central point of enquiry and rendering the real issue—the water grab—invisible.

Louise: The description you have just given of the events of Sainte-Soline is really important, I think, to show both the scale and reach of the state powers to repress and shut down contentious action and contribute to the role reversal between activist and criminal activities. Something that is exacerbated by the increasing use of ICT tools in surveillance practices, which are now increasingly used against environmental activists (among others). Can you tell us a bit more about this specifically, Nicolas?

Nicolas: Yes, absolutely. What we observe today is that the development of digital technology has massively expanded the scope of surveillance practices. It has provided governments with new and increasingly sophisticated ICT tools, which have progressively facilitated mass surveillance, including in historic liberal democracies. The latter, always ready to criticize authoritarian regimes for using surveillance tools against their populations, are now adopting the same technologies to such an extent that, while the quantitative gap in the intensity of use of these tools remains significant between authoritarian regimes and liberal democracies, it is becoming increasingly difficult to establish a meaningful qualitative distinction between these states, given that they are both using these technologies (e.g., facial recognition) (Bocquet et al. 2025).

Recent developments in “artificial intelligence” only reinforce governments’ fantasy of total information at a time where social conflicts multiply because of growing social inequalities and the acceleration of climate change, among others. In this way, technology, and in particular surveillance and security technologies, are seen by governments as a means of addressing the consequences of capitalist contradictions (for example, by helping to monitor and repress social and political contestation) (Harvey 2014), rather than tackling their root causes (inequality, climate change, etc.) (Morozov 2013). In other words, technology is seen by governments as a way of reducing governance uncertainty (Bocquet 2025).

The growing use of ICT tools to monitor and repress social movements is linked to at least three major trends. Firstly, a large part of contemporary activism and its organisation now takes place online, which makes it easier for law enforcement agencies and intelligence services to collect information that can be used to map social movements, anticipate their actions, and possibly repress them. This may involve public or non-public data (IP addresses, online activities, etc.) obtained through collaboration with digital platforms, as the Snowden revelations have shown. In some cases, repressive forces may try to censor certain online content with the aim of limiting social mobilisation. Recently, France—and this is a real repressive turn within liberal democracies—even completely banned certain social networks during mobilisations in New Caledonia.

Secondly, most activists today use smartphones and computers, which often have little or no protection against law enforcement surveillance. As a result, it is increasingly easy for law enforcement agencies to access these devices or extract data from them. Access to activists’ SMS messages or simple phone calls has become very cheap, as these data are not encrypted. There is also a thriving market in spyware, which governments use to hack into devices remotely or physically in order to obtain data (contacts, messages, images, location, etc.). Some sophisticated spywares such as Pegasus or Predator—which are more expensive—can remotely activate a device’s microphone, camera, or GPS without the owner’s knowledge. There is a real opacity surrounding the use of such remote spyware. Nevertheless, there is evidence that such tools have been used against environmental activists, particularly in Latin America, and in some cases have even contributed to the deaths of activists and journalists involved in investigating environmental crimes. In liberal democracies, the first cases of these technologies being used against environmental activists are beginning to be documented.

Finally, when law enforcement agencies are unable to collect sufficient data on social movements and activists through online content and/or activists' devices, they may resort to "external" surveillance devices (cameras, microphones, GPS tags, and drones). The deployment of these surveillance devices has grown significantly in recent years, particularly as their unit purchase cost has become increasingly affordable. While some of these devices are already present in public spaces, such as CCTV cameras used to identify activists during demonstrations or other types of action, law enforcement agencies can also conduct "discrete observations" involving the introduction of surveillance devices into private activist spaces, ZADs, squats, and other locations, as is well documented by the "Ears and Eyes" website, which monitors surveillance devices discovered in activist spaces.⁶ The purpose of these observations is to monitor militant activity and gather evidence for repressive purposes.

Louise: This brings us back to the case of the UK, which is a context where surveillance—via the widespread use of CCTV cameras in public spaces, for example—is particularly normalized. Have you noticed specific evolutions in the use of surveillance technologies in the criminalization of environmental activists? What does this tell us about the relationship between activists and the police specifically in the UK context? I am asking this in relation to the instrumentalization of police arrests by Extinction Rebellion, for example, as a key repertoire of action.

Graeme: I think, first of all, it's important to say that there is currently a long-running public enquiry in the UK concerning the activities of over 150 undercover police officers who infiltrated and surveilled non-violent activists in the UK for over four decades from the late 1960s until 2011, in some cases coercively fathering the children of women activists, and this includes environmental activists (Schlembach 2024). So, there is a history of spying and abuse of activists by the police, and (as we are also hearing) a history of the police acting as *agents provocateurs*, themselves designing and staging lawbreaking actions. On the ground, British protest policing often focuses on information gathering, and it's generally the case that the policing of the post-2018 wave has been highly professionalised, particularly where it has involved specialised protest removal teams, who deal with locking on and gluing tactics. Extinction Rebellion, for its part, adopted an explicitly consensual relationship with the police, which many people, myself included, considered naive at best.

In fact, I think what is interesting when we look into this case specifically is the way XR not only instrumentalized arrests in a way but also the initial intention behind them. Civil disobedience didn't start with Extinction Rebellion, obviously, but the emergence of Extinction Rebellion marked the beginning of a new wave of disruptive protest in the UK. It attempted to create a mass movement, paying after each action, and coming back bigger and stronger, with the goal of mobilizing 3.5% of the population. Even after COP 26 in Glasgow, it was claiming it would mobilize two million people in the streets in April 2022. COVID-19 was obviously a problem, but the group's attitude towards the police was also very problematic. On one hand, XR sought to disrupt policing and the courts; on the other, XR saw the police not necessarily as an antagonist but as a concerned party in the breakdown of law and order that would inevitably result from the climate emergency. Unsurprisingly, this unreflexive class and racial positioning produced widespread criticism from academic and, more importantly, activist networks. XR reflected and changed course at the end of 2022. In practical terms, it is now more or less inexistant.

Instead, we have seen the creation of successor groups, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil. These groups do not claim to universality in the way that XR did, and therefore their class and racial position is not widely seen as problematic, because they never claim to be inclusive. They mobilise relatively small numbers of people—in the hundreds rather than the thousands—and seek creative forms of disruption and media attention. In this sense, we can see that they are an accentuation of the types of action that XR carried out, particularly symbolic acts of criminal damage and disruption of the road network. The state's repressive

⁶ The "Ears and Eyes" website is available at <https://www.notrace.how/earsandeyes/>.

response is less a question of policing action on the ground than of increased surveillance, data gathering, and prosecution and sentencing, as discussed already. We are also seeing, and this is, I think, one of the major developments since 2022, the widespread use of arresting activists for conspiring to commit a crime. Bringing this sort of charge means that the prosecution can cast its net far wider than the activists arrested during an action and can arrest activists before an action takes place—for example, Just Stop Oil activists were arrested in July 2024 for “conspiracy to interfere with key national infrastructure” prior to an action planned at London Heathrow. Activists are arrested in the middle of the night, their homes are raided, their laptops and other equipment seized, and they are imprisoned until trial (“on remand”). They are also potentially sentenced to long prison sentences. What we do not yet know is how the imprisonment of activists will affect future tactics. By bringing conspiracy charges against JSO, prosecutors have been able to target movement leaders (such as Hallam) as well as “ordinary” activists. This will inevitably have an effect on movement resources and trust amongst group members.

Louise: The conspiracy charges against Just Stop Oil you just mentioned makes me think of something else that we haven’t discussed so much yet: the discursive attempts by states to “categorize” activists as criminals via different types of discourses and narratives. This raises the question of how activists themselves respond to these categorizations and possibly develop counter-narratives to fight back. Sophie, perhaps you can tell us a bit more about that and whether this is something you have observed in the French context? What kinds of counter-narratives could activists deploy in your view to resist criminalizing labels and categories, and more broadly, contest the official institutional narratives on ecology?

Sophie: Yes, I think the *Les Soulèvements de la Terre* movement does attempt to develop counter-discursive strategies, not only to resist criminalizing categories but also to develop alternative ecological imaginaries. And, interestingly, I think the confrontation of two narratives that correspond to two different conceptions of the ecological issues may explain why political power is tightening its grip on environmental groups. By moving away from the logics of “sustainable development” and “socio-ecological transition,” the narrative deployed by *Les Soulèvements de la Terre* is built against the figures of the powerful who privatize, monopolize, and squander natural resources. For *Les Soulèvements de la Terre*, the focus is on land and water in particular. To achieve this, the collective mobilizes a repertoire of action including blockade, occupation, and disarmament. Indeed, the movement takes its inspiration from the autonomous zadist movement, which played a key role in the victory against the Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport project in 2018. Embodying a total rejection of the state in alternative lifestyles, this movement seeks to recreate these new forms of living during their mobilizations, notably through the encampments that form the backbones during demonstrations.

These counter-narratives are also concretely at play during the actions themselves. During the Sainte-Soline demonstration, for example, the rear base of the protest organized itself to ensure a caring approach. Medic and legal teams were constituted to ensure the safety and well-being of participants. Groups were also set up to monitor sexist and sexual violence throughout the weekends of mobilization. This culture of care is a powerful counter-discourse to violence and state surveillance, building confidence among activists. The narrative written by *Les Soulèvements de la terre* during these events is the opposite of that of the government, which is focused on a binary vision of activism. This counter-discourse can provide strength and hold contemporary movements together. In fact, the government’s narrative is quite different: that of “vandals” destroying and damaging infrastructures belonging to individuals who are the victims of such damage. Although generally inactive on ecological issues, the government is developing a more institutional discourse on ecology, focusing on sustainable development and socio-ecological transition, which ultimately helps to justify and legitimize governmental inaction.

Louise: Nicolas, going back to the discussion on surveillance, do you think the use of criminalizing categories, such as the governmental eco-terrorist discourse or the semantic field of a “dissolution” as explained by Sophie above, can also be used to justify the extensive use of surveillance tools? If so, how?

Nicolas: I think it is very important to understand the decisive role of the criminalising categories used by law enforcement agencies in order to better understand the growing repression of activists of all kinds in liberal democracies, notably those fighting for environmental issues. On one hand, it gives law enforcement agencies access to a wider range of investigative tools, including a whole arsenal of legal and technical repression tools that would not otherwise be available. Turning activists into criminals thus makes it possible to increase their level of surveillance and repression by law enforcement agencies. On the other hand, the use of a criminalising category also makes it possible to work on the social acceptance of the repression that targets these social movements. The more militants are demonised in the eyes of the general public, the more socially acceptable repression seems. People labelled as eco-terrorists will always enjoy less popular support than “simple environmental activists.”

Some recent cases of repression against environmental activists have made the headlines due to the considerable human and technological resources deployed by law enforcement agencies thanks to the penalising categories used to monitor and repress them. One of the most illustrative examples is the repression of environmental activists who broke into and attempted to sabotage one of the fifty most polluting factories in France belonging to LafargeHolcim—the world’s largest concrete producer—near Marseille in December 2022, which led the French authorities to want to dissolve *Les Soulèvements de la Terre* even before Sainte-Soline events.

The sabotage action, carried out by approximately 150 activists, is estimated by the company to have caused just over six million euros worth of damage. Although no arrests were made at the time of the incident, the public prosecutor swiftly initiated legal proceedings, charging the individuals involved with criminal conspiracy (*association de malfaiteurs* in French) and “aggravated degradation in an organized gang.” This enabled the transfer of the investigation to the anti-terrorist police (SDAT), which has considerably more extensive investigative resources. In June 2023, thirty-five activists were arrested following police raids in the early hours of the morning. Some of them were interrogated for more than ninety-six hours by the anti-terrorist police. To make these arrests, the anti-terrorist police used extremely invasive investigative methods: use of public CCTV cameras to identify activists, direct location of their phones requested from their operators, requests to the main digital platforms for full information on their online activities, tapping of their telephone conversations, DNA and fingerprint tests, installation of microphones (and GPS devices) in some of their vehicles and homes, analysis of their bank transactions, daily surveillance on foot and by car, and even the installation of spyware on one of their phones by the DGSI (French domestic intelligence service), probably with the aim of accessing messages exchanged by the activists on an encrypted and secure messaging application (Signal messaging).

In this case, classifying environmental activists under certain legal categories allows the authorities to deploy extensive means of surveillance and repression against activists, culminating in an investigation file of over 14,000 pages. I think this example is a good illustration of the way in which the authorities use criminalising categories to increase repression against activists at a time when some of them are trying to increase the balance of power to break the neo-liberal capitalist status quo. For the authorities, it is also a question of “making examples” to discourage any radicalisation in the means of action used by these movements. If activists know that they risk being treated as criminals or terrorists, then they are more likely to give up going beyond moderate means of action. Even if in some cases, at the end of the proceedings, the activists are not found guilty, the proceedings and trials—which generally last several years—often already act as a traumatic punishment for the people concerned, their entourage, and the activist environment in which they operate. Being raided by the police in the early hours of the morning, discovering that your every move has been monitored by investigators, or being questioned for several hours in anti-terrorist proceedings is extremely traumatic and can discourage people from engaging in political activism.

Louise: As a last part of our discussion, I’d like to broaden the scope of our exchanges a little bit and try to reflect on what are the broader implications of some of your observations, in particular if we consider the

combination of increasingly normalized acts of abusive state repression together with the simultaneous normalization of far-right parties and actors. How would you re-situate or re-contextualize some of our discussions against the broader political context in France, Belgium, and the UK?

Graeme: At the 2017 and 2019 general elections, the Labour Party presented a potentially transformative political programme, focusing on the reduction of wealth inequalities and the provision of public services. It was, in broad terms, hardly radical: the party's programme fitted closely with the traditions of mainstream European social democracy. The way that this was treated as an illegitimate project that needed to be crushed—not just by the Conservatives and the right-wing media, but by the dominant right-wing faction within the Labour Party itself—was instructive.

Now elected in July 2024 with a huge majority in parliament, but with a remarkably low share of the national vote, the Labour government has announced the end of austerity but is following an economic programme that is largely consistent with austerity. There are many discursive differences between the current Labour and the previous Conservative government, not least the apparent end of culture war attacks on social minorities and public institutions. But public policy goals are likely, at best, to be ameliorative rather than transformative, with public investment highly circumscribed, and the absence of a long-term vision for the country declared as a virtue.

It is early days in this process. But there is little sign that the Labour government has any intention to develop the type of vision that would address the numerous overlapping crises of the public realm that require a coordinated state response, from child poverty to integrated transport and the collapsing education, health and care systems. The government has, notably, maintained its commitment to green growth, which differentiates it from an increasingly climate-skeptical Conservative Party, but has done so without the socially transformative design of the Green New Deal: its climate policies are a question of economic performance, not a social programme. Net zero is the perfect vehicle for this sort of politics: a technocratic exercise in carbon accounting, compatible with a top-down and highly unequal economy, rather than as a basis for developing an alternative future.

It has shown no signs of repealing the legislation brought in by the Conservatives in 2022 and 2023, legislation that it voted against in Parliament. And worryingly, it has maintained at least some parts of the Conservatives' approach. In June 2023, the Conservative government redefined "serious" disruption to mean "more than minor," a redefinition that had been expressly rejected by Parliament, using a parliamentary technique known as secondary legislation. Civil liberties organisation Liberty took the government to court and won. But rather than accept the verdict, the new Labour government has appealed against it, signalling that it wants to maintain this definition. A Home Office assessment in Spring 2023 estimated that this redefinition would increase police interventions in demonstrations and assemblies by up to 50%, and that this would lead to a substantial increase in prosecutions.

Nicolas: In recent years, we have seen major electoral victories for the far right, but it's not only that. We have also seen a normalisation of its discourse, and even of some of its non-institutional actors, which until recently were much more denounced or repressed. And there's something cynical about the fact that this is happening at the same time as the increasing criminalisation of left-wing activists fighting against social and environmental inequalities. We are observing a gradual reversal: xenophobic, racist, or sexist discourses (or even actions) are becoming increasingly normalised, while the actions of progressive activists are increasingly criminalised. The re-election of Donald Trump, a politician whom almost half of American voters consider to be a fascist (Langer and Sparks 2024), who had just been convicted of a criminal offence (Smolar 2024), and was still the subject of several trials,⁷ is an important indicator of this. And remember

⁷ Notably for inciting his supporters to attempt a "coup d'état" by invading the US Capitol Building after refusing to concede defeat to Joe Biden.

that Trump himself was pushing for the criminalisation of left-wing activists, notably by wanting to classify the “anti-facist movement” as a terrorist group in the United States (Bogel-Burroughs and Garcia 2020).

Sophie and Graeme spoke of the French and British cases, but similar dynamics are also at work in Belgium, where the far right is increasingly strong politically, particularly in view of the recent 2024 elections. Its discourse and priorities have largely infused the centrist and liberal right parties (which were historically more moderate on issues like migration, repression, and criminality), as shown by the 2025–2029 government agreement, with its very pronounced security orientation and, in particular, its desire to reintroduce an “anti-breakers” law (see above), to make the fight against drug trafficking the priority, or even the desire to introduce a nationality deprivation for those considered to be “terrorists” (Coppi and Sente 2024). The Vlaams Belang, the Flemish far-right nationalist party, also recently tabled a bill to “extend the Belgian list of terrorist organisations” to include the Antifacist Front, Black Lives Matter, and Extinction Rebellion (*Chambre des représentants de Belgique* 2024). The federal government is currently attempting to pass a law allowing it to dissolve organisations it considers radical or terrorist: organisations defending Palestinian prisoners and environmental movements are directly targeted. Once again, the goal is to strengthen executive power by circumventing the judicial branch.

Finally, perhaps just a word on the link between the far right and ecological issues: contrary to what is sometimes believed, the far right has historically used “ecological” arguments to justify racist or xenophobic policies on a given territory. It’s a little forgotten, but for example, the Nazi regime in Germany had a relatively well-developed discourse linking ecological issues, borders, and race. So, the fact that some far-right parties are once again trying to articulate ecological issues is nothing new. There is probably a desire on the part of the far right to position itself electorally on these issues in order to attract new voters. This is, for example, the background to the slight revival of interest in environmental issues by the National Rally in France, whose president, Jordan Bardella, recently declared that: “the best ally of ecology is the border” (qtd. in Landrieu 2019).

Louise: What we are witnessing today on the environmental activist scene, in particular with regards to Western states’ increasingly repressive response, did not happen overnight. On one hand, state repression has a longer history anchored in authoritarianism, colonialism, and broader structures of domination. It is deployed to protect the existing interests and privileges of dominant actors and institutions in society. The fact that part of the environmental activism has now fallen under the scope of “radical,” “violent,” and ultimately sanctionable activities is a sign of a broader authoritarian turn taken by so-called “liberal democracies” to exclude anyone or any activity which threatens the existing configuration of power. On the other hand, the arsenal of tools and measures with which states are currently shutting down the democratic contestation is the illustration of more recent evolutions, including technological ones, and says something specific about activist repression and surveillance in the years 2020s. In this contribution, we have tried to illustrate some of this recent and not-so-recent phenomenon by bringing together empirical traces of the practices, discourses, and legal manoeuvres through which Western states—in particular Belgium, France, and the UK—are turning environmental activists into criminals.

Among others, what comes out of our discussion clearly is the multifaceted and multi-dimensional nature of this role-reversal: the way activists are gradually portrayed as “violent” individuals who should be sanctioned and excluded relies on different processes of marginalization, (de-)legitimization, and “disciplining” by public institutions. The institutional discourse and its reception by public opinion is a critical element of this process, as is well illustrated in France and the governmental efforts to portray environmental activists as terrorists. The gradual and systematic infusion into the public debate of images and narratives of terror, using semantics that have been used in entirely—and heavily connotated—contexts, serves as the affective background against which concrete repressive measures and strategies can be deployed by states to control and repress anything that is perceived as a threat to the political and economic status quo. A second stage—and here second is not meant in chronological terms—happens at the level of

legal institutionalization. As emblematically captured by the Belgian attempt to sanction anything that represents a “malicious attack against the authority of the state,” the narratives and discursive gestures deployed by governments and public institutions are gradually finding their way in the institutional and legal backbone of all three countries under discussion (France, Belgium, and the UK). In addition to legal instruments, another side of the role-reversing process relates to the very practical and material means that are deployed by states, in terms of technologies or police practices, for example, to “contain” protestors and gradually discourage political contestation.

Overall, our exchanges document a large panoply of measures and instruments that have been adopted recently to restrict activists’ room for manoeuvre, at different levels of action (as explained in Page and Robinson 2025): (1) at protest actions themselves by applying a disproportionately heavy police and sometimes military arsenal (resulting in numerous arrests and different levels of police violence and brutality, as was the case, for example, in the case of Sainte-Soline in France); (2) before the actions by deploying surveillance techniques that dissuade participation (as well as during the action themselves, for example, via the use of facial recognition that has a significant chilling effect on potential participants); and (3) after protest actions through altered court procedures (e.g., in the UK, where activists can no longer justify their disobedient actions on moral and political grounds in court), extended jail sentences, and new types of charges assigned to social movement participants (e.g., terrorist and conspiracy charges).

The different steps taken by governments to carry out this role-reversal is worrying in and of itself; it illustrates the gradual “illiberal” turn taken in many Western societies and the carving out of their democratic vitality by foreclosing the space to contest the existing configuration of power. But it is also particularly concerning, as our last exchange explains, given that the increasing criminalization of left-wing activists takes place alongside another kind of role-reversal: the normalization and legitimization of far-right ideas, practices, and actions.

Having said that, and while our discussion might draw an overall pessimistic picture of the landscape of environmental activism today—and more fundamentally, of the right to protest in some Western societies—the multidimensional nature of these role-reversals also means that there are different levels along which counter-strategies and resistance might be organized. Activists still have agency even when their room to manoeuvre is severely restricted. This could take the form of concrete tactics to resist and bypass the increasingly ICT-aided surveillance organized by governments and public institutions, the reinforcement of activist legal teams to counter the hardening laws on protest, the occupation of new spaces and imaginaries that defy state logics and expectations, or the active diffusion of counter-narratives and stories that contest the increasing normalization of activists’ criminalization.

Our discussion, we hope, will encourage further research, exchanges, and concrete actions on several fronts. First, at the level of empirical documentation to trace the ongoing autocratization process of Western societies—i.e. the “process of regime change... that makes the exercise of political power more arbitrary and repressive and that restricts the space for public contestation and political participation” (Tomini 2021)—of which the criminalization of environmental activists is just one facet. Comparing different fields and being aware of the variety of strategies, discourses, and practices deployed by governments in different contexts will be key to resisting and anticipating a further tightening of the role-reversal that we have started to discuss here, and which may include a growing number of groups and individuals. Second, at the level of political thought, our discussion brings to light important edges and areas of tension not only on key notions such as political violence and conflictuality but also on the sociology of protest, and specifically on who still has access to political participation in an increasingly oppressive context. Third, our exchanges, we hope, may feed reflections not only at the level of the imagination of counter-strategies and narratives that contest the reversal of activists into criminals but also, more broadly, the dominant, institutional project of ecology and environmentalism.

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