



# Baptiste Morizot

## Rekindling Life

A Common Front

Translated by Catherine Porter



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# **Rekindling Life**

## **A Common Front**

Baptiste Morizot

Translated by Catherine Porter

polity

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# 1

## Give Us a Lever and a Fulcrum

On Monday, May 6, 2019, scientists working under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) submitted their report on the state of biodiversity: “Nature and its vital contributions to people, which together embody biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are deteriorating worldwide.”<sup>1</sup> Action on the part of nation-states is quite obviously not commensurate with the stakes. Contemporary societies urgently need, through democratic means, to empower political structures capable of addressing this problem. At the same time, less institutionalized political forms, countless more local initiatives emerging from civil society, need to be deployed. Our collective intelligence has to take up the fight, in configurations yet to be invented, tested, profiled, propelled. A thousand initiatives are under construction right now, with little fanfare. Rebellions against extinction. Transformations in the use of territories. Cultural battles, too, over the meaning of words, the formulation of problems, the nature of our modern legacy, the prioritization of stakes.

Those of us who are aware of the crisis are growing in numbers. There is energy and intelligence to spare. We want to stop wasting time – we no longer have time to waste – on quibbles, purist posturing, fuzzy compromises, revolutionary romanticism: there are things to think and



things to do (and often in that order, because nothing is more practical than a good theory).

But a feeling of powerlessness prevails. The problem lies in the process of transmission between our hands and the world. We need ideas endowed with hands, and good ideas for the hands available.

The challenge comes down to inventing *levers*. A lever is an elegant arrangement; it is probably the first mechanism ever invented, the oldest of all. It is thought to have been developed several million years ago by our primate ancestors, who used their animal genius to launch into manual technologies (though other animals undoubtedly invented similar devices). The function of a lever is to make commensurate two things that are a priori incommensurable: on one side, a hand; on the other, a disproportionately large rock. By sliding a solid branch under the rock and wedging the rock against a solid support, a fulcrum, the animal intelligence that we have inherited can “move the earth,” as Archimedes put it.<sup>2</sup>

We need *Archimedes’ levers for large-scale ecological operations*, tools commensurate with the situation. We need them at the local level; we need them to be multiple, sharable, and effective. The lever is the only apparatus that can bring hands and the world into communication, that can make commensurable a set of actors (you, me, paltry little bit players) and the great adventure of life on earth, life that has been going on for billions of years – this biotic adventure that has made us all. For the action of ecological and evolutionary dynamics has chiseled us in every detail, with our opposable thumbs, the powers of love and curiosity that extend beyond our species (we see these powers even among certain cetaceans), our elegant and ambiguous primate brains, our political capacities for mobilization. All these powers are fundamental legacies of

our evolution. Turnabout is fair play: it is time for us to mobilize our living powers to protect the adventure of life that has bestowed them on us.

I use the term “lever of ecological action” to name an arrangement that establishes commensurability between ourselves and the adventure of life all around us. A lever of ecological action must be efficient, accessible, uncompromising, rooted, effective in the short run and powerful *in the long run*; to achieve this latter goal, it must weave itself into the powers of resilience of life itself, those of the surrounding ecosystems. It must take on a real problem, a particular problem that can be overcome by a solution that is local but also scalable, applicable to a project that benefits global society (the lever and its “world”). Agroecologies that are plugged into short farm-to-table circuits are arrangements of this sort. In certain contexts, ZADs (Zones to Be Defended, an official designation in France) are also examples. There are thousands of levers to be invented. They are already sprouting up everywhere.

Here, I want to begin by exploring one local lever of this type, centered on the defense of forests. From there, we shall be able to move up a level in generality. For the philosophical and political analysis of the conflicts addressed in this case study will draw out a thread for further inquiry, an Ariadne’s thread that we shall follow to try to get out of a labyrinth of dualisms, either/or dichotomies – nature/humanity, exploit/sanctuarize, wild/domestic – all of which create useless conflicts and keep us away from the real battlefronts.

We can now see the following question on the horizon: What becomes of “protecting nature,” once we have understood that “nature” is a dualist construct that has contributed to the destruction of our milieus of life,<sup>3</sup> and

that “protecting” implies a paternalistic understanding of our relations with the living world?

## Notes

1. [https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/ipbes\\_7\\_10\\_add.1\\_en\\_1.pdf](https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/ipbes_7_10_add.1_en_1.pdf).
2. This is the celebrated “lever effect,” which multiplies the effectiveness of the person using a lever. The invention can be used for better or for worse: lever effects are used in global finance in the form of leveraged loans destined to multiply profits for the lender, but to the detriment of the world economy, as we saw with the subprime crisis in 2008.
3. [Translator’s note] The word *milieu* is defined in the Merriam-Webster online thesaurus as referring to “the place, time, and circumstances in which something occurs,” especially “the physical and social surroundings of a person or group of persons” (<https://merriam-webster.com/thesaurus.milieu>). In this text, the term is used more broadly to encompass the physical and social surroundings of a living being or a group of living beings.

## 2

# Anatomy of a Lever, a Case Study: Hearths of Free Evolution

The project that I propose to investigate here seems to me to have several properties that characterize a lever for large-scale ecological action; it is an ideal example, as we shall see. It targets a specific problem. It is local, but it is powerful. It has to do precisely with the drama of species loss, the weakening of ecosystems induced by fragmentation of milieus, by overharvesting and overhunting. It responds to these challenges as best it can – for the time being, microscopically, but already effectively, at its level. Above all, it is real.

I am referring to a project calling for the radical protection of what are known as hearths of free evolution, protection ensured through the legal and economic tool of land acquisition. Initiatives of this sort in France were initially undertaken under the auspices of the Forêts Sauvages (Wild Forests) association, and they are now supported by the Association pour la Protection des Animaux Sauvages, or ASPAS (Association for the Protection of Wild Animals).<sup>1</sup> In the 2019 Vercors Vie Sauvage (Wildlife in the Vercors) initiative, the case on which we shall focus here, ASPAS acquired a forest of 500 hectares (about 1,235 acres) in the gorges of the Lyonne river valley.

For what purpose? To leave it alone. Restore it to the beech trees, silver firs, deer, squirrels, wolves, eagles, tits,

lichens: to wild prairies and mature forests. Leave it in free evolution – that is, let the milieu develop according to its own laws, without exploiting, modifying, or managing it. Leave the dead trees standing so they can become habitats for other living beings. Leave the fallen wood on the ground so it will melt into humus. Let all manner of living creatures come and go. Let evolution and ecological dynamics do their serene, stubborn work of resilience, invigoration, circulation of energy, creation of life forms. Cut short all “anthropic forcing.”<sup>2</sup> These preserves are open to humans: anyone can go in, provided they respect the site.

The idea is diabolically simple. It does not look very revolutionary, but it harbors legal displacements, political subversions, and philosophical decisions that we shall explore in depth. It emerges at the confluence of three concepts (for the originality of an idea often lies in its being the meeting place and unique knotting point of other ideas): free evolution (as the style of management of a specific milieu), land acquisition by a nonprofit association (as a means of making protection permanent), and participatory financing (as a way of mobilizing the citizenry to share in joint ownership).

## ***From small lives to Great Life***

The singularity of the project that I am seeking to track here lies in its relation to time. When one is on the territory of the recently acquired nature reserve Vercors Vie Sauvage, for example, one can appreciate the temporal scales of other living things. The beechnut that just fell at my feet contains four seeds; one of them could become a venerable beech tree if it sprouts tomorrow, if it is not cut down, if it is allowed to live its lives. It will be the wild forests of tomorrow, the ancient forests, the richest milieus,



the most timeless. If we allow it the time, it will become a habitat tree sheltering a proliferation of fauna: a whole cosmopolitan world will dwell in this cosmos, with its differentiated floors, its multiform communications, its labyrinth of unknown lives, its interspecies conventions. In this forest, there are already a few beech trees that may well be a couple of centuries old. Under their branches, one feels what it means to build a world, a world for the other forms of life. From the sprouting of one fragile seed to the mastodon before our eyes, the life of this beech is like a very slow explosion that goes on and on for centuries. It is an expanding galaxy that welcomes and shelters all reigns, from squirrels to lichens. A very slow explosion that undertakes stunning formal quests in order to explore ways of dialoguing with the elements: air, water, earth. Experimenting with the world, feeling its way, from the tips of its branches and its roots, with its infinitely slow intelligence. Taking centuries to explore, by palpations of sky and rocks, the possibilities of being a tree. It is this sort of tree that can flourish and repopulate a preserve like Vercors Vie Sauvage. It is this sort of forest, this type of Great Life, that the sites of free evolution are meant to resuscitate. Nothing more, nothing less.

But doing so will take 300 years at the very least. The ecologists explain that biodiversity abounds in a tree after 100 or 150 years.<sup>3</sup> In Europe, a third of the biodiversity that a tree harbors depends on the later stages: this is when it really becomes a world for myriad other life forms. Exploited trees *never* reach such an advanced age; allowing them to do so is not economically viable, according to the criteria of contemporary forestry.

Our longevity as human individuals is trivial in comparison to that of a tree, a coral, an ancient forest, an ecosystem. Yet the Great Life of ecosystems, the green lungs of forests, carbon cycles, the evolution of species, is the condition

enabling the small lives of individuals. What is at stake in a lever for ecological action is protection of that Great Life. But in order to protect something, we are compelled to see the world from the vantage point of what we want to protect. For we can only protect a forest by protecting its world, and we can only understand its world by grasping time and space from the perspective peculiar to this life form. By following its own way of fashioning its space-time. To truly protect something is to protect it from *its own point of view*. Indeed, its own point of view is what we must protect.

A defining feature of this Great Life is that it lives and breathes on the scale of centuries and millennia. We must therefore protect it in the same dimensions.

While our light bulbs are designed to last six months, our policies devised to last a few years, why not imagine a politics for life forms that would be conceived on the scale of centuries?

That is the untimely ambition of sites of free evolution that have been established through land acquisition: to bring into being the ancient forests of tomorrow. The idea is to protect feral nature, the nature that regenerates spontaneously if we leave it to act on its own. But this nature has to be protected where people live - in the Drôme, in the Massif Central, in Brittany - in order to engage local populations; if we protect only prestigious and remote natural sites (isolated national parks, sublimely high mountains), we are implicitly justifying the abandonment of *all* other milieus.<sup>4</sup>

But how are we to *act, now, urgently*, on the scale of centuries - while lobbies are pressuring us to extract resources, to open new spaces for exploitation, to cut down every tree as soon as it is 60 years old, in the mad race to keep the markets going?

## ***A politics of the living on the scale of centuries***

Here is where the genius of these projects comes in: the trick is to take advantage of French property law and subvert it. Divert it, inasmuch as it is one of the causes of the ecological crisis: land ownership is what guarantees to exploiters the right to pressure the milieu for their private interest, sometimes to the detriment of the web of life. The idea here is to use property law to fight *against* such deviations. Article 544 of the French Civil Code consecrates ownership as the right of the owner to “enjoy and dispose of things in the most absolute manner.” This right is, in part, what makes it possible to weaken and sometimes devastate spaces in the name of profitability. “Absolute” does not mean “sovereign” (the right to do anything and everything), because the right of ownership is framed by the formula “provided that [the owner] does not use it in a way prohibited by laws or regulations.” An “absolute right” means, here, a “deterrent” right: in other words, a right opposable to all, a right that allows non-owners to be prohibited from using the property.

But if ownership gives the right to absolute exploitation of a milieu, limiting external control, this means that it also gives the right to absolute *protection*, without suffering outside pressure from lobbies. The idea is to take advantage of the possibilities offered by the property law and turn it against itself, against its world. To carry out an infiltration in plain sight.

Any attempt to create a national or regional nature reserve is exposed to countless demands by hunters, farmers, foresters, livestock breeders and herders, industrialists: all of them refuse to see public land put out of reach of their multiform exploitations (extracting, pasturing, logging,

harvesting, hunting, and so on). These negotiations among different users of a given territory are important and appropriate in most contexts. Émilie Hache has recently written an important book on the necessity of such negotiations and the shape they ought to take, as a democratic form of the relation between humans and their milieus.<sup>5</sup> A priori, and in general, we might suppose that these negotiations are the best option, especially to prevent the risk of local populations losing their lands in the name of protecting nature. But moving beyond general positions, we have to look closely at the contexts and situations to do justice in each case. For, in the French context we are focusing on, when it comes to protecting patches of forest or rivers, brandishing negotiation as a moral principle is in fact one more weapon exploiters can use to prevent even the simplest and most reasonable measures for protecting milieus: when the power relation is too unequal, defending negotiation amounts to defending the powers that be. (I shall show this further on by clarifying the logic of *unequal spatial scales*.) It means defending the parties with the greatest economic and political lobbying power.<sup>6</sup> And, as we all now know, this regularly occurs to the detriment of the common good - common to humans and the other living beings.<sup>7</sup>

Protectors of nature have thus been impotent witnesses to measures as contradictory as the return of hunting or pasturing in the very heart of some national parks or in the best-preserved zones of certain regional parks, which are already microscopic. They have similarly watched conservatories of natural spaces gradually introduce *active management* into sites that were once in free evolution. These spaces are being modified according to the logic of heritage sites, according to aesthetic criteria, security concerns, and/or with the aim of protecting certain targeted species. (This conservation model can be defended

in certain contexts, provided that there are no claims to monopoly.)

In response, “ASPAS, not being satisfied with the policy governing protected areas, and the deviations from it that have become customary, has created a new status, which corresponds to status 1b, ‘Zone of wild nature’ of the UICN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) and has registered the name.”<sup>8</sup> The status of Wildlife Reserve (*Réserve de vie sauvage*) applies to areas in free evolution. It is simply a matter of taking ownership. The challenge is to skirt a double ambush: the compromises induced by unequal power relations with exploiters on one side, the shifting policies in the management of protected species on the other. The Forêts Sauvages association has adopted analogous goals, using different terminology. It hardly matters – there may be multiple strategies, but the project is what counts.

Land acquisition is precisely what makes it possible to put a stop to endless compromising with lobbyists acting on the part of would-be exploiters. Private ownership in fact allows acquirers to avoid most of these tensions and negotiations: their enjoyment is “absolute,” in the legal sense of “actionable in opposition to all non-owners.”

The first key idea behind the project of creating sites of free evolution is thus to turn the legal invention of private property to the benefit of life forms other than our own: to the benefit of other living beings besides individual human proprietors. Because our law has been carved out by and for the possessors, property law is, paradoxically, a major weapon for protecting milieus: it suffices to turn the situation upside down. Ownership gives absolute enjoyment to the owner, but here the owners are not buying in order to secure personal enjoyment – they are buying to restore enjoyment to *other forms of life*.



No one will be able to cut down trees to sell them cheaply; no one will be able to sort out the timber, pry out the badgers, feed the deer corn so as to be able to shoot them on sight: the territory will be left to itself. Ecologist and forester Alain Persuy asks: “Are we ready, alongside forests that are exploited in multifunctional ways, to leave some of them in peace?”<sup>9</sup>

In other words, to leave the forest in free evolution. In 2008, Jean-Claude Génot proposed “free evolution” as a management style for natural spaces in France.<sup>10</sup> In *La nature malade de la gestion* (Nature Suffering from Management), Génot offered a critique of the shift in management practices that began to take hold in the 1970s, a shift toward active intervention in and modification of wild milieus set aside for protection; this was a landscapist, garden-oriented approach to conservation, incapable of accepting the ascetic posture of *doing nothing*. While modification may make sense in some conservation initiatives on the local level, Génot was criticizing its institution as the dominant and generalized logic for protecting milieus.

In contrast, a territory in free evolution is a space-time where diversity is allowed to settle in spontaneously: that of individuals (in terms of age or conformation), species (many exploited forests harbor a single targeted species), forms (vines, underbrush, strata), and dynamics of landscape creation and successions (a damp zone has a tendency to be colonized by willows over time, and then to become a forest; an uprooted tree leads to an explosion of sun-loving species).

It is not a question of following the American tradition of preserving ecosystems as they would have been before the arrival of humans (while forgetting the role of Amerindians, moreover, in shaping American landscapes), in a state of

supposed patrimonial virginity. Free evolution, the inverse of the cult of wilderness as nature pristine and intact, accepts the human history of forests.<sup>11</sup> In Europe, forests are often interwoven with complex ancient human ways of exploiting them. The point is not to turn back toward a supposed purity, but to allow the spontaneous forces of the forest to take over again. This is what is called ferality: letting an ecosystem express its powers, use its capacity to regenerate itself after it has been transformed by humans.

Leave – that is, restore – wild life to itself. This is the second key idea in all its troubling beauty. A forest in free evolution does what life does. It struggles spontaneously against global warming, by limiting the greenhouse effect. It stocks carbon, and it does this all the better when its trees are ancient and venerable. It works to purify water and air, to form soils, to reduce erosion, to foster a rich, resilient biodiversity capable of absorbing the blows of the coming climate changes. It does not do this for us, but it does it all the same, and its gifts are priceless.

Why reason in terms of profits and losses if, here, everything is offered and impregnable?

## ***In free evolution***

The idea of “leaving the forest to itself” triggers traumatic echoes in many people. We need to start by disrupting the associations. For the idea is taken indiscriminately today (by the “deciders” first and foremost) as implying rural desertification, loss of control over the territory, the erasure of human presence, an invasion of wildness – and everyone wants to fight against it, without quite knowing what is involved. Because the idea of a fragment of the world left to itself is terrifying.

But the real problem lies elsewhere, in the matter of spatial scale, which must never be forgotten. For it is not the “world” in general that would be left to itself, restored to itself, but only morsels of wild life in a French territory of which 99% has been exploited, transformed, hunted, anthropized. What these preserves are currently trying to protect from destructive human activities are tiny spots - confetti scattered over the map. The zones truly protected from exploitation, appropriation, and development in France oscillate between 0.02% and 1% of the French territory, depending on the criteria used for measuring. Humans can already manage, develop, sometimes cut down, dry up, and build, virtually *everywhere*. Is it really so unreasonable to imagine restoring a few parcels of peace and quiet to the other life forms that populate the Earth alongside us?

One model of scientific ecology makes the disparities readily visible. In substance, this model consists in comparing the biomass of vertebrates (let us say animals in general, humans included) on the surface of the Earth, on two dates: 10,000 years ago, and today. Of the animal mass 10,000 years ago, 97% was constituted by wild fauna, with humans weighing in at about 3%. Today, domestic animals make up 85% of the biomass of all terrestrial vertebrates, and humans have moved up to 13%. Wild fauna, once 97% of the total, now constitute just 2%.<sup>12</sup> A massive overturning, a colossal confiscation of the biomass by domesticated animals, to the detriment of the other components of the ecosystems - wild fauna, in particular. In the process, humans have amputated 50% of the autotrophic biomass (plants, let us say).<sup>13</sup> These numbers do not require lengthy commentaries. We can let them settle in our minds, where they can work at turning us into living beings *among others*.

And yet the defenders of exploitation continue to stigmatize all solid efforts to protect milieus, and they continue to demand compromises, exploitation rights even within the protected confetti. Gilbert Cochet described the phenomenon one day when we were exploring the western portion of the Vercors Vie Sauvage reserve:

It is as though, by sharing the wealth between the exploiters and nature, we were giving 99% to the former and 1% to the latter. But then the exploiters come in and say: "In your 1%, you have to compromise with us, you have to allow economic activities, otherwise it's unfair: we can't give everything to nature." But they already have virtually all the territory!<sup>14</sup>

Whatever the acolytes of growth may say about these proposals for forests in free evolution, there is no secret plan for covering the whole world with preserves in which exploitation would be forbidden. There is no all-powerful hidden eco-tyrannical conspiracy determined to forbid the world to humans: it is from the standpoint of pugnacious underlings that a minority is standing up for zones of free evolution. The objections to making sanctuaries of these plots are in fact ideological: they reverse the dominant and the dominated parties. The real power relation is the inverse: protecting these spaces and their fauna is a struggle like David's against Goliath.

The resistance is simply seeking to withhold a small percentage of land from exploitation, to the benefit of the living fabric that constitutes our giving environments. Is this such a radical quest, or simply a matter of good sense and a touch of decency? These days, it seems that humanism itself has changed sides.

The second fear associated with free evolution is fear of a "return of wildness": fear of losing control over the

territory, giving up our role as “developers of the earth,” being “submerged” by wildness. This fantasy is easily neutralized if we look at a phenomenon that is already omnipresent: all the landowners who are practicing free evolution “unawares.” In fact, millions of acres of French forest land are the private property of people who are unaware of the fact, or pay no attention to it, having inherited the land in some vague way; these sites are already peacefully undergoing free evolution. Still, if any owner should decide to profit from them or modify them, free evolution and its powerful long-term effects would be wiped out. For the decline in economic and managerial activity related to forests left to themselves is only the current phantom of past exploitation: we need to think in terms of free evolution as a *positive* development, one that does not entail simply an act of abandonment but rather an affirmative act of protection over the long term that would make the forested lands in question sanctuaries immune to volatile cycles of multiform exploitation. The word “protection” is actually not the right one, here, as we shall see: it is rather a matter of invigoration, dynamic conservation centered on ecological and evolutionary potentials given the conditions that allow them to flourish.

Forests in free evolution do not imply the return of a wilderness that would submerge civilization; they are just forests developing as they do when they are forgotten, when people stop thinking that they have to be developed, valorized, modified so they can flourish. Nor is free evolution a straightforward letting-go: it is one diplomatic practice among other possible practices that could be adopted toward forests. It consists in recentering our viewpoint toward that of a forest, then taking seriously its own patterns of behavior, and finally seeking the best way to give the forest in all its richness the conditions under which it can express itself. This is a strong position, but one



that is difficult to maintain in the recent culture of conservation, obsessed as it is by blind faith in the need to take charge, sometimes in defiance of good sense (for example, when managers of natural milieus are compelled by law to cut down all the dead trees, to protect the “safety” of people walking in the forests, thereby depriving all the fauna of innumerable habitats offered by the cavities in standing dead wood: a sort of protection *against* nature). Free evolution is a specific, positive, thought-out practice: it means doing nothing at all so that a forest is left free to regenerate.

The initiative to defend forests in free evolution is thus a subtle arrangement for navigation that tacks between problematic approaches, weighty inheritances, and abstract categories that are stigmatized as a whole. The project behind the establishment of hearths of free evolution in France entails three shifts away from the currently dominant trends: it avoids setting up a patrimonial “virgin” nature – a notion proper to the American tradition – by betting on the strengths of ferality and naturality; it uses land acquisition to neutralize unsustainable exploitation; and it fends off the impulse to intervene by adopting the principles of free evolution.

## ***Deconstructing a slogan: “nature under glass”***

The widespread, almost automatic image summoned up by the terms “nature reserve” or “integral protection” is that of nature under glass. This particularly insidious expression warrants painstaking deconstruction.

Put under glass, put in a glass case: these dismissive expressions are brandished on a massive scale by the agrobusiness and pro-hunting lobbies, in order to