



A house in Aubrac. Yuval Ben-Ami

'Suddenly I Was Inside Nothing': What's Really Going on in France's Empty Diagonal

France's sparsely populated 'empty diagonal' is a swath of land that covers about a third of the country's territory. Despite its name, there are some pleasant surprises there, as revealed on a roadtrip

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"It's a place to which I reacted in a totally spiritual way, a place where nature bursts into you, where you can hear the rustling of the stars. I was pregnant when we got there, and I told myself: This is where I want my child to be born." The speaker, Caroline Meyer, was born in Stockholm and now lives in Marseille, but she gave birth to her son, Nathanael in the district of Lozère, in south-central France. It was the idea of her partner at the time to move there: He'd heard that it was the most sparsely populated part of the country. The magical ambience of the place lasted after they moved there, but along with it came a challenge. Caroline's partner enjoyed support from the local government for his internet business, but her career as a jazz singer was temporarily derailed. "I wasn't able to immediately adjust to a situation where there was nowhere to go and nothing to do," she says. "Suddenly I was inside nothing."

It was Caroline who first told me about Lozère, which is located in a geographical space that can be called "France's subconscious," though the more usual name for it is diagonale du vide – "empty diagonal." Locals don't care for that term, which implies that they don't exist or count for anything, that their land is barren. One geographer, Jean-Francois Gravier, used an even more dubious term. His 1947 book, in which he decried the contrast between urban France and the remote and fading periphery, was titled "Paris and the French Desert."

The empty diagonal is a sparsely populated swath of land approximately 1,000 kilometers long, with an average width of 400 kilometers, stretching from the summits of the Ardennes area in northeastern France to the Pyrenees in its southwest. It covers about one-third of Europe's second-largest country. To its northwest lies Paris; to the southeast, Lyon.

I myself live in a village in southeastern France, along the fringes of the so-called empty diagonal, adjacent to its least-populated part – a broad plateau called the “Massif Central.”

On one occasion I ended up driving quite close to the empty diagonal, during a spontaneous trip that took me past Avignon, to the pleasant town of Barjac. The sun was setting and I'd had enough for the day and was heading home, but I made a wrong turn and found myself winding through narrow valleys between slopes crowded with dwarf oaks, just south of the diagonal. The thought of the vast area on the other side frightened me, a native of a tiny land, one 30th the size of France. I turned Waze on and went home.



Some people give credit for Lozère's recovery to the cows herded here. Today, the “Aubrac steak” is known across France. GUY Christian / hemis.fr / AFP

But at some point earlier this winter the wanderlust hit me and I felt impelled to visit the empty diagonal. There are some very far-flung places in the world – deserts, jungles and islands of ice – but isolation of this intensity in the heart of the tumult of the industrialized West is like a metropolis full of skyscrapers being hidden in the Sahara, albeit in reverse. I took a week off, filled the gas tank and set off.

Like ‘a human body’

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The high country of the Massif Central is roughly triangular. Its southeastern corner consists of a dense range of forested mountains; the southwest corner features more moderate ridges, covered with green meadows. The northern tip is the Auvergne region, an expanse of dark earth, studded with gaping craters from extinct volcanoes. In the heart of all this is the Grands Causses – broad, flat plateaus cleft by narrow canyons. A decade ago, a highway was completed that slices the triangle from north to south: Route 75, the Champs-Élysées of the diagonal.

I drove onto it near the Mediterranean coastline, hurtling toward the heavily forested mountains and feeling like I was sinking between them. The road signs try to lure you to numberless sites: caves, canyons, historic bridges, colorful villages, ruins dating to the time of the Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitaller in the 11th and 12th centuries. But through the windshield I saw only rocks and oaks. The radio was broadcasting songs in Occitan, the region's ancient language.



Nasbinals, France. Yuval Ben-Ami

Two years ago, Kristof Guez, a multidisciplinary artist and photographer, drove along this same route. “The region, with its varied landscapes, reminded me of a human body,” he told me by phone, from his home in Bordeaux. “Sometimes the highway supports the body like a plaster cast. It allows it to move, to work, to get places quickly. Sometimes it’s like a foreign object that infiltrates the body and injects it with a disease.” Guez’s photos, which were exhibited on the pillars of bridges and on abandoned structures in the small villages, reflect the inherent tension well: an image of a dining room in an intimate restaurant clashes with one of a narrow drainage channel, squashed between high concrete partitions; a bearded hitchhiker holding a cardboard sign next to the distribution center of a large supermarket chain.

After a drive north of less than an hour, I reached the highlands and encountered a tremendous feat of engineering: a bridge 2.5 kilometers long that spans the valley of the Tarn River, sparing vehicles a very challenging drive. The Millau Viaduct rests on seven

pillars, the mightiest of them towering 336.4 meters above the riverbed, making it the tallest bridge in the world. (The height of the Eiffel Tower, by comparison, is 324 meters.).

At the foot of the bridge, in the valley, is the pleasant town of Millau. I arrived on market day, and found abundant delicacies on display. Hundreds of handsome wheels of Roquefort cheese graced the stalls. The local restaurants offered Aligot, a regional delicacy: sausage served alongside sticky, cheesy mashed potatoes. But I was determined to dine at Millau's historic McDonald's branch. The town is a symbolic battlefield in the war between the empty diagonal and the outside world. In 1999, hundreds of local folk, most of them farmers, stormed and tore down the restaurant, which was then under construction.

The incident was part of a global trade battle, at the time. The United States had pressured the European Union to revoke regulations that blocked the importation of hormone-treated beef. When the EU refused, the Americans levied higher customs duties on a number of European foods, among them the Roquefort cheese that's produced near Millau. In response, local residents, their livelihood affected, attacked the place that symbolized the American food industry. Their leader, a sheep farmer named José Bové, was convicted of vandalism, served time in jail and became a legend. Until recently he was a delegate to the European Parliament. He ran for president of France in the 2007 election and got half-a-million votes. He still lives in a hamlet on the Larzac plateau, above Millau. The McDonald's was quickly rebuilt, and finally opened a short time later.

I went into the McDonald's, but couldn't bring myself to eat anything there, whereupon I went out in search of a Roquefort salad and some Aligot.



The Millau Viaduct. Yuval Ben-Ami

Not what I'd thought

I reached Lozère, which is the most desolate of France's 96 départements, or administrative divisions. With an area of 5,166 square kilometers, it's about one-quarter the size of Israel – but its population is a meager 76,000. Even in terms of the diagonal, Lozère is the extreme of the extreme. "We would all fit into Paris' soccer stadium," joked a local resident named Laurent Joyeux, who struck up a conversation with me in a grocery store in the village of La Canourgue.

Born in Paris, Joyeux, who works at a nearby nature reserve, said he moved to Montpellier and ended up in Lozère thanks to the highway: "The bridge at Millau was opened 16 years ago, so I went north to see what was there. I said, 'My God, this place is amazing' – and I bought a big old house." He soon found employment in the local government. His job: persuading film directors to shoot movies in the region.

"They would come here as if they were visiting some exotic milieu," he recalls. "They'd ask me: 'Do you have electricity? Do you have running water?' It was funny, but for me it was wonderful. The other part of that job obligated me to go to the Cannes Festival, but all the champagne there disgusted me."

The grocery store's proprietor praised Route 75 in lovely French: "Nous nous étions désenclavées" – meaning, "We have been dis-enclaved."

But Joyeus feels differently. “The road connects Lozère with Paris, and the people who live here don’t go to Paris much. If the highway at least passed through Mende, which is the capital of the district, it might be different, but the mayor of the La Canourge, Jacques Blanc, was once a government minister, and he arranged for the road to miss Mende and go through his village.”



Yuval Ben-Ami

The result, he continues, was the creation of what is effectively a one-way route. Veteran Lozère residents remain in the region and Parisians en vacances come to them. Contact between the two communities is very meager, particularly when it comes to particularly affluent visitors.

The natural inclination of every tourist is to visit a capital city. So I betook myself to the district capital of Mende, which is about 40 minutes east of the highway. There I discovered that the term “capital” is purely relative. The town of black-roofed houses is attractive enough, and even boasts an entrancing Gothic cathedral – but it has only about 11,000 inhabitants, fewer than the Bedouin community of Lakia in the Negev. Its reasonable hotels are closed in the winter; the lady in the local tourist office sent me back toward the highway, to a motel of sorts lit with blue neon.

The next day I went to the nature reserve where Joyeus works, located on a bare plateau called Aubrac. Until then I’d driven in valleys interspersed with villages and farmsteads. Now I was in an open expanse above: on a grassy, snow-stained plain, broken up by ancient stone walls and small streams. Looming in the distance to the north were the white peaks of some extinct volcanoes. The radio was broadcasting a medley of popular reels from Scotland that were perfectly suited to the hilly landscape. At a certain point the music faded out. I pushed

“seek” and saw the digits spin round and round with no station to be found. I felt as if I’d gone as far as it was possible to go.

I was certain that I was traveling into an impoverished area. After all, many provincial towns in France suffer from neglect and isolation. The poorest corners in France are rural: the East Pyrenees at the southwestern extreme; the northern tip of the country at the other. Lozère is far more isolated than they are, yet its unemployment rate is half the national average. The prosperity here is strikingly apparent. The only locale on the Aubrac plateau that one could cautiously call a village, Nasbinals, is built completely from granite. It’s one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever seen – not only because of the construction materials but because of how well-kept it is: Here you can find a cute bookstore, a hair salon, a richly stocked grocery store, a lovely playground and even a small museum. Also in the vicinity of Nasbinals is the Maison Bras restaurant, which was recently named, in a survey of Michelin-star chefs, the finest restaurant in France.

This was not the way I had imagined a remote corner in Lozère.



The Maison Bras restaurant. Patrick FRILET / hemis.fr / AFP

Dream of lean cows

Nasbinals has a population today of 528 – half of what it was in 1936, and a third of what it was in the late 1800s. It’s the same throughout Lozère. The peak was recorded in 1881, when 143,565 people lived in the district. Thereafter, the Industrial Revolution began to draw farmers to urban centers, and afterward many local men died in World War I, virtually turning entire villages into communities of women and children, who gradually abandoned them. After that war, the population of Lozère shrank by an average of 8,000 people a

decade. The other parts of Massif Central lost about one-third of their inhabitants. So the diagonal is not naturally empty; its residents emptied out of it.

In 1963, France's National Center for Scientific Research began documenting the Aubrac plateau as an area that embodied the social and economic decline of the country's rural regions. The project lasted for a decade, but shortly after its completion, as if to spite the scientists, signs of recovery began.

There are some who give partial credit for this to the cows. Roland Generoux arrived in the area in the 1970s and began to working with sheep and goat farmers by assisting on births and performing other jobs.



Roland Generoux. Yuval Ben-Ami

"The cows in Aubrac then were small and lean," he relates. "They gave so little milk that the only thing to do with it was to use it to make cheese in small amounts and mix it with potato puree. The lean cows were replaced by bigger ones that were not native to the region, and those bigger cows got sick and died. In the 1980s, a number of veteran farmers who still bred Aubrac cows banded together and persuaded friends to invest and restore the species. Today, the 'Aubrac steak' is known across France." The mashed potatoes with the cheese – Aligot – became a symbol of the region and has spawned an industry that provides local employment.

The proprietor of the bookstore in Nasbinals cites another reason for the renaissance of the Aubrac area: “James, son of Zebedee,” one of Jesus’ 12 apostles. A bronze scallop shell (a symbol of James) affixed to the façade of the local church marks part of the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, in Spain, where, according to tradition, the headless body of the saint is buried. Until the late 20th century, the journey to Santiago was undertaken only by pilgrims motivated by piety. In the 1980s, however, a backpacking culture began to develop around the route, which helps support the economy of various communities along the way.

That development was evident the next day, when I drove two hours northeast to the town of Le Puy-en-Velay – an absolute jewel. Two steep volcanic cones rise out of the picturesque old town, one supporting a statue of the Madonna, another a small chapel, making for a truly stunning sight. The public buildings too are gorgeous. The local Christmas market was offering oysters and good wine.



The town of Le Puy-en-Velay. Yuval Ben-Ami

Every historical process is the result of a number of factors. There’s no doubt that the proprietor of the grocery store was right to praise Route 75. Laurent Joyeux was right when he mentioned the role of outsiders in helping to improve the region’s economy. The cows and the pilgrims also played a part. But that’s not enough. There’s another element that is preserving the region as a blooming garden: a strong and bold civil society. Time to meet José Bové.

Tractors vs. artillery

It took two weeks to coordinate the interview with the sheep-farming former European legislator. As the time passed, I wondered whether the trouble was my affiliation with an Israeli publication. It seems that Bové's political militancy was not confined to demolishing a fast-food restaurant. In 2002, during the [Israeli siege of the Mugata](#), the Palestinian Authority's headquarters, in Ramallah, Bové infiltrated the building together with other European activists in order to offer himself as a human shield for then-President Yasser Arafat and his aides. But eventually he agreed to grant me an interview, and at the entrance to his house I saw Hebrew letters welcoming the guests, adorning the cover of an illustrated edition of the Book of Genesis.

Bové was smiling and cordial. His ecologically constructed wooden house, located in a very tiny hamlet on the Larzac plateau, was modest and pleasant. Sixteen people live in his little village, which was totally abandoned following World War I, and remained largely empty (nomadic herders occasionally dropped in) until his family arrived in the mid-1970s. Its revival has nothing to do with tourism or infrastructure, but with resistance. Bové had lived among shepherds in other far-flung parts of France and he arrived at Larzac as an act of solidarity with local sheep breeders, who were fighting the expansion of a nearby military base at the expense of pasture land.



José Bové. In 2002, during Israel's siege of the Mugata, he and his colleagues offered to serve as human shields for Yasser Arafat. ERIC CABANIS / AFP

"The existing base covers 7,500 acres, and they wanted to expand it to almost 100,000," he says. "The farmers united, and in 1972 declared that they would never leave and would wage their battle against the expansion of the base by nonviolent means. It was a struggle

against the government and the army, in which the explicit guiding principle was: If we fight using their tools, we will not win. If we have pistols, they will have rifles. If we have rifles, they will have machine guns.”

Another family arrived in the wake of the Bovés. By that time the land had already been turned over to the army, and the new occupants found themselves encircled by artillery batteries. “We had to stop what we were doing and position ourselves with tractors right opposite the cannon,” he says. “On every occasion we forced them to move. Many French people saw this as a symbolic struggle.”

According to Bové, virtually all of his public activity has been associated in one way or another with life on the plateau where his house stands. The razing of the McDonald’s branch did not stem from opposition to some sort of icon of globalization, he says, but was a protest against a policy that was harming his colleagues. “I was one of the representatives of the farmers in the Roquefort Confederation, I was a public emissary. They attacked Roquefort, which represents the French concept of ‘appellation.’ If that’s the case, we said, we will attack the symbol of junk food.”



Cows in Aubrac. Yuval Ben-Ami

He and his friends carried out their destructive acts on the restaurant-in-the-making on August 12, 1999, during the daytime and in the presence of police officers – who did not intervene: “There were 400 of us who took part. It was a huge, festive happening with an orchestra on hand.” He was arrested after three days and spent 44 days in detention. Since then he has held various posts and continued to defend his home ground.

As a delegate to the European Parliament on behalf of the Greens, he protested France's intention to allow the production of natural gas by hydraulic fracturing. It was the valley below Larzac that was chosen to be the first site for the project. The fracking never happened, however, nor did the import of hormone-treated meat. Ultimately, the military base did not undergo expansion, not least because the local protest resonated nationally and the issue became a cardinal one in the 1981 presidential election. A large part of the credit for those victories goes to Bové, much to his supporters and some also to a healthy set of checks and balances at both the national and EU levels. More than 100 villages and towns in and around the Larzac plateau eventually united and launched a "regional park" project. According to Bové, they now have support from the EU and the districts to promote other environmental and economic goals.

Perchance to move

My wife accompanied me on my second journey to the Massif Central and to the interview with Bové. Over our days of traveling together, she occasionally referred to countries of which the terrain reminded her. "We are in Switzerland" she said once, adding, "I didn't quite believe you when you said these places were affluent." Since Switzerland is 10 times more densely populated than the Massif Central, however a comparison she made the following day seemed more apt: "We are in Finland", she said.



store in Lozère. Benjamin Polge / APJ / Hans Luca

We were driving through a broad silent forest of fir trees at the top of one of the plateaus, when suddenly the forest disappeared and we found ourselves between bare hills of brown grass where cows were grazing. We were in Texas, a totally surprising expanse in which to suddenly find a French village.

In the afternoon we made a steep descent from the plateau to another narrow, shaded valley, then proceeded south toward the inhabited area. After some time, a large town loomed in front of us. We entered it in search of an afternoon snack and were stunned by what we found. An ill-fated place with row after row of crumbling projects, some derelict, at the foot of the hills. The shelves in the grocery stores were few and empty.

We had arrived at La Grande-Combe, which sprang up around coal mines and collapsed like other such towns in Europe during the 1980s. Unemployment stands at 40 percent there today, almost four times the national average. Yes, it's extreme and does not reflect the general picture, but it was symbolic. We had just crossed the last mountainous turn and left the empty diagonal. There's nothing like a big dose of reality to tell you: Welcome home.

[Yuval Ben-Ami](#)

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