



Inès Leraud - Algues Vert

Rob: I'm with Inès Léraud who is a journalist who has brought out a book called "Algues Vertes L'Histoire Interdite"; in other words "Green Algae The Forbidden Story". Why is it a forbidden story, Inès?

Inès: It's a forbidden story because, from the first interview that I did, I realised that the subject was taboo, that there was an omertà. The first interview I did was with a representative of the Côtes d'Armor, and he said there had never been a single death, either human or animal, due to the green algae. I asked if I could record him saying that, he said "No". When I asked him why, he said "Because...". When I asked him his name, he replied "I am Director of Communications for the Préfecture of the Côtes d'Armor, but I warn you that if you quote my name, depending on what you say, I shall sue you for defamation". That's it: he didn't tell me anything, but if I said that he didn't tell me anything, he would sue. And that's the first time a Director of Communications, a representative of the State, threatened me. After that, I was the same all the time: the subject is very difficult to bring up.

Rob: Why do you think that is? Why have you had so many closed doors?

Inès: In fact there are two omertà in Brittany about this subject. On the one hand, one mustn't say that the green algae kill, because that will put off the tourists. The problem is that tourism is a very important factor in the Breton economy. And on the other hand, one mustn't say that the green algae come directly from agriculture, which however is the case, because agriculture, and the food-processing that goes alongside, is the most important contributor to the Breton economy. It's what keeps Brittany going. So there's a statement that's absolutely forbidden, and that is: the green algae come from intensive farming practice, and that they kill. That complete statement is never ever said.

Rob: So when you have said this in your book, this is at personal risk to yourself, isn't it?

Inès: In fact I think it was the perfect moment to carry out this investigation. It's been fifty years since this taboo has existed in Brittany, and several maires and elected representatives had collected facts and proof that a number of dogs had died on Breton beaches, that there had been complaints from local people. The scientists from IFREMER had collected proof ...

Rob: IFREMER is the organisation that does research into the sea...

Inès: Yes, IFREMER is the French Institute for Research and Study of the Sea; it's an institution based at Brest. There were also been doctors who had understood the link between the green algae, that is to say the mass of rotting algae, which gives off the gas H₂S, a highly toxic gas which can kill in minutes, like cyanide, and the deaths that were found on the banks of the green algae. There was a significant number of doctors that had proof of the connection; I came along years after these proofs had been suspected, proved and brought together. In a way, the fruit was there, ripe for the picking. I didn't really have any obstacles put in my way. Where I did have problems was when I tried to



understand the status of farmers, their working conditions, who they worked for, the contracts they had with the big agro-industries. That's when I was being watched; my phone was tapped, my computer hacked. Agents of the Interior Ministry told me that later. There were even fake demonstrations organised by the big food-processing companies; they made believe that it was the workers at their factories who were demonstrating. These workers explained later that it was in fact the communication departments of the companies who organised the demos. And then my work was discredited on the Facebook pages of the companies and on their Twitter accounts, saying that what I was doing was a tissue of lies, that it was completely fake, and that I was inventing everything. That was the hardest part to take.

Rob: Your book has been selling very well because people are interested in this subject.

Inès: Yes, the success of this book was totally unexpected, for me, for the publisher, who had brought out a very small run. He was obliged to re-publish seven times due to the level of demand. Stocks ran out seven times and today we're on a run of 45,000; in 4 months, that's huge! I noticed there were a lot of people who said "I don't want to read that", "I know everything there is to know about the subject", "The Breton newspapers bring it up every year". But what appears to have pleased people is that we don't limit ourselves to discussing the deaths due to the green algae. We explore the roots of the Breton farming industry since the 2nd World War, about the realities of farmers' lives. We don't accuse the farmers, on the contrary, we try to understand the trap in which they have been caught. I've had unique witness accounts from farmers because I've lived in central Brittany for three years, I wasn't on the coast, where all the green algae are, but inland, at the source of those algae. I really was among these people, who are often accused of being polluters. I had unique accounts where they said things that you never hear elsewhere. About their relationship with the big agro-industrial companies. They were often anonymous of course, but they said things normally unspoken. And that's what has interested the public. After the comic book came out, we expected to have a lot of problems. The editors had everything re-read several times by a lawyer, who told us to cut some parts, saying that they were too risky. So we were expecting to be taken to court, but in the end the book was generally well-received, even including by people who were openly criticised in the book, including politicians. They contacted us to say that the book was a solid piece of work, and that they had clearly made mistakes in the past.

Rob: It's a very serious subject, for Brittany, for France, for the climate. Why did you choose to do it in a bande-dessinée? I should point out that it's a cartoon-book, if you haven't already seen it on the bookshelves. Why did you choose this way of telling your story?

Inès: Actually, the comic-strip came about completely by chance. The reason the book took this format is that I was contacted by a comic-strip magazine, who asked me to do an article on the green algae. And then they said why not carry on to produce a book? They introduced me to an illustrator which surprised me, as I'm primarily a radio reporter, but in the end, I think it's the ideal format because we have had responses from people of all ages, from 7 to 90. There's a lady of 90 who came to tell me that it was the first comic-strip that she had ever read, and she loved it. All kinds of readers: scientists who know the



subject, who work for IFREMER or other research institutions, who thanked me, saying it's fascinating and precise; farmers; people who have nothing to do with the industry, who know nothing about Brittany, or about farming. It's great to see it interests all sorts of people, who perhaps never read about investigations, who aren't interested by journalism. It's in plain view, in bookshops throughout the countryside. You don't need a big bookshop in your neighbourhood to find it.

Rob: This interview is going to go out on an English-speaking radio programme. Are there any plans for this to be translated into English? Because I know that your name and your book has been quoted in English newspapers; I've seen articles in the Guardian and in the Telegraph about your book...

Inès: ...and the New York Times! That's not an English newspaper, it's American, but the English-language press has shown an interest in the book. Greenpeace in New Zealand has also reported on the book. There are green algae in England, in America, in New Zealand, in a lot of countries in the world today. It's a problem linked to global warming too. And yes, I'd love it to be translated into English someday, I don't know whether it will. So I'm sending out an appeal to all translators, to all English publishers.

Rob: You've come from another part of France to Brittany, specifically to explore the world of agriculture in Brittany? Oui And what have you found in general? Some of your radio reports have been very positive about agriculture; I've heard people look after their animals differently here in some cases. Is this general do you think, or is it special to this central Brittany area?

Inès: I don't know, but I came to the centre of Brittany to find out about the way the farming and food processing industries functioned, and the accompanying pollution problems, and as soon as I arrived I discovered groceries which sold local organic produce, farms that had set up alternative methods to bypass the needs for banks and bank loans. A whole range of different ways to cultivate. In short, models of farming that were truly inspirational, even if they were set up years ago, but which serve as models for possible future methods. It's true, everything is here in Brittany; we're at a crossroads right now. I don't know if we're going towards a hardening of the way industry operates, or whether we are going to do a u-turn, and be inspired by the models which we find all around us in Brittany. In any case, I'm delighted to have discovered all these alternative ways of doing things here, and I've made radio programmes about them.

Rob: There have recently been lots of demonstrations by farmers as a reaction to what they call "agri-bashing". Do you agree that farmers in Brittany are seen in a bad light?

Inès: No, in fact I'm convinced that farmers are exploited by the FNSEA. Members of the FNSEA, highly placed members of this, the most important farmers' union, are also highly placed in the food-processing companies. In fact the FNSEA doesn't stand up for the farmers, it exploits them by means of the huge agricultural cooperatives. And they invent all sorts of terminology to alter the meaning of true and objective comments levelled at them. Yes, the present food-production model pollutes. They've come up with the term "agri-bashing"; it's pure George Orwell, you see, 1984. It's a way of completely changing the sense of the word, so that those who see the pollution are portrayed



as people who insult, when all they are doing is exposing the reality. It's like my case, for example. At the beginning, when I was working on the green algae, elected representatives, and social media, said that I had come to Brittany to soil it. I pointed out the pollution, in a bid to improve the situation, and it was me who was soiling Brittany. It was an incredible double-speak. It would be better to examine the expression “agri-bashing”; what does “bashing” actually mean?

Rob: “Donner des coups”...

Inès: And we see that modern intensive farming methods kill people. It kills, it makes people ill, it has serious effects on the living, and despite that, “agri-bashing” is an expression made up by the people who make a lot of money thanks to modern farming, and it more than implies that those who say that intensive farming kills are in fact the violent ones. An example of the way that meanings can be reversed.

Rob: Inès Léraud, it's been a pleasure speaking to you; thank you very much.

Inès: Merci