

## ‘Staying with the Trouble’ in a self-managed agricultural collective

### *Abstract*

The relationship people have with the future shapes emotional states and affects social practices. In this regard, it has a fundamental heuristic value for anthropology to understand political imaginaries. Based on long-term participant observation in self-managed neo-peasant collectives in the Massif Central (France), this account aims to approach the imaginary of one of the protagonists of the ‘back to the land’ movement. Inspired by ethnographic notes and excerpts from interviews, this ethnographic fiction deals with different temporal arrangements created by people who decided to live and work collectively. Refusing to seek certainty, or a coherent political strategy, they embrace multiple and sometimes antagonistic relationships to the future and social struggle. They create a daily life that allows them to inhabit the disorder and the uncertainty: they ‘stay with the trouble.’

*Keywords:* Neoruralism, Future, Anarchy, Rural

### *Introduction*

It’s drizzling. A fag in her mouth, Léo moved her classic Citroën C15 to the farm. Usually, we leave the cars in the car park, 100 metres further on. We don’t venture out onto the track. But here, she needed it to unload some old insulation panels. She looks at me and says:

- It’s upcycled. It’s been rotting up there for a while. But now it’s time to get this done. Thanks for helping me.

As for me, I still don’t know what I got myself into. I just, as usual, offered to help out during lunch. I know, it’s a good way to meet the people here since they are numerous and always busy... Especially Léo. She’s not the easiest person to deal with. She’s been living on the farm for seven years, doing construction work, clearing bushes, making goat cheese, selling it to village markets. She is a bit tired of ‘tourists’, as she says, who come to see, with stars in their eyes, what a self-managed farm in *Ardèche* looks like.

- See, it’s not heavy, just bulky. I’ll climb up the ladder and you pass them to me from below. Okay? Careful, it’s sharp, it’s fiberglass. Didn’t you bring gloves?

She is flexible, strong and her movements are precise. She wants to get this done quickly. We slide the panels into the attic. She invites me to join her under the roof. Bent over, we arrange them like a puzzle on a rickety floor. I'm a step behind Léo in every action. I'm in the way, less agile, unsure where to step. She cuts angles with a cutter, kicks the boards into certain corners. She fills holes with pieces of wood, scraps of plasterboard, bits of fabric. In 30 minutes, the floor is covered with a thick layer of insulation.

Léo seems satisfied. She rolls a cigarette, covered in dust, sitting cross-legged near the only small window in the attic.

- There we go! It wasn't that hard! It'll lower the temperature by 10 degrees! In the summer, it sometimes reaches 27 in the cheesery, it's not good for the ripening. Last year, Thibaut and I would water the roof all day long... It would cool the temperature down a bit, but it's not exactly eco-friendly! And with the summers getting drier here, it was really unsustainable to keep doing that.

Water was one of the criteria they had defined at the beginning of their project, when they were looking for a place to settle with a group of friends. Land, a building that could be collectivised, and water.

- Christophe gave me a call, he said: 'That's it, we've found it! It's more expensive than expected but there's water, water, Léo, so much water! And It's stunning! 80 hectares, tucked away in the mountains'. Honestly, I didn't really care about the water, but it was a real worry for Christophe. With all these talks about climate change, worsening droughts... it reassures him to have water autonomy, to have some margin, buffer, you know. And back then, we didn't even talk about it in the same way! Well, of course, it's certain that if you want to do farming and you don't have any water, that's not great. You realise it when you get into it. But hey, agriculture wasn't my big passion to begin with, unlike for some people here.
- Why wasn't it so important for you?
- Oh well, because I think that when things will get really dramatic, what do you want us to do? Put up barbed wire everywhere? Patrol and defend our little property? Considering how things are polarising, the extreme right organising, the speeches you hear... I may have doubts that the neo-rurals can stand up

to neo-fascists in a true civil war, especially in a context of scarcity... if you feel me.

- Do you really think we'll live through this?
- Oh, I don't know. I don't know about that. But the way it's going... it's not looking too good. Global warming, extinctions, soil mineralisation... it's all here you know. We can't do anything anymore, it's screwed. Well, so, yeah, I don't really care about my proper ass. But I struggle to understand why Kevin and Lucie chose to have a child, I must confess.

The rain is getting heavier. It pounds on the roof. Léo looks out of the window.

- Well, there you go. My plan of doing mechanics washed away. Would you fancy a coffee in the yurt?

I am delighted with the proposal. My back hurts, I'm cold, and I've spotted huge spiders in the room. We leave the attic, I grab my raincoat from the car, and follow Léo hastily.

What had motivated Léo to settle here was above all the collective life. She had lived in a squat in Lille for several years. She went to art school for two years, then dropped out to fully invest herself in the project. She organised canteens with the salvaged goods from the markets, learnt how to get by with little money, DIY, how to play with legality. She had met people, had networks. One thing leading to another, she had entered the world of self-management in the countryside: those who 'tinker with utopia' (Dubertrand 2020). Everything seemed possible there. There was space, fewer cops passing by, and there was matter. Wood, wool, grass, ground...

She believed that living together made her less of an idiot. That it allowed her to break away from the seemingly predestined path of family life, career, and access to private property. She thought it was silly to work for long hours to earn money to buy things and services she couldn't do herself due to a lack of time. Living with several people, she believed, made achieving autonomy easier—being able to make her own food, manage her home, and produce her energy.

To get to Léo's house, we crossed gardens and old drystone terraces, overgrown with bushes. The yurt is 10 minutes from the farm, raised on stilts, surrounded by chestnut trees. It is an abandoned landscape, rewilded after rural exodus. Since the end of May '68, collec-

tives have been setting up in the region, spreading, disintegrating, and attracting people (Rouvière 2015).

- It's nice here, you can't see us from the road. It's peaceful. We don't get hassled by the Department or the neighbours. The mayor knows very well that we've set up tiny houses and huts. But as long as we don't piss him off, he doesn't piss us off.

She smiles, takes off her muddy *Jallattes*, and invites me in. The yurt is of simple, yet elegant comfort. Léo has taken the time to make custom-made furniture, with rounded edges. Wooden racks hang from the ceiling. Some plants are drying on them. Shelves also hang from the self-supporting frame. Jars everywhere. Posters for a punk concert. A cat.

She starts a fire in a small stove. The room warms up immediately. I am soaked.

- What were you planning to do today?
- I was supposed to change the brake pads on the Sony. Then there's the greenhouse to tidy up. The garden sector will need it for seedlings soon. At the end of the afternoon, I'll give a hand to Thibaut at the bread oven. We need to split a lot of firewood... Oh yes, and at 6 pm, there's the weekly meeting too. But well, I have a huge to-do list... It's March, you know, it speeds things up. Spring is coming.
- Yes, you work a lot, I noticed...
- Oh, but for me, it's not 'work'. For me, 'work' is really the idea of working for a boss. It means being exploited. So yes, I do a lot of things, but I have fun, I choose my rhythms and what I do. And it's always different. Here, I don't 'work'. It's the relationship of subordination that makes the work. Here nobody exploits anyone for their own profit. Everything is decided by the collective, and for the collective.

For Léo, emancipation means freeing herself from work. Choosing one's own work rhythm, collectively deliberating on productivity thresholds, giving oneself the possibility of experimenting or stopping an activity without consequences. All this is a way of escaping a mode of work organisation that she disapproves of. I couldn't help but think that her choice of lifestyle also allowed her to stop worrying about the deterioration of working conditions and the welfare state. She said it

herself. She didn't feel concerned by social struggles for pensions, unemployment benefits or labour rights. Any reformist or revolutionary social movement seemed to her doomed from the start.

- It's an anarchist idea. Do you identify with this trend?
- Oh well, I know that anarchists define things a bit like that, yes.

She throws a handful of dried flowers into a teapot. Slumps down on the couch, puts her feet on the coffee table. I understand that we won't be having coffee. Herbal teas aren't really my thing, but I'll make do. I hope there's honey. She continues.

- But I, to be honest, am a political wanker.
- Isn't it political what you're doing here?

She sighs.

- Yes, it is. Of course, it is. It is political. But without pretending to be very ambitious. Every time I talk about what we do here, how we live together, how we organise ourselves, the goats, the gardens, the free price, the community canteens, the tiny houses, all that, people often say to me: 'Wow, that's incredible, I really want to do what you do': It plants little seeds, it opens up imaginations. And then, collectives attract other collectives, we connect, we network. That's what I believe in. It's a whole world that is created in alongside the state and capitalism. I don't know if we represent something in the game. I don't think we do. But at least, well, we exist. So, we can say that it exists. So, we can say that it's possible. We *can* live together. It just means that. It's not much, but it's not nothing.
- But don't you think this is a desertion that only the privileged can afford? That it's a bit individualistic? It may not be nothing, but it's not a societal project that concerns everyone...

She knows this criticism well. They often talk about it. She knows that the inhabitants of the farm are mostly a bit *bourgeois*. All white. That most of them will inherit a property from their parents. That living on 500 bucks a month is hardly sustainable when you have to support your family. She smiles.

- Are you talking about the united proletarians of all countries? I'm not much of a revolutionary, actually. You see, the great communist speeches, to say: 'here we are, now we're doing communism, we're stopping capitalism, and we're doing this,

that, and that and that'. And to say that *this* will change society. That's bullshit! There is no linearity, no guideline towards a moment where everything would finally be stable, where 'here we go, everything's fine, the world is tidy, everyone eats properly, there's no more war, everyone is in harmony, we don't pollute any more, and we all agree with that'. I don't see it that way. It will always be in tension. There will never be an end to oppression. With places like this, we create an alternative map: a whole little world is being created in parallel, it germinates, it grows, it helps each other, it defines common values. Well, that's utopia, eh? It's nothing yet definite, but if we have to hope for a transition, or at least a resistance, I think it will be somewhat silent, furtive. But every time a collective manages to get by without the state, the state becomes a little weaker. But it's not a planned political project. Trying to do something more or less correct *now*, today, is already not that easy.

Léo does not like grand, sovereign, hegemonic, universal narratives (Tsing 2020). The construction of a project for society according to unique, linear, evolutionary temporalities. She does not think anything with certainty. For her, this impoverishes the universes of possibilities, creative capacities. The catastrophic millenarianism (Thoreau and Zitouni 2018), capitalist technophilia (Dupuy *et al.* 2013), the 'calculating and rational prediction of speculation' (Bourdieu 1963: 27), but also Marxist eschatology. For her, the centralised and planned social struggle has no outcome. It would either be doomed to failure given the magnitude of the repressive and capitalist device; or inadvertently condemned to reproduce the authoritarian and inegalitarian logics inherent in power relationship. For Léo, wanting to change the world, makes her head spin. It paralyses. She chooses to scale down her relationship with the world, both temporally and spatially. She makes her daily life the primary political stake (Pruvost 2021): 'here and now.'

- Aren't you afraid of growing old here? Of being too precarious?
- If the system collapses, we'll all be in the same shit anyway. Whether you worked or not. If there is some kind of crash of civilisation – which is very likely – people's old-age insurance won't be worth more than those who don't have it, that's it. As a joke, I used to say all the time, when people asked me that: 'But I'm retired! I'm taking it now because soon there won't exist

anymore.' I'm not going to work all my life for a retirement that I'm not even sure I'll get! Retirement is the carrot that makes everyone work like fools... Our old-age insurance is having created spots like this one. Because, if you've created communities, then you know that you'll be able to recreate others quite easily. Because, you know how to do that. You know how to organise a meeting that's efficient, you know how to tinker, do a bit of electricity, grow things. The basics, you see.

I struggled to follow her. I couldn't quite see how organising with ten people and gardening weakened the state. I was also not convinced about the sustainability of these initiatives once the residents grow older, require more comfort, and become less productive. She won't always be able to chase after her goats or cut and gather wood for the winter. How can one contemplate doing without a centralised social security system? The alternative she proposed seemed quite meagre compared to historical social conquests. Furthermore, Léo had mocked Marx, and that was hard to hear for me, a former member of the Belgian communist party. I had indeed been charmed by the evolutionary and progressive certainties of Marxism. The idea that an egalitarian society would be within reach if we followed a universal method of struggle together, united. For me, considering sustainability, the development of a long-term societal model, is intrinsic to every political thought. However, Léo seemed to consistently avoid contemplating the future and valued the present as the sole temporal horizon.

And yet, she fascinated me. Her ability to accommodate contradictions and not seek a universal ideological coherence was far from the historical materialism I had been trained in. Léo is neither resigned nor optimistic, which projected an aura of mystery and strength onto her. She doesn't think that 'changing oneself is changing the world.' But she rejects both passive hope and sacrificial ambition. She is not ready to sacrifice genuinely horizontal organisational modes for the promise of a situation of generalised equality. But neither is she a catastrophist, survivalist, autarkic prepper. She is not trapped in a perpetual present (Hartog 2015), tyrannical (Baschet 2018), sterile.

What Léo wants to create are not new objects to be optimistic about but new stories to be told. New paths. New narrative systems, built collectively, not imposed according to a monopoly of external legitimacy. These narratives are not so new, by the way. They have been nourished, sometimes unknowingly, by the radical politics of the

19th century, utopian socialism, libertarianism, communalism (Dolgoff 1974; Petitfils 2011; Steiner 2016; Sauvêtre 2021).

The relationships with the future that Léo brings into existence, these antagonistic temporal horizons that interact, intertwine, these temporalities that do not exist without each other, make her ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway 2016). This disorder resides in ‘generative joy, terror, and collective thinking’ (idem: 31). She links the pessimism of the intelligence and the optimism of the will (Gramsci 1978: 19), makes ‘alliances with bits of the past or the future’ (Pieron, 2019: 286). All at once. Hybrid.

The water boils. Léo pours it into the teapot and serves me without letting the mixture steep for too long. There is no more honey. The next harvest will take place in June.

- When you sent your email to come and study us, it made us laugh. We thought: This is it, we’re on the verge of extinction.
- Haha, why do you say that?
- Oh well, because we are used to seeing anthropologists in remote tribes, documenting ways of life that are disappearing.
- It is not entirely false that anthropology has long been driven by the ‘paradigm of the last’ (Fabre 2008: 185–186, translated by the author). We have traditionally been more interested in history, memory, and transmission than in the future.

She frowns.

- There is a tendency among you academics to talk in complicated terms. Are you doing that now? Are you thinking everything I’m saying and creating a more complex discourse to say the same thing?
- What do you not understand about what I have just said?
- ‘Paradigm’?
- A way of understanding the world, of making it coherent.
- Oh dear, you’re in trouble if you’re looking for coherence here.
- I thought it was just actually something that was important to you...
- Pff, I’ve never been very good at posturing and principles. I’m very, very malleable. We give tons of money to electricity com-



panies, nuclear ones, and well, I do nothing to change that. You see, our farm is not at all self-sufficient in electricity... I don't really believe in militant purity and right posture. Look, why don't you eat meat?

- Well, because I reject the system in which animals are raised, that we don't need to eat so many of it, and that large-scale farming contributes to a disgusting food industry.
- Yes, but you have a car, you use diesel. In terms of disgusting industry, you can't do worse. You see, the problem, if you're looking for coherence, is that it's endless: 'You don't have a mobile phone, but you have a car', or 'you don't eat meat, but you smoke', 'you advocate for free things, but thanks to welfare benefits'. There is always something that links us to big financial groups. So, either you're a pure primitivist who lives in a cabin in the forest, or, I don't know, you can denounce systems and ways of operating, but not in an attitude of purity or righteousness. I often find that a bit boring. It's actually more interesting, you know, that loads of people have their own take and talk about our place. I know the ten other folks living here, they've got a whole different spiel on what life's like here. And that, that's what real life's all about. It'd be a shame to put us in boxes, label us. Is that what you're looking for?

Challenging the idea of purity as Léo does, also corresponds to the work that my discipline does on itself (Latour 2006). When it comes to studying the relationship to time, anthropology has tended to value coherence and stability (Fabian 2014; Bensa 2006). We have tended to treat the cultural systems we study as autonomous, unique realities external to individuals, imposing themselves on them. Starting from the assumption that people evolve in multiple temporalities allows us to give a legitimate place to movement, contradictions, and frictions between the universal and the singular experience (Tsing 2020).

Léo is not wrong; it is true that it is a bit complicated.

I see some drawings lying around the couch. The beginning of a comic strip. Ink portraits. Loose sheets of paper, rippled by the humidity.

- Did you do this?
- Yes... another aborted project from this winter.

- It's nice. Why haven't you finished yet?
- Well, you know how it goes. Here on the farm, artistic time always comes last. There are always a thousand things that need to be done. It's always urgent. One moment it's the goats running away, the next it's helping to carry something heavy. You've got to be available for the people in the collective, too, to care. Farming is an ongoing endeavour. There's never a moment when you think you're done. When I go from the farm to here, along the way, I come across a million things that say to me: 'Hello, I'm a tree, maybe it's time you pruned me', 'Hey, that really needs weeding!', 'You could at least take care of me, the stone wall is about to fall!'. So, unless you really have this ability to let go and not let these calls affect you, you're screwed... I always have my head filled with things to do... It's a bit exhausting. That's why, as I say, autonomy isn't pursued at any cost. The goal here is not to do *everything*. If it's to recreate an old-fashioned peasant life, where you work constantly, it's not a life either. You have to make choices.
- And do you all agree on these choices?
- No, of course not! It wouldn't be fun!
- Does it create conflicts?
- It creates conflict. Or not. What you have to avoid is when it freezes positions. You see, of the core group, only Lucie, Christophe and I are still here. Many others have left, and others have arrived. It's not always easy to be the old one in the group. It gives you a status that's not very pleasant to carry. Since I've been here longer, I have more experience, a broader vision of the place, I see better what needs to be done. But then, sometimes I'm a bit of an old fart. I sometimes get tired of the talk about experimentation when we're already struggling to do the basic things that keep the farm running. Even though that's the idea at its core... The project is that there is no project. And accepting that things will change... Accepting that is not easy, sometimes we forget. We want to 'stay on track' with what we've discussed, ensuring that what we do aligns with the guidelines we've set for ourselves. However, this is where it becomes authoritarian, you see. The problem, when you seek coherence, is

that it's endless: you don't have a cell phone, but you have a car, or you don't eat meat, but you smoke, or you advocate for free living, but rely on social benefits... There's always something connecting us to large financial entities. It's more interesting that many people have different perspectives and narratives about our place. I know that the other ten people living here have a discourse that differs from mine on what we experience here. It would be a shame to categorise us.

Léo's relationship to the future is necessarily multiple and she wanted it that way. Her temporal horizons are uncertain, and she chooses to inhabit this uncertainty without thinking too much of what practice would be sustainable or coherent with one another. She takes hold, opens worlds with curiosity, desire, hope and despair at the same time. For anthropology, going to the margins, with their blurred contours, allows us to study which priorities emerge, which practices are the subject of debate and passion. In doing so, it may also allow us to avoid doing anthropology from the perspective of despair. I returned from the field haunted by the fear of pigeonholing Léo and her companions into these infamous categories. Supported by a bibliography, I sought to honour the redemptive incoherence that Léo had advocated. I felt that anthropology should transcend the oscillation between hope and despair and embrace the disturbance and juxtaposition of imaginable potential universes.

I completed my PhD and returned to Léo's collective to deliver my manuscript. I was eager to see her again and engage in discussions about my writings. What would she think? Would she accept my reservations? My critical analysis?

However, Léo was gone. She had moved to Burgundy with her partner. They had bought a house with her grandmother's inheritance and were about to finish renovations. She had started her bakery business. A toddler would join the adventure in a few months. She had turned the page, I had 400 of my own to deal with.

*\*\* Based on an extended participant observation study among self-managed neo-peasant collectives in the south-eastern Massif Central, this account is nevertheless fictional. It draws inspiration from ethnographic notes and excerpts from various interviews conducted between 2015 and 2022. Ethnographic fiction is a genre that emerged within postmodern currents in anthropology in*

*the mid-1980s. Assuming the fact that fictional narrative necessarily shapes ethnographic description, this type of text enables the researcher to position herself more prominently within her field, sharing her experiences, inquiries, and fantasies. Without absolving itself of rigorous empirical work, ethnographic fiction allows for simultaneously depicting reality while making visible the subjectivity present in the research relationship, which can be more effective in conveying certain aspects of lived experience (Rinehart 1998; Geertz 1988).*

## References

- Baschet, Jérôme. 2018. *Défaire la tyrannie du présent. Temporalités émergentes et futurs inédits*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Bensa, Alban. 2006. *La fin de l'exotisme. Essai d'anthropologie critique*. Toulouse: Anacharsis.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1963. 'La société traditionnelle. Attitude à l'égard du temps et conduite économique.' *Sociologie du travail* 5 (1): 24–44.
- Duberland, Benjamin. 2020. *Bricoler l'utopie : expérimenter d'autres manières de vivre dans la moyenne montagne ariégeoise*. Université Toulouse 2, PhD thesis.
- Dolgoff, Sam. 1974. *The Anarchist Collectives Workers' Self-management in the Spanish Revolution 1936–1939*. Montreal: Black Rose Books.
- Dupuy, Jean-Pierre, Vercueil Julien, and Labrousse Agnès. 2013. 'Le capitalisme a besoin de se croire immortel pour exister.' *Revue de la régulation. Capitalisme, institutions, pouvoirs* 13, <http://journals.openedition.org/regulation/10048>.
- Fabian, Johannes. 2014. *Time and the other: how anthropology makes its object*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fabre, Daniel. 2008. 'Chinoiserie des Lumières, L'Homme.' *Revue française d'anthropologie*: 269–299.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1988. *Works and lives: The anthropologist as author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1978. *Selections from Political Writing (1921–1926)*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Haraway, Donna J. 2016. *Staying with the trouble*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hartog, François. 2015. *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*. Paris: Seuil.
- Petitfils, Jean-Christian. 2011. *Les communautés utopistes du XIXe siècle*. Barcelone: Pluriel.
- Pieron, Julien. 2019. Habiter le trouble, Habiter le temps. In *Habiter le trouble avec Donna Haraway*, eds. by Julien Pieron, Vienciane Despret, Florence Caeymaex, 275–298. Bellevaux. Dehors.

- Pruvost, Geneviève. 2021. *Quotidien politique. Féminisme, écologie, subsistance*, Paris: La Découverte.
- Rinehart, Robert. 1998. 'Fictional Methods in Ethnography: Believability, Specks of Glass, and Chekhov.' *Qualitative Inquiry* 4 (2): 200–224.
- Rouvière, Catherine. 2015. *Retourner à la terre. L'utopie néo-rurale en Ardèche depuis les années 1960*. Rennes, Presses Universitaire de Rennes.
- Sauvêtre, Pierre. 2021. 'Éco-communalisme. Bookchin et l'écologie de la revolution.' *Terrains/Théories* 13: 1–30.
- Steiner, Anne. 2016. 'Vivre l'anarchie ici et maintenant: milieux libres et colonies libertaires à la Belle Époque.' *Cahiers d'histoire. Revue d'histoire critique* 133: 43–58.
- Thoreau, François, and Benedikte Zitouni. 2018. 'Contre l'effondrement: agir pour des milieux vivaces.' *Lundi matin*, December 19th, <https://lundi.am/Un-recit-hegemonique>.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.