



# Nostalgic Confessions in the French Cévennes: Politics of Longings in the Neo-Peasants Initiatives

Madeleine Sallustio

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AND ETHNOBIOLOGY

# ECOLOGICAL NOSTALGIAS

Memory, Affect & Creativity in Times of  
Ecological Upheavals



Edited by Olivia Angé & David Berliner

# Ecological Nostalgias

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# Ecological Nostalgias

Memory, Affect and Creativity  
in Times of Ecological Upheavals

*Edited by Olivia Angé and David Berliner*



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## **Nostalgic Confessions in the French Cévennes:**

### **Politics of Longings in the Neo-Peasants Initiatives**

*Madeleine Sallustio*

#### **Introduction**

Today is a beautiful autumn day. I'm staying at the farm of *Chambalou*<sup>1</sup>: a community of eight people who maintain a *maraîchage* (gardening) system with animal-drawn vehicles and a small herd of goats, who also sell their self-made cheeses and wood-oven bread in the nearby markets. Among them is Pierre, who left Paris a few years ago to settle in the Cévennes where he built a small wooden hut on the farm's site, and from whence he became very passionate about organic gardening. Although he is busy with the work that this activity requires, he offers to show me around the hills nearby. The land we are crossing, covering several tens of hectares and very little maintained, belongs to various owners in the region. It is an idyllic expedition for me, whose knowledge of nature is limited to such places as parks in Brussels. For Pierre, it is an abandoned landscape: the ruins of a world that no longer exists.

The access paths are covered by the brambles and holm oaks that grow all over the place, destroying the dry-stone terracing walls. The passage of game and herds of adventurous goats contributes to the collapse of these walls and creates a network of passages through bushes and shrubs that are sometimes more convenient to follow than the original paths. In addition to these dry-stone walls, there are ruins: small buildings whose former status as a habitat, shepherd's hut or sheepfold has been forgotten; stone staircases embedded in the walls that provide access from one terrace to another; remains of gutters that once enabled the irrigation of these terraces; and the development of basins downstream from the river and other remains of peasant agriculture that were still active at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the

climb, Pierre explains what he knows (or guesses) about the use of these remains. He seems particularly affected by his lack of knowledge of landscape archaeology. Several times during the walk, we find ourselves in front of cavities carved into the walls of the terraces. He comments:

Here is a big mystery. No one knows what it could be made for. Shelter maybe? To keep out the rain when they were herding the animals? It drives me crazy that we've lost all this knowledge, that we've forgotten what it was meant for, what these terraces used to look like.

Further up the mountain, basalt flows contribute to an atmosphere of neglect and desolation. We sit at a place where we enjoy a clear view down over the valley. I particularly enjoy this contemplative break between serenity and physical exhaustion. Pierre shares what he then presents as a confession:

Well, I'm telling you because I know you're interested. But here, when I see this, I get really nostalgic, it gets me here (*he touches his chest, hesitates*). I realize that it's not possible to recreate these, though. I mean, there's all kinds of things you don't have to produce anymore, you can just buy them. But all of that made an entire world disappear.

*Are you sorry this world is over?*

*(He hesitates...)* It's not that I regret it, I definitely don't want to go back to that. You know, we are always called utopians, hippies, dreamers. But no, on the contrary, the dreamers are those who believe that we can continue to exploit the land as we do! We have become so specialized that we have completely lost our grip on basic knowledge and know-how such as producing our food, maintaining our environment, building our house... It's not that I want to go back, but it would be a shame to lose everything.<sup>2</sup>

This conversation in which my interlocutor shows a certain nostalgia which he then immediately nuances and justifies with political discourse is no exception. It is a recurrent rhetorical strategy on the part of the people I have met in the field. In this chapter, I will explore this confessional modality of neo-peasants' nostalgia for traditional peasantry. This examines the different temporalities that surround the daily lives of people who have chosen to leave the city to live in farms, and documents eco-nostalgic practices that are symptomatic of Western society in the face of climate change and ecological upheavals. Analyzing the nostalgia for traditional peasantry experienced by these actors highlights the salient aspects of the social and ecological critique they carry.

To understand the roots of this confessional dimension, I will examine the mobilization of rural nostalgia over the long term. This historical approach is inspired by the concept of 'structural nostalgia' introduced by Michael Herzfeld (2007: 173-213). Through his study of the nostalgic rhetoric of the Cretan shepherds, he showed how the same nostalgic representation is passed through history while being re-appropriated in very different ideological discourses. I will seek to understand how the archetype of the traditional peasant, invoked as the basis of stability and human wisdom, has been used in the course of history for differing fascist, reactionary, anarchist or ecological projects. Although they are in the historical continuity of the mobilization of this rural nostalgia, neo-peasants are nevertheless reluctant to assume the

nostalgic emotion within a political discourse for fear of being accused of lacking rational discernment. Their attachment to past agricultural traditions thus takes the form of a 'nostalgic confession'.

Furthermore, I will draw on Svetlana Boym's thought about the 'Future of Nostalgia' to demonstrate that the nostalgic temporality of the neo-peasants is neither strictly oriented towards the past nor strictly towards the future. It involves the interweaving of different temporalities with the past, present and future horizons that constitute them, in accordance with her assertion that nostalgia seems 'stifled within the conventional confines of time and space' (2001: XIV). The neo-peasant collective projects are inspired by past knowledge and know-how with the aim of proposing an alternative way of life that is more respectful of the environment. This chapter intends to account for the composition of this complex temporality.

### **French Rural Nostalgia Throughout History**

The nostalgic reference to traditional peasantry or vernacular countryside is not new. In France, the social transformations that took place in the countryside between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century provided fertile ground for the emergence of a collective nostalgia that allows for a 'sense of historical continuity' in times of uncertainty (Davis 1979: 49). In the course of history, the peasant archetype has often asserted itself as 'the only witness to pre-industrial civilization and... the bearer of valuable experience that can provide a remedy against the evils of so-called technical progress' (Jollivet 1978: 25, personal translation). The same applies to the countryside, invoking the idea of a salvific balance and harmony in the face of the 'ravages of modernity' (Chamboredon 1980: 114; Chevalier et al., 2000: 54-55; Eizner 1978; Jollivet 1978; Léger 1979: 50-52; Léger and Hervieu 1979). Such a melancholic idealization of traditional forms of popular sociability and rural family economic organization in opposition to the growth of cities thus already existed in the eighteenth century with thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Rauchs 1999: 286; Dobré 2002: 141-142).

However, at about the same time in France, a completely different temporality dominated the discourse towards the rural world: that which was associated with progress. This temporality is characterized by the conviction that we are witnessing a unidirectional historical process, a 'single evolutionary line' (Simmel 1984: 219-220, personal translation) oriented towards an ever-increasing improvement in the human living condition. By the end of the nineteenth century, the countryside became the site of unprecedented national integration policies: literacy became a priority; the modalities of collective organization and management of the peasantry were institutionalized; the first phase of mechanization had as a consequence more individualization of peasant work, these in turn freeing up labour (Bleton-Ruget 2002; Fel 1985; Weber 1983; Lejeune 1991). People within this temporality started migrating to the cities.

In reaction to these social transformations and the advent of modern capitalist industry, some intellectuals of the time questioned the humanism of the Scientifics and denounced the inequalities in the distribution of the benefits from the industrial revolution (Noble 2016). Thus, authors such as Charles Fourier and Élisée Reclus (1899: 3) opposed the progress of industry and urban development in favor of communalized agricultural life. For these authors, the countryside and 'corporate agriculture' (Fourier 1833: 292) became the primary place for the creation of a liberated society and for the well-being of the people. In the nineteenth century, the French countryside was indeed the site of the installation of the first anarchist communities: the *Milieux libres* (Steiner 2016). These precursors of neo-peasantry wanted to distance themselves from the industrial world and reconstitute in the countryside a communitarian society, free from the proletariat, the Church and the State. The anarchists of the time thus put the work of the land in the spotlight. The first criticisms of capitalist industrialization were thus built in parallel with a re-evaluation of the peasantry.

[INSERT IMAGE 1]

However, the idealization of traditional peasantry within political discourses was not exclusive to progressive libertarian thinking. At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, agrarianism was born. This conservative and anti-Semitic European ideological trend emerged as a result of the political organization of an elite composed of landowners and families in power directly descended from the fallen Christian aristocracy: the *Notables*. Faced with the endangerment of the foundations of a hierarchy directly inherited from the *Ancien Régime*, the massive rural exodus emptying the countryside of its craftsmen and peasants and, above all, the rise of revolutionary workers' forces in the cities, this elite then intended to rely on a sense of rural identity to establish its legitimacy (Barral 1968). Strongly supported by the Catholic Church, the rural world was then invoked as the 'privileged place of Christian life' (Hervieu and Léger 1980: 17, personal translation). The peasant family and village life were presented as moral emblems and systematically placed the city and industrialization at odds with each other. Peasant pride and working the land then became one of the stabilizing symbols of the French nation (*idem*). Agrarianism and its hatred of cities, elites and the 'decadence' linked to progressive social values went through the nineteenth century, to resurface with the rise of fascism as witnessed by its apogee under the Vichy regime.

[HERE INSERT IMAGE 2]

In the postwar years, the imperative was to modernize agriculture. This time, the isolation of the countryside from the cities' cultural entertainment environments was emphasized, the permanent social control of the villages was done with fright, and the austere peasant lifestyle was poorly perceived (Jollivet 1978: 22-23). The modernist ideology of the time and the green revolution it was preparing seemed to have overcome the collective nostalgia for a myth of nobility and peasant wisdom (Guérin 2002: 233-235; Mendras 1976: 297-300; Weber 1983: 687-688). The doors opened up to the agri-food industry as we know it today. It is understood

to be the intensification of productivity, the generalization of monocultures, the widespread use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers and the development of hybrid plants, but also the large-scale competition between farms throughout the world thanks to the deployment of competitive imports and exports (Haubert 1991: 726; Deléage 2011; Dupont 2005; van der Ploeg 2014). Facing this, small-scale agriculture struggled to maintain itself. Peasantry shifted from a ‘way of life’ to a professional status, as it was entering a process of specialization<sup>3</sup>. The rural exodus of those who could not bear the new commercial constraints increased as well.

Although the rural world had already witnessed the disappearance, creation and transformation of traditions over the course of history (Chevalier et al. 2000: 22; Weber 1983: 567), this time the elites and intellectuals sounded the alarm in favor of the past against ‘the death of tradition’ (Weber 1983: 669, personal translation), and set out in search of ‘authenticity’ (Bendix 1997). Using a Marxist perspective, these intellectuals constructed an ideal-typical description of the peasantry as a social category fundamentally opposed to industrial capitalism (Alphandéry and Sencébé 2009; Bernstein and Byres 2001: 7). The traditional peasant was indeed presented as a victim disappearing under the injunction to modernize and make agricultural work more productive (Weber 2015; Mendras 1976; Kayser 1990; van der Ploeg 2014: 47; Fel 1985; Jollivet 1968; Deléage 2013).

This critical perspective, which stood for the social and ecological merits of the traditional peasantry, was appropriated by the early neo-peasants. When they arrived in the deserted countryside after the events of *Mai 1968*, these activists carried with them a nostalgia articulated as a project of ‘return to the land’. This notion of ‘return’, commonly used by the actors themselves, is quite revealing of the nostalgia at stake. Most of them had indeed often not lived in rural areas before. The ‘return’ should be understood here as nostalgia for a world they did not directly experience, an ‘exonostalgic’ (Berliner 2014) characteristic of neo-peasant initiatives. This longing for traditional peasantry nourishes the will of a ‘return to the roots’, to

a pre-industrial stage where a long-term sustainable ecological balance would prevail. The figure of the traditional peasant was then erected as a symbol of resistance and an icon of a pre-industrial and collectivist way of life. This is illustrated, for example, by the birth of the trade union La Confédération Paysanne in 1987 or the organization of the international movement Via Campesina. The peasant archetype underpins a sustainable, small-scale, environmentally friendly agricultural project, but also advocates decent working conditions and village solidarity (Demeuleunaere and Bonneuil 2011). In addition, the reference to peasantry carries with it the search for the transmission of vernacular wisdom and skills and a taste for local products, which are presented as being directly opposed to contemporary 'junk food' (Jollivet 1978).

The popularization of the romantic and idealized portrait of the French peasantry and countryside was thus directly linked to its political construction, sometimes humanist and anarchist, sometimes regionalist and reactionary. As has already been studied by other anthropologists in different fields (Herzfeld 2007: 173-213; Berliner 2012), the mobilization of the same nostalgic reference in political discourse has thus served very different, sometimes even opposite, ideological projects and this ideological ambivalence has percolated throughout history. This sheds light on the ideological tensions and misunderstandings that I have observed in the field (see below). This clarifies the tensions and ideological misunderstandings that are embedded in the nostalgic stories I collected during my stay in the Cévennes.

### **Ethnography and People's Relationship to the Future**

Since the end of the 1960s, the Cévennes has been the scene of a 'rural renaissance' (Kayser 1990, personal translation) following the arrival of city people. Among the actors that sociologists generally identify as 'neo-rural', I chose to meet those who decided to settle in the countryside, whose goal was to establish a field of experiments for the creation of new libertarian and self-managed micro-societies. They had wanted to boycott the political scene, which is considered disappointing and corrupt, and wished to escape the control of institutions

and the State. They intended to live on the margins of the 'system', understood as the organization of work based on the wage relationship, the pyramidal institutionalization of power relations, as well as inegalitarian and anti-ecological modes of production. In order to respect their identification with the peasantry, I have chosen to call them 'neo-peasants'.

During the year and a half of participant observation in the field, I lived and worked in about ten collectives, composed of between five and twenty-five inhabitants. These collectives bring together people aged between twenty-five and forty years old (in addition to children, up to 11 years old), generally from middle class backgrounds (two thirds of the people) or from more precarious backgrounds (one third). A very large majority of them also come from the cities.

These actors organize themselves according to self-management principles, in particular by ensuring horizontality in decision-making concerning daily life and the organization of work. In addition to building spaces for social experimentation (collective life, mutualism, rejection of private property, self-management, multi-family life), most of the activities that the neo-peasants set up revolve around the desire to learn how to 'do by themselves' and to become autonomous regarding the consumption of most basic needs. This ambition focuses primarily on their food self-sufficiency through the implementation of small-scale organic farming, the raising of goats or sheep, and knowledge about the cooking of agricultural products (sourdough bread, jams, cheeses, lacto-fermentation, wine-making, beer brewing, cold meats, etc.). The desire to improve their autonomy also concerns the ability to build their own homes or to understand the functioning of the tools they use (mechanics, ironwork, electricity, craftsmanship, carpentry, low-tech engineering).

These daily activities are seen as a way to self-empower and to have more control over the environment. These tasks occupy a large part of the time of neo-peasants. They are valued as emancipatory as opposed to the repetitive, compartmentalized and decontextualized tasks of

line work or office work, which are taken as examples of typically urban occupations and are seen as numbing and alienating. However, these activities are rarely sufficient to generate individual income, and neo-peasants usually receive social assistance in parallel with their activities.

The neo-peasants' search for independence is also associated with an anxious approach to the future. While continuing the rural nostalgia whose history was presented above, the contemporary regret of the traditional peasantry is accentuated by the temporality of the 'emergency' (Dubar 2011). This vision of the future has been conceptualized, according to the authors, as a 'crisis of the future' (Dubar 2011: 2; Leccardi 2011, personal translation), 'loss of the future' (Anderson 2017: 4), 'death of the future' (Lowenthal 1992), 'eclipse of the future' (Taguieff 2002: 83-123, personal translation), 'dystopian times' (Levitas 1982), 'apocalyptic times' (Godard 2002; Foessel 2012, personal translation) or even as 'catastrophism' (Dupuy 2002, personal translation). All these works refer to the relatively pessimistic approach to the future and the erasure of long-term future temporalities in progressive political discourse: utopia seems to have lost its place in political thinking.

Since the 1990s, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has produced unqualified assessment reports on the responsibility of human activity in the process of global warming (Pachauri and Meyer 2014). Increasingly, research shows that the related systemic consequences include the degradation of biodiversity, the increasing scarcity of drinking water sources and dramatic consequences for health and food. The work that has been carried out on concrete cases of cascading extinctions and abrupt transfigurations of ecosystems has produced a specific relationship to time: that of the apprehension of an irreversible environmental disaster. What is then called the 'ecological crisis' thus carries with it the idea of a 'breaking point' (Servigne and Stevens 2015: 89, personal translation), of a 'catastrophic shift' (Scheffer et al. 2001) by which the ecosystem would suddenly collapse, accompanied by an

unprecedented global humanitarian crisis. On this basis, neo-peasants maintain the idea of a world in which environmental pressures on human life, such as the difficulty of feeding one's self or accessing water, would plunge people into barbarism. Faced with this approach to the future, it is tempting to conclude that 'living in the present', according to a formula very frequently used by neo-peasants, is an emotional 'withdrawal' strategy (Hartog 2015; Leccardi 2011: 4), allowing them to avoid having to justify their actions in a long-term, carefully planned political project.

I'm a bit too pessimistic to have a real ambition for social change... I relieve myself by doing little things, going to dig potatoes and thinking about how beautiful my potato field is. I say to myself, 'well, I'm doing something good, right now, it's concrete, I'm indirectly exploiting almost no one, I have a minimal ecological footprint, and it's nice, I have good potatoes, it's in my interest...' And if it can inspire people to do the same thing, who knows, maybe we can build an alternative. But (*sighs*), it's hard to believe.

The cynical attitude towards the future that can be observed in this interview with Mathieu helps us to understand how neo-peasants associate 'living in the present' with 'giving meaning' to their lives and seeking personal fulfilment. It is precisely this search for meaning that motivates neo-peasants to settle in collective farms, which allow a way of life in line with the imperative of ecological sustainability. The opening of the future in less catastrophic terms then seems possible only on the condition of working 'here and now' to implement concrete alternatives, without submitting to the bureaucratic lengths or actions deemed too indirect of classical political processes. Faced with the temporal nature of the urgency conveyed by the ecological crisis, neo-peasants are impatient to see the 'return' to sustainable agriculture, without

depending on equipment whose modes of production are based on the excessive exploitation of natural resources (including fossil fuels) and on the enslavement of part of humanity.

The fact that people seek above all the instantaneous pleasure of living and think their project in terms of a local scale does not imply an individualistic and indifferent approach to the wider social world. What brings pleasure is in fact evaluated in terms of a 'post-capitalist ethic of existence', to quote Christian Arnsperger (2009, personal translation), on the basis of which a whole regime of values is constructed, such as respect for animal and plant life, the valorization of self-production and poly-activity, the rejection of neo-colonial exploitation, and others. This ethic also presupposes a self-realization that is re-situated in a universal perspective of social transformation ('if everyone did like me it would change things', 'I want to show that it is possible'). By setting up agricultural collectives and developing self-sufficiency practices, neo-peasants intend both to refuse to participate in a production system deemed harmful and to weaken it, as the practice of boycotts implies. This is the whole logic of the 'interstitial strategy' (Wright 2017: 513), common to anarchist initiatives, which supposes a weakening of the capitalist system 'from the margins'.

### **The Past as a Source of Inspiration: the Cases of Ancestral Seeds and Animal Traction**

Rather than freezing in anxiety, neo-peasants are therefore working to refocus scale, both spatially (relocated economy, local production, communal policies, etc.) and temporally (future envisaged in the short term). This change of scale implies the re-appropriation of agricultural practices that prevailed before industrial expansion, awakening an interest in rural history. However, it is not by idealization of the past that neo-peasants are re-appropriating past craft and agricultural know-how (Chevalier et al. 2000: 23). Rather, it is because the updating of this heritage is linked to their personal emancipation projects and their ecological and social concerns. The study of the rehabilitation of tools and techniques rendered obsolete by the

progressive industrialization of the countryside thus offers a prime field for analysing how past and future time horizons interact.

Among the different activities that crystallize this ‘sustainable nostalgia’ (Davies 2010), we can count first the use and reproduction of ancestral seeds and the latter’s self-production. With the advent of the controversy over GMOs and hybrid seeds from the late 1970s onwards, various activist, association and union networks defended the use and reproduction of so-called ‘peasant’ seed varieties (Demeulenaere and Bonneuil 2011: 204). Like the debates in which rural nostalgia has historically been inscribed, this issue is divided between defenders of progress (genetics this time) and those who oppose it in the ancestral peasant tradition (Bonneuil et al. 2006: 29). The choice of neo-peasants to turn to the use of local seed varieties and, based on these, to produce their own, is part of this debate.

This choice is not exclusively justified by a nostalgic desire to conserve and save ancestral plant varieties from oblivion. First of all, it is about contemporary environmental issues. Given that the seeds sold by the industry are selected to meet the standards of conventional agriculture (Bonneuil and Hochereau 2008: 1333; Demeulenaere and Goldringer 2017: 56), market gardeners who wish to implement organic agriculture without pesticides, herbicides, heated greenhouses or fertilizers turn to the varieties best suited to the region's terroirs and climate: heirloom and traditional varieties. These different seed varieties, resulting from successive selection by farmers up until the seed industry developed with the advent of the green revolution, make it possible, for example, to save water (in the case of regions where summers are particularly drought-prone) and do not require inputs to reach maturity (Bonneuil and Thomas 2009; Demeulenaere and Bonneuil 2011: 205). Second, the reintroduction of traditional varieties into the agricultural production of neo-peasants aims to increase biodiversity. This biodiversity makes it possible to choose the seeds best adapted to the cultivated area, to diversify the diet, but also to protect market gardeners from a bad harvest. If

one variety of wheat does not tolerate the drought of one year, another, earlier or more resistant variety may be able to cope more easily. For example, it is quite common to use a mixture of seeds in the culture of wheat plots, without necessarily knowing exactly which varieties are used. In addition to the savings in annual expenses from buying back seeds, self-production of seeds also gives neo-peasants control over the entire production and work chain and, therefore, autonomy from the monopolies of large seed groups. Managing the entire production process is part of the search for autonomy and independence that is dear to them and corresponds to their vision of peasantry as a holistic way of life (Mercier and Simona 1983: 258).

A second convincing example of the re-appropriation of practices rendered obsolete by the green revolution and rehabilitated in a perspective of ecological alternative is the use of animal traction. In many valleys of the Massif Central, it is common to find remains of dry-stone terracing on which the different cultures were organized. This system made it possible to make use of sloping land, protecting crops from erosion, drought and damage caused by the autumn rains known as the *épisodes cévenols*. As a result, the agricultural land was fragmented and the use of motorized tools such as tractors was practically impossible. Although the local inhabitants have finally abandoned agriculture due to the drudgery of manual labour, the need for constant maintenance of these areas and the impossibility of improving agricultural productivity, the neo-peasants have decided to reinvest in these types of crops. The willingness of neo-peasants to acquire an intellectual and practical mastery of the tools they use and to look for alternatives to fossil fuels in agriculture has led them to re-appropriate the know-how of yesteryear. For these individuals, it is therefore a question of recognizing (and valuing) what the pressure of a pre-industrialized rustic environment has made human beings do, without them being aware of the long-term ecological value of their activities. It is therefore not peasant morality that is idealized here, but rather the prospects offered, in the current context, by functional uses dating from before the advent of motorized farm work. Neo-peasants thus often

refer to pragmatic efficiency and virtuous austerity to explain choices of crops or tools, which are therefore not simply the result of nostalgic attachments.

[HERE INSERT IMAGE 3]

In addition to being presented as more sustainable, the re-appropriation of devolved agricultural practices is also defended through indirect criticism of hygienism, over-consumption, waste, and the static and compartmentalized work of city dwellers. The agricultural work that neo-peasants are putting in place is erected in opposition to these practices as ultimately healthier, more sustainable and empowering. The ‘hardness of life’, the material sobriety or the physical and manual work are valued. For the desire to re-appropriate the production chain of daily-use goods also stems from the idea of learning to appreciate their value. The aim here is mass consumption: there is no longer any question of systematically wasting or throwing away worn-out everyday objects.

The pleasure of the task and the attachment to romanticized practices of their project nevertheless play a driving role in the neo-peasants' initiatives. That said, these affects are very rarely verbalized as such and the actors encountered. As the excerpt from an interview with Pierre shows in the introduction, nostalgic attachment is generally not displayed in the discourse of neo-peasant initiatives. In addition to the historical overview outlined above, sociological analyses of the nostalgic rhetoric on the political scene help us to understand the nostalgic shame shown by these actors. As Paum Zawadski argues, ‘to describe someone as nostalgic in a political discussion is generally not laudatory’ (2002: 36, personal translation). In the French media scene, protagonists from both the Marxist left and right-wing politicians have publicly accused neo-peasants of being reactionaries. The first ones, like journalists Jean-Baptiste Malet<sup>4</sup> and Yann Kindo<sup>5</sup>, accuse the neo-peasants of conservatism because they consider that the glorification of the traditional peasantry generates a disassociation from workers' struggles. They thus draw a dangerous kinship with extreme right-wing discourse and an anti-scientific

attitude (see above). The second ones, like former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, accuse his detractors of being anti-progressive and paranoid towards new technologies and the market opportunities they open up<sup>6</sup>. In the media or in the mouths of political figures, this accusation is frequently used to caricature radical environmentalist positions by categorizing them as anti-progressive. This rhetoric reveals the difficulty of devising a social critique of industrialization and capitalism that is not necessarily backward-looking (Dobré 2002: 145). It corroborates the fact that nostalgia is 'always suspect' (Atia and Davies 2010: 181), in line with the medical perspectives that introduced it in the seventeenth century as an indicator of a pathological state (Dames 2010: 271; Davis 1979: 1; Illbruck 2012: 29-42; Jovicic 2016: 49-50; Sedikides et al. 2008: 304; Boyer 2006: 364-368).

This strategy of de-rationalizing an idea through the denunciation of a nostalgic attitude and the systematic devaluation of the past in relation to the present on the part of the detractors of environmental projects is not an isolated case. As authors such as Daphne Berdahl (2010: 195), Dominic Boyer (2006: 374), Mitja Veikonja (2009) and Ayse Parla (2009) demonstrate in their respective fields, the same applies to the positive evocation of the communist era in anti-capitalist political arguments. These arguments are systematically linked to a nostalgic attitude considered as an error of judgement, betraying the 'objective' and darker historical facts. Thus, when reference is made to the past in the discourses regarding the aspiration of a return to communism, two types of argumentation face each other. On the one hand, those that evoke stability, prosperity, solidarity, equality among citizens and, on the other hand, those that depict a dictatorial, libertarian, threatening, violent and corrupt context. On another level, the reference to traditional rural life suffers the same fate when it is evoked in environmentalist discourse. On the one hand, it is praised for its state of stability, autonomy, independence and respect for ecosystems. On the other hand, it is contrasted with inequalities between men and women, superstition, omnipresent social control, isolation and the harshness of life and work.

Confronted with this reaction from a section of public opinion, those who support questioning scientific progress made for the capitalist market have constructed a defensive line of argument. During my walk with Pierre in the terraces, it was clear how he quickly retracted his sensitive, introspective and notoriously fleeting impulse just right after evoking these. The latter then directly integrates his nostalgic feeling into a rhetorical figure mobilizing a variety of emotions that veil the evanescent nostalgic spark. This furtive ‘nostalgic confession’ does not indeed fit into the same temporal register as rationalized econostalgia integrated into a social critique. In the same way, Pierre also tries to avoid the accusation of ‘idealism’, which would invite some to categorize him as utopian, in its chimerical connotation. The intellectualization of his nostalgia, as well as part of his utopia, is carried out in the name of the objective efficiency of traditional peasant practices. In this vein, neo-peasants insist on their desire to re-appropriate the advances made in the field of science and technology in the name of ‘real’ progress, with the goal of improving the lives of as many people as possible without devastating the environment (Zimmer 2011: 165). Rather than rejecting the very notion of progress, actors are re-appropriating its definition and objectives and reconciling it with an a priori antinomic time horizon: the past. In doing so, it is a matter of seeking in the traces of a past life ‘the basis of future prospects for the evolution of society-nature relations at the local level’ (Giusepelli, 2006: 139, personal translation).

### **Multiple Nostalgias**

Analyzing the nostalgia manifested by neo-peasant projects certainly helps to better understand the meaning that neo-peasants give to their daily activities. It also allows us to take an original perspective on the relationships that neo-peasants entertain with other inhabitants who appreciate the natural environment of the Cévennes with different values: tourists and holiday-home owners on the one hand and locals on the other. The tensions between neo-peasants and holiday-home owners is epitomised by the through the discrepancy between their two different

idealizations of the traditional rural world. Several disagreements between the inhabitants of second homes and neo-peasants have indeed been reported to me. They concern, for example, the installation of electrified fences<sup>7</sup>, the use of certain plots of land for grazing herds or the burning and felling of trees.

On the one hand, the owners of holiday homes (often renovated old Cévennes houses, possibly inherited family homes) project a romantic vision of country life on the territory. Urbanites lovers of bucolic walks, they are looking for a change of scenery. During their holidays, they aspire to be immersed in a supposed time from the past, idealized and unchanged, reminiscent of the romantic images of the French countryside. In this critical imaginary of air pollution and concrete pavement in the city, electric fences take away the aesthetic value of the landscape and it is the trees that need to be protected. Their discourses display a willingness to preserve the “natural environnement”. Yet, summer residents demonstrate a kind of longing similar to the ‘imperialist nostalgia’ conceptualized by Renato Rosaldo (1993). This concept enlightens how people innocently mourn the loss of a traditional world that they actually contribute to transform through their colonial domination. Indeed, the popularity of rural and heritage tourism has led to real estate inflation and an explosion in the second home market. Through the favourable balance of power implied by their economic capital, the owners of holiday homes freeze the possibilities of settlement and reduce the prospects for economic development in the valleys. This process is known as ‘rural gentrification’ (Cognard 2012: 64; Perrenoud 2008; Richard et al. 2014; Martin et al. 2012). They block rural development opportunities other than through tourism, for being considered to be detrimental to heritage ‘authenticity’ (Berliner 2010). The neo-peasants' desire, not without nostalgic foundations, to participate in local cultural life and their desire to revitalize interpersonal and economic ties in the area is thus frustrated.

Secondly, a balance of power is at stake between holiday-home owners and neo-peasants in the relationship that these two types of actors maintain with regard to the landscape. For example, the forests idealized by tourists are the object of a reverse appreciation by neo-peasants who read in them the mark of the abandonment of the countryside. Described as *déprise agricole* (agricultural decline), these forests have effectively invaded the terraces after the abandonment of agriculture following the massive rural exodus, leaving the land in fallow for sometimes a hundred years. The terraced landscapes in ruins, invaded by brambles, holm oaks and chestnut trees, awaken nostalgia among neo-peasants, just as much as a willingness to act on this landscape. This is particularly true when the traces of history are still present enough to reinvent themselves. So they cut down the trees and uproot the brambles so that the grass can grow back under the chestnut trees. This allows better use of the potential pastures or simply easier access to harvest the chestnuts, which are then processed and sold at markets.

The neo-peasants claim superior territorial legitimacy vis-à-vis the inhabitants of second homes. This legitimacy is directly linked to their identification with the Cévennes peasantry and is in line with the idea of continuity of use rather than family heritage. As illustrated by the following excerpt from an angry neo-peasant after the owner of the land on which he used to graze his herd told him that he was now forbidding him access:

He dared to say to me, 'you are not *Cévenol*'! He comes three times a year and thinks he's a *Cévenol* because his father lived here, but I'm more *Cévenol* than he is! Who works here all year round? Who is keeping the paths clean? I know the territory way better than he does!

Conducting agricultural activities thus influences the way the landscape is conceived. Indeed, it appears that as their agricultural, pastoral or artisanal practices become more professional, the neo-peasants themselves re-evaluate their nostalgic impulses for their project. For many of them, the notion of ecological coherence is relativized and food autonomy ceases to be an end in itself. As for the use of motorized tools, it is not uncommon for their necessity to resurface as the issue of comfort, ergonomics and efficiency at work becomes important<sup>8</sup>.

Both the nostalgia of the neo-peasants and the nostalgia of the summer residents is for a past they have not experienced personally. Their 'exonostalgic' quarrels (Berliner 2014) do, however, raise questions of legitimacy. Faced with the same landscape, the owners of holiday homes and neo-peasants do not see the same thing. The former see a wild natural green space that must be preserved and the latter see it as a sign of a world that has long since been lost and whose loss is deplored. For the neo-peasants, it is not a question of preservation from imminent destruction, but rather of rehabilitating and transforming a landscape so that it corresponds to an image that evokes a peasant way of life, based on pre-industrial and family use of the land. Yet, the neo-peasants consider that their nostalgia is more legitimate than that of tourists since it is supposed to be more similar to that of the so-called 'local' Cévenols. The neo-peasants as Pierre often refer to the sadness of the old Cévenols to see the 'work of the ancestors' falling into ruin:

The death of the Cévennes, it's these lands that close under the brush. And for the old people, that's what's painful... When people who live in second homes see us cutting down trees and they say, 'oh my God, you're destroying the forest!' It's because they don't understand the pain of picking chestnuts from the brambles. If you want biodiversity, you have to prune the trees to allow others to grow.

If these exonostalgic disagreements here take on the appearance of neighbours' anecdotes, they nonetheless take on more significant economic and political stakes in the negotiation relations of neo-peasants with public actors such as the Cévennes National Park. Indeed, the Cévennes National Park has made the preservation of fauna and flora a priority, to the point that agriculture is prohibited and construction projects on territories that were once cultivated and inhabited are drastically limited. This situation of tension is due to the desire to preserve a different kind of nature (wild nature on the one hand and peasant life on the other). Without denying the need to protect natural spaces against capitalist extractivism, this observation nevertheless raises the whole question of heritage fixation on the part of 'preservation agents' (Berliner 2012: 770, personal translation) who freeze a given ecosystem, endemic or not, in a given time, signaling the existence of 'multiple nostalgias' (Bissel 2005; Berliner 2012) depending on the cultural frameworks of the actors and their daily practices.

The trend towards French rural heritage does not only play to the disadvantage of neo-peasants (Bossuet and Torre 2009: 147). The maintenance of the regional specificities that neo-peasants demonstrate can indeed open up economic and tourist potentialities of what are, for example, local products. The nostalgia of tourists for the oblivion of local traditions, the loss of regional culture, the standardization of vernacular specificities, the transformation of the rural landscape and so on are also used in a utilitarian way (Valceschini and Torre 2002: 273-290). As Olivia Angé has studied (2012; 2015), nostalgia can thus be instrumentalized for commercial strategy purposes. Playing on the rusticity of products such as local salads bearing the name of the region, homemade flower syrups, 'granny style' jam, sourdough spelt bread baked over a wood fire or other homemade products adds significant added value once in the markets.

Invoking the preservation of the heritage of natural areas or rustic products such as chestnut cream or sourdough bread baked over a wood fire can also be linked to 'awareness-

raising devices' (Clavairolle 2013: 314, personal translation) to defend biodiversity, fight against the food industry or oppose extractivism. However, the anti-capitalist nature of their political positioning is not always evident. In the collective of Chambalou, where Pierre lives, the practice of animal traction, for example, has several times crystallized ideological misunderstandings between the inhabitants of the collective and extreme right-wing protagonists. The latter saw in the rehabilitation of animal traction the enhancement of the image of the traditional French peasant, and with it a racist regionalist identity opposed to multiculturalism and the supposed Islamization of France. These ideological misunderstandings raise questions among neo-peasants, most of whom are progressive and anti-racist.

### **Conclusion: Nostalgia, a Utopia in the Past Tense?**

The neo-peasants' nostalgia is a continuation of a rural nostalgia documented throughout history. Today, it is a reaction to a context of 'crisis of the future', which is particularly based on an anti-capitalist critique and an anxiety about the degradation of the environment on a global scale. Faced with the impossibility of envisaging a stable and serene future, the neo-peasants I met implement an alternative way of living and working that reveals a singular interaction between past, present and future. By re-appropriating old-fashioned craft and agricultural skills such as animal traction, the reproduction of ancestral seeds or the re-appropriation of rustic recipes and food processing, the neo-peasants mobilize a traditional heritage in order to achieve their utopian projects of personal emancipation, the quest for well-being and the construction of a way of life that would be radically ecological and based on egalitarian social relations. I argue that the econostalgia of the individuals I have observed is both an affective state and an allegorical technique, as researcher Jeremy Davies (2014: 265) has already formulated. The evocation of the past among neo-peasants is the result of a constant

negotiation between an emotional yearning for nostalgia and the desire to inscribe their political proposals for organic agriculture in a historical continuity.

Following Olivia Angé and David Berliner, I have mobilized nostalgia here as a 'power/resistance paradigm' (2015: 5). I have studied its 'critical potential' (Atia and Davies 2010: 181) to grasp its role in the construction of contemporary contesting claims (Boym 2001; Bissel 2005). This study makes it possible to distinguish between imperialist econostalgia and political econostalgia. The first one, which I have observed among owners of second homes in the Cévennes, enjoys a balance of power in their favour because of their purchasing power and the protection of their private property. By seeking to preserve a presumed natural state of wilderness, they are blocking the ability of the inhabitants to act in their environment and hampering the possibility of economic development that would not be geared towards tourism in this region. The second, demonstrated by the neo-peasants, relates to the desire to 'revitalize' the Cévennes countryside by seeking to maximize autonomy and localized food self-sufficiency. In this perspective, the recognition of certain positive aspects of the past is taken as the basis for a critical analysis of progress and capitalist modernity (Pickering and Keightley 2006: 921; Bissel 2005: 216). If the mismatch between the agricultural practices of neo-peasants and the land grabbing by summer visitors can lead to neighbourhood quarrels, neo-peasants do not hesitate to mobilize the heritage nostalgia of tourists when selling their products in markets, which also becomes a communication strategy about their activities and political ideas.

This study provides a better understanding of the concrete interweaving of nostalgia and utopia within contemporary ecological practices. Neo-peasants' econostalgia unfolds an ambivalent temporality. It is at once a reaction to a catastrophic future, a positive value placed on traditional peasantry, but also the potential breeding ground for 'utopian impulses' aspiring to change society (Pickering and Keightley 2006: 936). This idea that nostalgia is ultimately

equivalent to utopia combined with the past has already been defended by the anthropologist Mitja Veikonja. He presents nostalgia as a 'retrospective utopia' (2009: 13-14) that consists more of the implementation of a sustainable agricultural project and the hope for a better future than an irrational interest in the past.

In this context, the idealized past becomes a source of inspiration for the development of sustainable agriculture projects. Nostalgia as studied here makes it possible to understand how temporalities that are regarded as antinomic in our Western culture, in fact interact with each other. Dystopian, utopian, nostalgic and presentist temporalities interact with each other and reciprocally shape their essence. This re-establishes the interactional perspective of our relationship to time and brings a contribution to the consideration of the coexistence of multiple temporalities in anthropology.

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<sup>1</sup> All the names of places and people have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> All these words were transcript just after the walk but were not recorded.

<sup>3</sup> This is notably evidenced by the increasing number of professional categories within the French agricultural status (grain farmer, dairy farm manager, market gardener, seed producer, etc.).

<sup>4</sup> Journalist for the Marxist newspaper Le Monde Diplomatique. See <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2018/08/MALET/58981> or <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2019/08/MALET/60145>.

<sup>5</sup> Marxist journalist for the online and far-left newspaper Médiapart. See <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/yann-kindo/blog>.

<sup>6</sup> In a speech to defend nuclear energy production in France in 2011, Nicolas Sarkozy, for example, accused his ecological critics of wanting to 'go back to the Middle Ages' and 'go back to the candle'. See <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/edition/les-invites-de-mediapart/article/011211/la-centrale-ou-la-bougie>.

<sup>7</sup> They are used to protect the pastures from wild boars which, in their search for worms and roots, turn the earth upside down and destroy the rare and precious meadows of the Cévennes mountains.

<sup>8</sup> These readjustments of peasant zeal, as reported for example by a person who has been living for more than ten years in the same collective, are not without consequences on the sociability behaviours within the group. For example, I witnessed the taunting of a man named Jack who never left his reference book on peasantry: 'Back in the old days'. He used the book as an encyclopaedia and often referred to it for advice on traditional weaving, woodworking, farming or cooking. One morning, another member of the collective crossed out the title in pencil

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and wrote 'Jack in the old days'. This nostalgic reframing made everyone laugh, including Jack. In general, and especially for individuals with many years of agricultural work experience, the practical aspect is privileged and nostalgia is kept secret.