



# Neo-Rural Communities as Heterotopias

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# UTOPIAN ENCOUNTERS:

## ANTHROPOLOGIES OF EMPIRICAL UTOPIAS



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## 4 Neo-Rural Communities as Heterotopias

Like many parts of the French countryside, the Massif Central was deeply affected by the rural exodus that occurred during the industrial revolution. Yet since the 1960s, the region has seen this pattern reverse. A new population of city-dwellers has colonized many once-abandoned settlements in the hope of ‘getting back to nature’ and reconnecting, in one way or another, with the traditional farming lifestyle of the pre-capitalist era (Dobre 2002).

Although it has evolved over time, the phenomenon known as the “return utopia” (Léger and Hervieu 1978) is still very much alive. The ideal community lifestyle that goes hand in hand with this phenomenon continues to attract people that have grown up in the urban middle classes, with no directly inherited, social or professional roots in the countryside. As we will see, places of communal living and work are still today the stage upon which this utopian desire for the rural world and a farming lifestyle is lived out.

In order to better understand this social phenomenon, I carried out six months of field work, spread across the months of April and May 2015, then from October 2015 to February 2016. Still ongoing, my participative study is staggered throughout the year so as to give me an understanding of the influence of the seasons on the organization and daily life of these communities.

I made my first contact with the actors in question through the WWOOF<sup>1</sup> network. A close examination of the list of projects on offer revealed several collectively managed farms, and initiating contact through

1 “WWOOF” (World-Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) is a global network of organic farms that offer to host people who want to share the daily work of a farmer or shepherd, for example, in exchange for board and lodging. People who take part in “wwoofing” are commonly called “wwoofers”.

this network helped me to manage my potentially uncomfortable position as a 'guest-observer'. By offering to take part in the daily agricultural tasks, I was accepted as an (almost) fully integrated member of these communities. To have remained a passive observer would have been to put up a barrier between me and my hosts. I was just as implicated in the organizational discussions and technical decisions on the tasks that needed to be carried out as any other member of the community. What is more, my status as a "wwoofer" made me feel less responsible for the financial burden I may otherwise have imposed on my host communities.

Through people I met, and by word of mouth, I came into contact with other communities which – whether through their own choice or not – were less exposed to the Internet. With the same determination to play an active part in daily community life, I managed to make contact with around ten different communities, each numbering between four and thirty-five inhabitants.

Given my position as an anthropological observer, my integration was greatly eased by the generally high cultural awareness<sup>2</sup> of the people I encountered in these communities, their significant interest in developing similar initiatives elsewhere and the fact that we spoke the same first language.

So how should we describe these collective initiatives? The inhabitants of neo-rural communities tend to be between twenty-five and thirty-five years old and not born into farming communities. Even if they grew up in the countryside, most of them have spent at least a few years studying or working in a big city. Either individually or with a group of friends, they have made the conscious decision to 'return' to the rural world and establish agricultural and pastoral practices that are respectful of the environment, well-adapted to the local ecosystem and small in scale.

Today, they produce goods to sell directly to consumers at markets (jam, honey, cheese, chestnut cream, etc.) and develop expertise in artisanal activities (woodwork, weaving, wickerwork, etc.), eco-construction

2 Almost three quarters of the individuals interviewed had received post-baccalaureate higher education (vocational qualifications, art school, university, etc.).



(dry-stone walling, carpentry and joining, etc.) and/or mechanics. The pursuit of self-sufficiency, be it in food, energy or finance, is an important Leitmotiv among the individuals that form the basis of this study.

Beside the subsistence and/or more economically lucrative activities they engage in, these communities also act as places of social experimentation and reflection on the idea of 'communal living'. In choosing to live and work as a community, the individuals involved also show a certain commitment to a horizontal and egalitarian social structure. They see their solidarity, their decision to share their income and pool their working abilities, as a means of escape from the capitalist culture of mainstream society.

As we will also see, the practices and the social structures these individuals adopt are born of libertarian aspirations: the utopian ambition fulfilled, anchored in reality and experienced on a daily basis. This research paper consists of an analysis of this 'back to nature' phenomenon through the theoretical prism of temporality.

## Temporality as a Key to Conceptualize Social Worlds

In the social sciences, the study of how individuals represent time has often been viewed as one of the essential theoretical frameworks through which to gain insight into the social world and understand its complexity (Lévi-Strauss 1962; Durkheim 1973; Geertz 1973). Whether as a question of speed (fast, slow, occasional, cyclical), a reference to a particular moment in time (past, present, future) or a timescale (long, short), temporality has always served as a way to understand human phenomena (Dubar and Rolle 2008, our translation).

But it would be naïve to assume that the relationship to time observed in one particular economic sector or in relation to one particular kind of activity (religious, economic, political or other) should apply right across society. This criticism was raised by Maurice Bloch in his article *The Past and the Present in the Present* (Bloch 1977). Here, Bloch raised the idea that there exists a juxtaposition of individuals' representations of time and the

patterns of thinking that are linked to them. And we are right to assume that people really do juggle with multiple temporal registers depending on the activities they do, the places where they do them, their social situation and their interactions with others (Gui Ekwa 1995). Each specific type of activity has its own corresponding relationship to time, the study of which could lead to a more nuanced understanding of human societies. This consideration is the starting-point for the research that will be discussed below.

Using the concept of temporality as a framework to structure our approach to the subject of utopia and how they influence individuals' actions was not an easy choice. After all, how can we apply this approach to something that is, by definition, outside of all time and place? And how can we avoid the eternal semantic debate over whether or not a utopia can really exist in a physical space without distorting the original concept? And finally, how do we deal with temporality without turning it into an ontology, that is, giving the concept its own existence, independently of the social actors that are the real subjects of this study?

In light of these questions, Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' and the underlying concept of 'heterochrony' (Foucault 1967) emerged as the structural framework of this ethnography. Defined as "other spaces" and "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia" (Foucault 1967: 15, our translation), heterotopias are, among other things, places where the concept of time also takes on the form of something 'other', compared to the way it is perceived in the space surrounding the heterotopia.

This assumption nevertheless raises a number of questions. Spaces may very well be 'other', but compared to what? As Arun Saldanha argued in his article "Heterotopia and structuralism" (Saldanha 2008), the idea of conceiving a space as 'other' compared to its surrounding space requires the dominant 'society' to be conceived as a homogenous whole. What is more, many, not to say all, spaces have certain characteristics that correspond to the defining principles of heterotopias. A prison, a fairground, an apartment block, a park, a luxury boutique, all these spaces have their own ways of working, their own principles of opening and closing or a unique temporality. For Saldanha, the concept of a heterotopia only makes sense if it is understood as a quality of the relationships that link different spaces, and not as an intrinsic characteristic.



This approach is valid for the research discussed here. The inhabitants of neo-rural communities often speak of their home as somewhere “apart”, stressing their desire to live, in their own words, “outside the system”. If we probe deeper into what this idea of ‘the system’ means for these individuals, we find they refer above all to the modern city. But the problem does not lie with the city itself, rather with the capitalist city as described by Henri Lefebvre (1973): in “The right to the city” as a space where the majority of activities are subordinate to the interests of commerce, where “everything is for sale” and where methods of control smother the momentum of any citizens’ initiatives. As we will see, the rejection of the capitalist city is transposed into a rejection of the eat-sleep-work lifestyle, of labour specialization, of overconsumption, individualism and the increasingly visible machinery used to control the population.

So for the individuals concerned, the communities they construct serve as ‘heterotopias’, spaces in which they can conduct their lives far from the city, but most importantly, in a way that distances them from capitalism and all the practices that go with it. In this research, the heterotopia should thus be understood as the progeny of Lefebvre’s concept of the ‘counter-space’ (Lefebvre 1974). After all, efforts to make ‘life changes’ or ‘change society’ are meaningless if they are not accompanied by the creation or adoption of a suitable space (Lefebvre 1974: 72).

This chapter aims to fulfil two central objectives. The first consists of demonstrating the theoretical utility of the concept of heterotopias in anthropology, with a particular focus on studying concrete expressions of neo-rural utopias. Michel Foucault’s six defining principles of heterotopias provide a structural framework for the ethnography. This study does not aim merely to identify neo-rural communities as heterotopias, but to explore the analytical possibilities that such a concept offers. The second objective of this paper consists of showing how the idea of heterochrony can be used to enrich the theoretical study of temporality, and in doing so, add value to the study of the ‘back to nature’ phenomenon. Through his example of the museum, Foucault flows into the theoretical frame constructed by Maurice Bloch, where juxtaposing temporalities can co-exist within one heterotopic space, albeit, in this case, through the accumulation of objects belonging to different periods of time. The idea

of the coexistence of multiple temporalities in one space will therefore be approached through this hypothesis.

## Neo-Rural Communities as Heterotopias?

The very first task of this chapter is to demonstrate that these communities correspond to Michel Foucault's definition of heterotopias. As we will see, it also offers a precious theoretical frame to analyse our object. To do this, we will examine the six defining principles of the concept.

### *Diverse forms across time and social contexts*

The first defining principle of heterotopias is that they may take on various forms according to the culture or time period in which they occur. The desire to return to the rural world and live in close-knit communities is in itself neither a strictly contemporary nor necessarily European phenomenon. The hippy communities that sprang up in France after May 1968 were of course an expression of this inclination, but we should not forget the "utopian communities" (Petifils 2011) inspired by Fourier or the anarchist libertarian communities of nineteenth-century Europe and America, which were even then making a stand against capitalism, the church and the state. These movements led to the development of "milieux libres" where, like in the contemporary communities examined here, the leading figures behind their creation advocated a complete disassociation from industrial society (Creagh 1997).

That said, although these rural communal initiatives share many basic ideals, like a respect for nature, feminism and the rejection of labour alienation, there are also a great many differences between them. One such example is the sexual liberalism that was often encouraged in the 1970s, but which is not such an important feature of comparable French communities today. Another is the recent discoveries concerning the importance

of the microbiological make-up of the soils and the appropriation of this knowledge by contemporary neo-rural communities, which bring a certain expertise and precision to their agricultural activities, an advance that is very much of our times.

It is also possible for one and the same heterotopia to change over time and whilst remaining an 'other space'. This is true of "Frêne-aux-champs", a community that was founded in 1971, and which is still a place of rural and communal living. This community, located on the top of a hill in the Aveyron, has been home to many people over the years. Yet none of the community's current inhabitants were among the founding members. Groups of people have come and gone, some staying several years and some just passing through. The way in which this community works has evolved to suit its inhabitants at any given time, for example, with the emergence of individual spaces within this communal space. Yurts, caravans and cabins act as private bedrooms or places of "withdrawal" for when the weight of communal living becomes too great. The activities practiced on this farm have also changed greatly over time, periodically including or excluding market gardening, animal husbandry (sheep, goats, horses, chickens ...) and cheese production, as well as construction, renovation and development of the site.

And yet, in spite of these changes, Frêne-aux-champs has never ceased to be seen as an 'other space', both by external onlookers and by its inhabitants, as attested in the following testimony. Mathias, thirty-five years old and a five-year resident of Frêne-aux-champs, expresses this idea:

It [Frêne-aux-champs] was founded by a group of hippies. Then the communists arrived, then the anarchists, then the punks, and then came the squatters from the city ... well, it has changed a lot. [...] But for the people from the neighbouring village, we are still the hippies from the mountain. We have been a subject of local legend since this place started. They think we are nudists who all sleep together, a bit like it must have been at the beginning. [...] And even if things are different now, it is still a place where you know you will find somewhere to stay if you don't know where to spend the winter, where there will be people who refuse to live within the system, and where you will also be able to try out any projects you might have. What doesn't change is the potential of this place, the *carte blanche* it offers.

*A place of deviation from the norm: the relationship with work*

‘What is left’, what ensures that these places continue to exist as ‘other spaces’, can in part be explained by a second defining principle of heterotopias: the fact that the rules governing these spaces deviate from the ‘conventional norms’ and apply only to one specific utopia. In the case we are examining here, the social structure is broken down into an ideological pattern of opposition to the emphasis on high productivity, security and ecologically harmful techniques. For its inhabitants, this neo-rural space is thus experienced as a ‘bubble’ of social and agricultural experimentation.

The relationship between this new kind of farmer and their work is a good example of deviation from the prevailing social and political context. To borrow a concept from Chris Carlsson, neo-rural communities engage in ‘nowtopian practices’ (Carlsson 2010): unpaid activities which, counter to the logic of production and the work/pay relationship, hold back the proliferation of capital. By overcoming the need to make money, the individuals that construct these ‘nowtopias’ offer a completely different definition of work in which capitalism is not the dominant force, they redefine the individual and the collective, increase ecological, social and relational awareness and develop new approaches to politics.

Indeed, in their agricultural practices, questions of productivity or profitability have little or no bearing on the appreciation that is shown for an individual’s work. Abandoning the dominant capitalist rationale, these communities use an altogether different system of validation, based on the three criteria proposed by André Gorz to define labour without alienation (Gorz 1988).

Firstly, the goal or product of this labour must be of direct benefit to the community. The idea of the wage is rejected: for these new farmers there is no question of working ‘for’ a third party. The sole aim of their work is to produce enough for the community to be self-sufficient, not to create anything of monetary value. Only surplus production is sold or exchanged for products that cannot be produced on the farm. By pooling its income, the community ensures it can pay whatever bills it incurs

(gas, water, electricity, rent, etc.), buy agricultural equipment or animal feed, fuel for travel, construction materials, specific types of food (salt, sugar, rice, pasta, oil, etc.) and cover any other communal expenses that may arise.

Any initiative that aims to increase the community's autonomy will be welcomed: the more autonomous these individuals are, the less they need to buy from outside the community and, in their own words, "collaborate" with a system they reject. The motorization of agricultural labour is an issue that cannot be avoided in relation to this goal of autonomy, given the dependence on the oil industry that it implies.

Secondly, all work is self-managed. The individuals observed for this study organize and share out their tasks collectively, allowing each person the freedom to manage their own work and working hours. In so doing, these communities champion the ideas of existential autonomy, emancipation and individual freedom, as well as a horizontal structure of human relationships. In these communities, everyone is entitled to an equal share of the farm's earnings,<sup>3</sup> and the value of an activity is not determined by its profitability or any monetary gains it can bring to the collective.

This pooling of earnings is logical given that the labour itself is pooled. The inhabitants of these communities organize themselves so that one person takes charge of and plans the work required in each 'sector' (gardening, milking and caring for goats, tending fruit trees, beekeeping, preparing horses for farm work, cheese-making, etc.). As all sectors are intrinsically linked by common objectives, the members of these communities help each other where they can and organize their workforce according to what is needed at any given time. The fact that five people may be detailed to look after the goats, for example, a task traditionally performed by one person, means not only that the workload is significantly lightened, but

3 It should be noted that it is also very common for individuals to benefit from social welfare payments like unemployment benefits, the RSA (*Revenu de solidarité active*), an in-work benefit, or income earned from activities outside the collective, like construction or fruit picking. This personal income is sometimes pooled with the collective and sometimes kept as "pocket money", allowing individuals to maintain a small amount of personal purchasing power.

also allows workers to take holidays, a rare luxury on conventional livestock farms, given that the animals need to be milked every day, often more than once.

Thirdly, work, as it is understood in neo-rural communities, should above all be a rewarding activity for those that perform it. Thus the ideas of taking pleasure in a job, of creating beauty (the layout of a garden, for example) and of seeking individual fulfilment are always central to any task and open up considerable space for experimentation and creativity at work. Given the high degree of versatility demanded by farm work – the expert local knowledge and skills across all areas of production that are necessary in a farmer's daily life (Mendras 1976) –, farming is a radical alternative to factory work or urban office work, which the inhabitants of neo-rural communities often see as “mind-numbing and alienating”. Individuals are encouraged to develop a broad understanding of all of the community's areas of activity and to reject the division of labour outright.

In fact, as the following passages illustrate, one reason that individuals choose to adopt this lifestyle is that they hope to master the different stages of production for the various products they use or consume. This goal is pushed ever further as they learn to perform new and increasingly diverse activities. These individuals move from one ‘profession’ to another without having to define themselves by any activity in particular, an idea containing something of Charles Fourier's “passionate attraction”: a vision of utopian societies where individuals give free rein to their passions, changing activities as and when they want (Fourier 1816). Julie, thirty years old, threw herself into the collective project of La Ferme du Col in the Cévennes and, seven years later, she insists on the importance of keeping a hold on her life by taking care of her basic needs by herself.

I studied sociology. It was interesting but I quickly understood that something was missing, I couldn't do anything with my hands. I felt powerless, completely dependent on the work of other people for my basic needs, like food and housing. I think it is incredibly important at least to understand how to produce what we eat. Here, just look at the goats: we see how they are born, we make hay to feed them in the winter, we graze them (which helps maintain the forest!), we slaughter them ourselves, we butcher and cook them, we preserve their meat for our stores, we tan their hides to



make rugs, we use their milk to make cheese, their dung goes on the garden as fertiliser ... we cover the whole chain!

In a similar vein, Jérémie, twenty-eight years old, came to the Ferme de Raivaut in the Haute-Loire with the aim of dedicating himself to organic agriculture. During his first two years in the community, he discovered a passion for making bread to sell at the village market, and as others could manage the gardens, he decided to dedicate himself to the bakery full-time. While researching baking techniques on the Internet one evening, he told me he was still interested in a variety of other activities:

Last year I looked after the vegetable garden, this year I am making the bread, maybe in two years' time I will want to become a blacksmith ... or a dancer, why not?

It is also worth noting that in neo-rural communities, everyday activities are commonly regarded as work. Cooking a communal meal or cleaning the common areas is considered just as valid a form of 'work' as that undertaken by the carpenter, the goatherd or the farmhand, who in the same time may have constructed a piece of furniture, milked the goats, or cleared the land where the animals graze. The fact that all activities are viewed as work is logical, given that none are remunerated. And this outlook breaks down the dichotomy between so-called 'domestic' and 'paid' work and allows these communities to avoid what Ivan Illich called "shadow work" (Illich 1981); a phenomenon in contemporary society whereby certain activities go unrecognized or under-valued because there are not considered as 'work'.

Considering all activities as a form of work is a means by which neo-rural communities deconstruct the idea of 'labour value' and all the imagined moral issues that surround it. In his book *The Right to be Lazy*, Paul Lafargue (1880) defended this idea against those who preached that work was 'the essence of man' while refusing to see the subjugation it implied. The very fact that any activity can be regarded as work means that the inhabitants of neo-rural communities are often reluctant to say that they work at all. By their logic, even relaxation could be considered a form of work, as it is an inherently necessary part of the preparation for any other activity. When all activities are chosen and performed in complete freedom, the line between leisure and labour becomes blurred.

In short, driven by utopian visions of positive life changes and, by extension, alternative social structures, these new agrarian communities operate under a different set of rules to the rest of society.

*Systems of opening and closing and the principle of compensation*

A third defining principle of these ‘other spaces’ according to Foucault is the fact that they “always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (Foucault 1976: 18). In fact, nobody arrives in these communities by chance. The comings and goings of the visitors to neo-rural heterotopias are filtered through a process of permission and invitation. Of course, the inhabitants often feel obliged to open their world to potential newcomers, but this usually implies a preliminary meeting of some kind (at the market, through friends, etc.), even if it is just a question of explaining how to get there.

My first contact with the Chantry community in the Ardèche, home to eight people, is typical of this ‘passageway’, the bridge that must be crossed in order to reach the site of the heterotopia, which in this case is particularly isolated. The community is part of the WWOOF network, but without an Internet connection on site, community members answered my emails and gave me directions from an internet café in a nearby village, where they go once a week to sell goats cheese.

I’ll have to tell you the way. When you arrive at Montpezat sous Bauzon, you stay on the main road through the village and on the right you will see a signpost for “Hameau de Chaloix”. At the end of the hamlet you will see a bunch of letterboxes and steps going up to your left. Go up it. (...) Allow a good hour for the walk, the path climbs 400 metres so it’s best not to be carrying too much.

The opening and closing principles of these communities pose questions about their relationship with the nearby villages, both concretely, in terms of their day to day interactions, and as an instrument through which to explore the idea of these communities as ‘niches’ for people of a similar social profile. While it is possible to visit these sites, becoming an inhabitant and a fully integrated member of the community takes time and depends on a number of more or less firmly established criteria (the desire

to develop a personal project within the community, a certain amount of practical knowledge and expertise, the ability to make proactive decisions, moderation in the consumption of alcohol or drugs, personal affinity, etc.).

While neo-rural communities may sometimes try to raise awareness of alternative lifestyles or use their expertise to educate others, it should be understood that they are, for the most part, far from the revolutionary organizations that some observers in the 1970s took them to be (Marcuse 1968: 17). In fact, the fundamental desire of these communities is to carve out a space where their own parallel society can exist; a kind of 'stronghold'. Danièle Léger and Bertrand Hervieu describe these spaces as "defensive mechanisms within which people can take refuge while the balance of power is against them" (1979: 54).

In other words, these individuals do not seek to confront and alter the capitalist society, but to construct havens of tranquillity in its forgotten corners, places to give free rein to their ideas, where anything is possible and where they can establish a way of life in line with their own personal aspirations, which would not be viable in the stifling environment of the city. This fulfils the role described by Foucault as 'compensation' for the rest of society, and constitutes a fourth defining principle of heterotopias.

### *The juxtaposition of incompatible spaces*

By examining the internal workings of these neo-rural communities through the prism of a fifth defining characteristic of heterotopias, I was able to achieve a more nuanced impression of the ideological uniformity of their way of life: the sites that make up a heterotopia can themselves be incompatible. The administrative and regulatory burdens of modern life are examples of such juxtaposition within these communities. Certain material changes have to be made to the space in order to satisfy the legal requirements of the mainstream society, which inevitably leads to a certain amount of conventional behaviour being preserved within the heterotopia.

To be allowed to sell their goat cheeses at the market, for example, the small-scale neo-rural producers must meet the same European hygiene, production and storage standards as any other producer. Concretely, this means the cheese must be made in a sterilized dairy with tiled walls and

floors, standard equipment, temperature and humidity regulation, mains water, a hot water supply, an entrance buffer zone for decontamination and all the equipment necessary to ensure that the cold chain is respected. In case of inspection, the dairy workers must also be able to demonstrate their usual working practices (changing into protective clothing before moving from the buffer area into the dairy, the automatic and thorough cleaning of equipment, strict timings for the drying of cheeses, the destruction of cheeses that do not meet the required standards, etc.). All these obligations undermine the desire for creativity and the rejection of constraints to the organization of work, but are nonetheless necessary for the survival of the neo-rural project.

The idea that spaces of a conflicting nature can be interwoven in such a way is important, as it raises the possibility that different temporal registers may also co-exist within one heterotopian space. The material organization and administration associated with each activity comes with its own specific temporality. Records are kept of all processes and interactions, meetings are marked on the calendar, documents are filed in the correct folder and address books are kept up to date. Time is then divided into months, days and hours. Projects are ‘planned’ and defined by an expectation of what will happen in the future (not by what is happening in the present, or by how the project echoes the past). They become conceptualized as a linear succession of events over which individuals have no control, they being forced to adopt the temporality imposed by the administrative and legal requirements they are subjected to. The ideals of autonomy and freedom give way to a feeling of disempowerment and an inability completely to fulfil any plans unimpeded.

## Heterotopias and Heterochrony

When Michel Foucault spoke of heterotopias being linked to “the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time” and of the “accumulation of time” (Foucault 1967: 7), he was not referring to neo-rural communities. Yet the dynamics of the ‘back to nature’ phenomenon

and the imagined world it constructs suppose an interlocking mosaic of different temporalities.

### *Living in the present*

Firstly, a utopia should above all be seen as inseparable from the present, as the only space and time where a utopia can exist (Cosette-Trudel 2010: 3). Contrary to what we might think, “utopian immigrants” (Léger 1979: 47) are not motivated by hopes of societal change or some unattainable, idealized future, but primarily by the pursuit of personal fulfilment. Their firm rooting in the present, the fact that they choose not to lay down future plans for themselves or their projects, can be explained in two ways.

The first concerns the utopia as described by Charles Fourier: giving free rein to one’s passions and choosing to live in the present (Fourier 1816). The search for personal fulfilment and excitement, and the happiness these bring, is an end in itself, not an objective to be achieved through a political process. Regardless of the end result or the relevance of their actions in the greater scheme of things, the priority of the individuals interviewed for this study is to find happiness in their own lifetime. Gautier, twenty-six years old, had been staying in the *Pommiers* collective in the Ardèche for six months and planned on finding a place to begin a new collective project with other friends, a project they would run together from the very beginning. Meanwhile, he was engaging himself in the day-to-day life and work of the community, taking on responsibilities and investing time on activities that he would probably not see achieved by the time he left. I questioned him about his commitment.

In a way, it’s about understanding that there is no purpose. The means is the end. We can no longer dream of constructing a communist state by passing through a phase of tyranny. We can no longer accept that we should set aside certain principles in the hope of achieving the ideal society, because we will never reach the end of history, this place where everything is better. (...) So I try to really live in each moment and to make each one of my needs and the tasks I have to complete into a pleasure, something fulfilling. (...) The journey is just as important as the destination, if not more so.

It is clear from this extract that ‘pleasure’ holds considerable importance in the ‘back to nature’ movement. The lifestyles adopted by the individuals interviewed here call for a deconstruction of the definition of happiness based on the acquisition of material goods, property or professional success. Instead, they find pleasure in the small things of life, in a “return” to simpler times, with an emphasis on the fulfilment of their basic needs, like having a place to live, enough to eat and a peaceful life. A good deal of space is left free for contemplation, finding satisfaction in work and sensory gratification through food or sound. For example, Martin, a thirty-six-year-old who had lived in the Frêne-aux-champs community for five years, invited me into his yurt for our interview and explained to me the pleasure he found in his home.

Some people say yurts are not comfortable, but I wouldn’t swap mine for anything in the world! Have you seen where I live? Look out of the window, do you see that landscape? And that tree? This is my television. In the morning I hear the little birds. You hear the wind, the rain, you feel the cold of winter and the heat of summer, you can actually tell the difference between the seasons: you are in contact with the elements.

Despite how it may appear, the fact that these individuals live, above all, for their own pleasure is not a sign of individualism or indifference to the social world around them. If certain desires are considered to be superficial or hollow, it is because they are seen as destructive on a larger scale. This reflection on the excesses of abundance and luxury is echoed in the writings of Epicurus (Helmer 2013), and more recently in Serge Latouche’s writings on “voluntary simplicity” (2006), and Pierre Rabhi’s concept of “happy sobriety” (2010). Rabhi’s linking of this Epicurean thought to more general contemporary political issues, like the disastrous implications of overproduction and overconsumption for the environment, has made him a highly acclaimed figure among neo-rural communities.

The second reason for the firm anchoring of these new agrarians in the present is based in a cynical renunciation of the future: the refusal to anticipate the near or more distant future is a kind of intellectual and emotional defence mechanism. Some observers would interpret an individual’s failure to imagine a happy future as a sign of low expectations and an impairment (Dubar 2011a). Yet in the case of neo-ruralism, staying



focused on the present helps to ensure a certain level of social and political consistency in everyday life.

One perspective that is not taken into account in opting for a life of 'voluntary simplicity' is the old age, disability and distress that the future can, and, sooner or later, certainly will hold. The decision not to save for retirement, so as to ensure a minimum of material and financial security, is not a question that is raised. As Epicurus maintained, the fear of death should not affect the quest for happiness in the present. The fact that a majority of individuals in neo-rural communities come from the middle classes may go some way towards explaining this apparently rash behaviour. The real risk of ending up destitute is, for most of these individuals, very small.

### *Considering the future*

The combination of the Epicurean world-view, based entirely on pleasure, and the cynical renunciation of activism is directly related to the way in which the individuals in neo-rural societies view the future. Their outlook fluctuates between a fatalistic view of humanity sleepwalking towards disaster and hope for a return to a 'pre-crisis' situation. But these two seemingly contradictory considerations both lead to the same conclusion and inspire the same response: the pursuit of autonomy and a 'return' to an agrarian lifestyle.

Pre-apocalyptic though it might be, this world-view is constructed simply by extrapolating very real observations of the contemporary political and ecological situation. The widespread use of mass surveillance technology, increasing social inequality, the ecological crisis, the development of intensive and unsustainable agriculture, growing population density and repeated economic crises are all contemporary realities that can be understood as elements contributing to an inescapable dystopian future. On top of which, the diminishing influence of the citizen in the political decision-making process (national, European and global) only compounds further the feeling of powerlessness and the inability to grasp and shape the future.

Whether or not individuals have been involved in activism in the past, the adoption of the neo-rural lifestyle amounts to a withdrawal from political and societal struggles. As we saw earlier, their focus on small-scale action, the fulfilment of their basic needs and the search for the highest possible level of autonomy is a way to bring meaning back into their lives. Like many others, twenty-nine-year-old Justine from La Ferme du Col in the Cévennes holds this pessimistic view of the future. For her, proclaiming any great societal or ecological change would be pretentious and pointless, even if she continues to express hope for a better world through her actions.

We are not going to change the world, it's too late. One day, it's all going to come to a head, and I'm not worried about nature, she'll survive, it's just the human species which, like many before it, will disappear. We will have screwed up the environment so badly that nothing will grow, we will have lost all the knowledge and know-how we would need in order to survive without supermarkets, we will have allowed the fascists to come to power, our bodies will degenerate because of the pollution (...). I am not there to say to people 'look, you have to live like this' (...), well, maybe just to show them that it is possible to live in a different way. But I have neither the strength nor the desire to impose my will on anyone else. If it happens, great, if not, never mind.

Behind this apparent cynicism is a more optimistic outlook: these individuals may have abandoned all hope of redesigning the world's political architecture, but they continue to hope that subversive behaviour will become more and more widespread. This is the idea of "changing society from the outside" and the individualization of activism. Over recent years, individual and community initiatives aimed at developing alternatives to fossil fuels and mass consumerism and picking apart the conventional fabric of society have become increasingly common (Ion 1997; Beck 2002; Lamine 2005; Pleyers 2011). For some individuals, proving that it is possible to provide for themselves without wage labour, to live from organic agriculture and to find fulfilment in simplicity is an objective in itself.

Neo-rural communities offer a way to overcome traditional political divides and leave behind the disappointments of direct challenges to consumer society by constructing a "substitute society" on its fringes (Léger 1979: 48). In fact, societal crises as they are experienced by the inhabitants of neo-rural communities, be they political, economic, ecological or "in cultural transmission" (Berliner 2010: 4), generate a feeling of "pressing

urgency” (Dubar 2011a): the idea that swift and efficient action is needed to save not only themselves, but, perhaps, the existence of humanity itself. In preparing for civilizational disaster, neo-rural communities encourage the anticipation of a post-apocalyptic future where anything will once again be possible. Some would even call this “preparing the rear bases of the revolution”, stressing the fact that it would be futile to fight the system if we have no radical alternative to propose. This embodies the ‘reaction’ dimension in the definition of a utopia, according to Marie-Ange Cossette-Trudel (2010).

The decision to ‘set an example’ is aimed at influencing not only visitors, parents or friends who might make similar life choices, but also the local and regional authorities and institutions. The idea is to facilitate the creation of initiatives aimed at promoting local organic agriculture and the establishment of small-scale social and economic structures. To do this effectively, the inhabitants of neo-rural communities often participate in a range of movements and associations,<sup>4</sup> and even, on occasion, in the local politics of their town halls. They are also often involved in fighting the closure of village schools (due to a lack of pupils), the grabbing of agricultural land by property and industrial developers and the exploitation of natural resources with destructive consequences for the environment, the local economy and the landscape.<sup>5</sup>

While participation in these organized protest movements may be the exception, rather than the rule, local acts of resistance and the desire for change are clearly pervasive in neo-rural communities. The choice to adopt an agrarian lifestyle can therefore not simply be viewed as a form of escapism or self-centred withdrawal: it is an expression of hope for a fairer and more sustainable society; a refusal to separate social criticism from

4 See *Le Mouvement Colibris*, *Terre de Liens*, the CREFAD network, etc.

5 This is a reference to the occupations and local struggles led by members of neo-rural communities in their local areas. Among the best-known examples are: the occupation of land in Larzac in the 1970s, in opposition to the enlargement of a military base; the ZAD (*Zone À Défendre*) of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, an area occupied to block the construction of an airport; the current occupation of the site of the proposed Sivens dam; and the debate over the potential exploitation of shale gas in Ardèche.

personal emancipation and the pursuit of happiness; Christian Arnsperger's "existential activism" (2009). To go 'back to nature' is thus to embody this twofold movement, this dialectic between the renunciation of society and the struggle for political exemplarity. For the inhabitants of neo-rural communities, the practice of subsistence farming and the complete mastery of the production process for each of the goods they need are a way to 'return' to a utopian way of life associated with the agrarian communities of the past.

### *Nostalgia and the mobilization of history*

The alarmist view of the future presented above is central to understanding the relationship of neo-rural communities with the present, but it also provides fertile ground in which individuals may cultivate regret for a lost past (Davis 1979; Pickering and Keightley 2006; Angé and Berliner 2015).

Indeed, there is no small amount of nostalgia in the presentation of the peasant farmer as the sole witness of pre-industrial civilization, and thus the bearer of precious experience that could be used to counter the evils of modern society (Jollivet 1978: 25).

It is worth remarking that this nostalgia for the traditional, rural world is not an exclusively contemporary phenomenon. The rapid pace of social change in recent centuries, driven to a great extent by industrialization, and the uncertainty this has generated surrounding the future, has led some authors and philosophers to question our definition of 'progress' and to mourn the loss of the idealized, traditional rural order (Chevalier, Chiva and Dubost 2000). As early as the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to cite just one example, saw man's return to a supposed state of primitive innocence as a means of escape from the urbanization and autocracy of the period. The presumed natural balance between mankind and the natural environment, and the ideas of liberty and equality with which it goes hand in hand, were even then contrary to the burgeoning capitalist system that Rousseau considered so "unnatural" (Piromallo-Gambaderlla 2005: 68).

Those individuals that decide to "return" to a simple, agrarian lifestyle do so in the knowledge that they are partaking of this nostalgia for the rural world. Historical continuity is invoked here as a discursive tool to

strengthen the justification behind these projects. The argument consists less of a reference to mankind's 'fundamental nature', than of the search for a sustainable and coherent way of life in our past.

It is through this nostalgia that the individuals that form the basis of this study first began to develop their interest in the rural history of their adopted homes, and in doing so, discovered the pre-industrial ways of life and methods of working the land. Nostalgia thus becomes a resource, "the foundation on which perspectives on the future evolution of relations between society and nature on a local scale are based" (Giuseppelli 2006), while regret for the lost tools and practices of yesteryear forms an integral part of the neo-rural communities' pursuit of independence and autonomy.

Perhaps the most distinct example is the use of animal traction. In the Cévennes, for example, crops were traditionally grown on terraced land. This step-like layering of the farmland helped to protect crops from erosion, summer droughts and the damage caused by the autumn rains. As a result, the local farmland is highly fragmented and the use of motorized machinery like tractors is virtually impossible. While the local inhabitants eventually abandoned farming due to the physical demands it implied, the decision of the neo-rural communities to reinvest in the land has forced them to recognize the value of animal traction.

Old animal-drawn farm machinery, like ploughs, harrows and hoes, must first be found and purchased, and then contact must be made with animal handlers that still practice the old farming skills. In order to direct the horses or cows as they till the land, the ploughman may even be obliged to give instructions in Occitan, the local language in which the older generation still train their animals; an amusing throwback for the neighbours, but one which is fully assumed by the individuals concerned.

The inhabitants of neo-rural communities do not re-appropriate these old farming practices purely to satisfy an "excessive appetite for the past" (Chevalier, Chiva and Dubost 2000: 23), but because they are a meaningful part of the search for ecological and political consistency. By re-appropriating such traditional know-how and reducing, as far as possible, their dependence on industrial society, the individuals in question attest to a feeling of increased autonomy, of having greater control over their environment and of absolving themselves from all responsibility for social



inequality. Ivan Illich (1973) expresses the same idea through the notion of ‘conviviality’.

Laurent, thirty-three years old, arrived at the Ferme de Raivaut four years ago and learned how to practice animal traction from another member of the community. He often notices that his activities arouse curiosity from tourists and attracts a lot of attention from ecological activists. Yet his own point of view on animal traction is nuanced.

All those little tricks they [the older generation] had to get by with nothing, all that know-how, that's what we have to re-learn. (...) Today we call it ‘ecology’, we practice it so as not to consume too much because we have realized that we are heading straight for disaster, but for our grandparents it was just normal, it went without saying: it was a basic necessity ...

The same reasoning can be found behind all kinds of other activities, like the cultivation of ancestral seed varieties. These are better adapted to their environment, and so require less input and are more effective at promoting biodiversity. The specific local knowledge associated with these crops is particularly valuable and important to their successful cultivation.

Jeremy Davies’ concept of “sustainable nostalgia” (Davies 2006), can help us grasp the complexity of the temporal register of the ‘back to nature’ movement, as it is experienced by the inhabitants of today’s neo-rural communities. Here, the notion of ‘sustainability’, so pivotal to contemporary ecological thinking, is presented as intrinsically linked to a “nostalgia for the future”: it is namely in the future that the consequences of today’s ethical, emotional, cultural and political decisions will be felt. This concept of nostalgic temporality is therefore particularly pertinent to this paper’s central theme, as it can be used to explain how the nostalgic and utopian ideas feed into and support one another. They result in the rejection of an imperfect present on the one hand and the creation of a radical alternative on the other, engendering a constant back and forth between references to past, future and present temporalities.

It should also be considered that the neo-rural lifestyle is part of a wave of enthusiasm for cultural heritage that has been gathering strength over the last fifty years (Jeudy 2008). The fact that regional artisanal products and culinary specialities have gained popularity and carved out their own



space in the collective imagination has even led these newcomers to the agrarian world to harness this popular nostalgia as a commercial strategy among the tourists to whom they sell their products (Angé 2015). This can also allow them to forge closer ties with the local inhabitants and/or the public authorities, even if so doing may undermine the political dimension of their project.

### *Cyclical and linear time*

As we have seen, the choice to 'return' to an agrarian lifestyle emanates from a utopian vision encompassing political, ecological and personal aspirations. This utopia can be subjected to anthropological study through the analysis of the different interconnected temporalities we have examined above. But on top of these broader temporalities, we must consider the specific relationships to time that arise from working the land and interacting with external actors.

Let us return to some theoretical principles. In the social sciences, it has long been common practice systematically to consider the so-called 'cyclical' and 'linear' temporalities as opposites. This distinction is an extension of the presumed incompatibility of so-called 'traditional' and 'modern' societies (Durkheim 1912; Bourdieu 1963; Elias 1984). The idea was this: the relationship to time is something that develops alongside an individual's own objectives and the specific role they play within their society. It takes on a collective relevance once these activities or beliefs are shared by a larger number of individuals. However, this theory has tended to determine a dominant register of activity, which has then imposed its structure on most human activities and interactions. The tendency to view the experience of time as homogenous, accentuated by culturalist and structuralist theories, has thus come to determine the dominant temporal registers that characterize the identity of individuals belonging to the same society.

In industrialized and capitalist Western societies, the dominant temporal register influencing various aspects of social life is what has been called 'linear' temporality (Gui Ekwa 1995). This temporality is strictly future-oriented, disregarding the past as a source of inspiration (Rezsóhazy

1988, cited by Gui Ekwa 1995: 3). What is more, the primacy of neo-liberal economic values across all areas of society shapes a utilitarian conception of time in daily life. Some authors even refer to this as a “technico-capitalist” temporality (Dubar 2011b).

In his book *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, Hartmut Rosa demonstrates how the mechanisms of profitability and productivity permeate the fabric of our daily lives, pressing us for ever greater efficiency and speed (Rosa 2010). The notion of the deadline and the calendar are imposed on workers, justified not by natural necessity (the climate or seasons, for example) but by commercial interests. For Hartmut Rosa, all aspects of social life have also succumbed to the influence of this drive for acceleration, with the exception of those, like pregnancy, which by their very nature cannot be sped up.

Conversely, in so-called ‘traditional’ societies, where industry does not enjoy the same supremacy and where agriculture still occupies an important place in the economy, the dominant temporality has been described as ‘cyclical’. The endlessly repeating seasons, the succession of day and night, the cycles of the moon and the natural cycles of birth and death become points of temporal reference that draw no clear distinction between past, present and future. Time and history are presented as an eternal cycle, which can explain the important place occupied by myths and ancestral figures in traditional social structures (Malinowski 1927; Evans-Pritchard 1968; Lévi-Strauss 1971).

As we saw at the beginning of this article, these theoretical considerations were put forward in the works of Maurice Bloch (1977), and popularized by Alfred Gell (1992). These authors emphasized the fact that it is the circumstances of a particular action that determine an individual’s experience of temporality, and not the other way round. And depending on where an individual is, the activity he is undertaking and the context surrounding this action, he can perceive time in a variety of different ways (Bensa 1997: 6), regardless of whether he belongs to a so-called ‘linear’ or ‘cyclical’ society.

The study of neo-rural societies allows us to examine the interchange between these two types of temporality. Firstly, as Rosa has observed, farming is a good example of a sector that is being sped up. The

mechanization and motorization of agricultural work has made human labour more productive, more efficient (Weber 1983: 684). The development of chemical fertilizers and the widespread use of fossil fuels have also helped to speed up the growing of crops and extend the season of production (by heating greenhouses from the beginning of spring to make seeds germinate faster, for example). With livestock, the ability to import large quantities of food supplements facilitates the continuous indoor stabling of animals, increases their yield and allows them to be milked all year round, even in winter. The logic of competitiveness and the demands of the supply sector for agricultural products only increase this productivist bias.

In view of the nostalgia and the relationship to work that we discussed earlier in this article, it is easy to understand how the inhabitants of neo-rural communities would be inclined to defend the idea of respecting the natural cycles. Their own criticism of industrial society is expressed through a demand for balance between human actions and nature. The desire to follow the “rhythm of the earth”, alluded to in the following extract from an interview with Jeanne, a thirty-one-year-old from Chantry, is one way to take ownership of this ideal.

We have lost the idea of living slowly. When you are in town, you have to deal with change all the time, everything moves very quickly, come rain, wind or snow. (...) Here, you have to readjust to the idea of slowness. You have to live at the pace of the plants, of the earth in fact. You live by the sun, the rain, the moon. (...) You also learn to listen, to listen to your body and your own rhythms. If you know when you have to rest and when you are fit, you don't need a schedule to tell you when your working day is over.

Through their traditionally inspired peasant farming and animal husbandry practices, the inhabitants of neo-rural communities naturally fall back on the rhythms imposed by the cyclical nature of the seasons, which give rise to a temporality that some would call “cyclical”. During the periods when there is much work to perform in a short space of time, like the harvest in summer or the cleaning of the chestnut groves at the end of winter (logging, brush cutting, swiddening), these neo-rural communities often pull together for a few days of “collective work”, sometimes joined

by guests from outside the community, including friends and relations. Spring, summer, autumn and winter become not only points of reference for an individual's personal or professional perception of time, but are also a reassuringly constant basis on which to plan for the future, given that the cycle of the seasons is infinite and unfailing. Luc, twenty-six years old and a member of the Mougatier community in the Cévennes, has learned to appreciate the rhythm imposed by the seasons and now even finds it reassuring.

I've been living here for five years now, and I've accepted that you have to give the wheat time to grow, that there's nothing you can do about it and you just have to wait. That fewer things happen in the winter, while nature is dormant. It gives you the time to relax, to read, to watch films. And then in spring you have to be energetic because that's when everything comes back to life, and it all happens at an incredible speed! Every year it's the same, it's reassuring. I was never in the habit of planning for the future, I never knew what the next year would bring. Here, at least, you know that nature will keep on running, with or without you.

Livestock farming also imposes its own very structured temporality. The shepherd releases the animals in the morning, then goes up the mountain to bring them in in the evening. The repetitive, daily task of milking, uninterrupted by weekends or holidays, also brings a sense of continuity, without the same constraints experienced by an employee who is bound by a conventional working calendar.

But however autonomous these neo-rural communities may be, they do not exist in isolation. In spite of everything, their socio-economic context implies a temporal register that is relatively disconnected from the natural cycles. Yet as Michel Lallement wrote, "to live in a society, you must learn to adapt your behaviour, to such an extent that time arises as the fundamental basis of social relationships" (2008: 6, our translation).

In fact, in their efforts to establish and maintain their projects, neo-rural communities often run up against administrative barriers. Without going into detail on the complex administrative and legal structures these individuals have to deal with, it is important to note that they have developed a certain skill in juggling the various opportunities for funding and support offered by the French state.

To qualify for subsidies under the CAP,<sup>6</sup> for example, these individuals are often prepared to make certain compromises, like increasing the number of animals on their farms (the minimum number needed to gain access to subsidies is constantly rising), buying the requisite electronic tagging equipment (though not necessarily using it), or even deforesting and clearing parcels of land so they meet the administrative requirements for receiving certain kinds of subsidies. By the same token, certain individuals do not hesitate to obtain agricultural status, which may come with an advantageous tax regime,<sup>7</sup> comprehensive social security scheme<sup>8</sup> and preferential access to agricultural property; while others are well-versed in claiming in-work benefits. In short, the individuals that make up neo-rural communities develop the expertise needed to navigate the complex machine of French bureaucracy and turn it to their advantage. Communities may even arrange meetings with each other to exchange advice on property or the opportunities offered by the voluntary sector.

All of these administrative procedures require a level of cooperation with the official institutions, including adhering to their calendar and using the same information and communication technologies. Given that the act of beginning any such procedure inevitably leads on to a series of administrative hurdles that must be overcome in order to ensure the further development of the neo-rural project, the resulting temporality can be described as linear or “sequential” (Lasswell 1956 and Jones 1970). Many individuals see these procedures as an encumbrance that prevents them from acting with the freedom they desire. Bureaucratic requirements are regarded as a major restriction; deadlines must be met (for project proposals, for

6 The CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) is a European agricultural subsidy framework. It is broadly criticised for its encouragement of production-oriented agriculture and its lack of ecological and social considerations (Nallet 2007; Zamburlini et al. 2015).

7 Under the Young Farmers’ Endowment (*Dotation Jeune Agriculteur*), young farmers can claim state support and tax exemption for the first five years after starting their business. They are required to meet certain profitability requirements after this five-year period.

8 The MSA (*Mutualité Sociale Agricole*) is a social security mutual that provides farmers with incapacity benefits, pensions, occupational risk insurance, etc.

example), plans and budget projections submitted. Sometimes this may give rise to the feeling that the neo-rural lifestyle is being swamped to such an extent as to undermine its original purpose.

For example, Laurent, from La Ferme de Raivaut, had to deal with a lot of paperwork after several previous residents decided to leave the farm. As they had a lease agreement with the association *Terre de Lien*, Laurent had to take over the project with some other new residents. This led to long and complex administrative procedures.

When I decided to get back to nature, to the basics, to reconnect with the earth and all that ... that was the point in my life when I spent the most time in front of a computer.

The fact that these individuals systematically have to plan for the long term (particularly in terms of production) also creates tension with the logic of presentism that we encountered earlier. Claude Dubar's idea of "suspended time" (Dubar 2011a: 5), presented as part of his study into the contexts of social crises, is interesting to explore in this regard.

In short, the variety of temporal registers that can be observed in neo-rural communities lends support to the idea that an individual's experience of time can differ depending on the activities they perform and the objectives they pursue. Even within one heterotopian social group, an analysis of the different temporalities, as perceived by these actors, can help us appreciate the complexity of the neo-rural phenomenon.

## Conclusion

The concept of utopia does not easily lend itself to anthropological study. The notion of 'heterotopia', which anchors the utopia within the physical space, offers a theoretical framework, which not only helps to structure the ethnography, but which is also relevant to considerations of how individuals experience temporality.

By addressing each of the six defining principles of a 'heterotopia', I have demonstrated that the concept can be applied to the study of



neo-rural communities. What is more, the idea of juxtaposing temporalities, raised by the underlying concept of 'heterochrony', provided an interesting theoretical opening. The assertion that a variety of temporal registers may exist within a given social group allowed us to take a position within the theoretical corpus and examine how these 'other spaces' necessarily imply an 'other temporality'.

This heterochrony is specific to the heterotopian spaces examined here. In the case of neo-rural communities, it is primarily the utopian aspirations themselves, both personal and societal, that reside in a tangle of temporal registers, between a *carpe diem* mindset, hope or anxiety for the future, and nostalgia for the traditional rural world. The methods by which these communities work the land and raise livestock then introduce a temporality that can almost be described as 'cyclical', and which is based on a lifestyle quite free of neo-liberal economic thinking. Finally, given that no heterotopia is completely isolated from its surrounding space, certain aspects of daily life also inevitably trigger linear and utilitarian conceptions of time. The variety of temporal registers is integral to the dynamics of the neo-rural phenomenon, and shapes the consciousness of these communities.

Through this approach to 'return utopias', we have been able to grasp the internal coherence of neo-rural communities, to add our own understanding to the self-perception of their inhabitants and to demonstrate the temporal richness of the utopia as it is experienced here.

Utopias are worthy of interest from the social sciences for the inspiration they bring and the actions they encourage. The 'back to nature' utopia is both an expression of social discontent and an agenda for change. The simple fact that individuals construct these rural utopias, or borrow from the utopian ideal in their day-to-day actions, reveals a burgeoning aspiration towards collective solidarity and a certain ownership of the contemporary ideological and technical alternatives. As Chris Carlsson said, these neo-rural heterotopias "certainly will not cause the state or global capitalism to collapse by themselves" (Carlsson et al. 2010: 949–951). The strength of these life projects lies in the fact that they are "*happening*, continuously", and through their "learn-as-we-go experimentalism", the individuals involved construct their own alternatives to capitalism (Dubar 2011a: 949–951). Now the field of research must be expanded, without fear of moving beyond the

semantic and subjective debates on utopias, to understand their character, their contents, how they are brought about and the cultural changes they awaken (Wright 2010). Each discipline has its own ambition and duty. Let's hope utopia becomes the mission of social sciences.

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