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Fanny Hugues

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Title: Getting by in rural France: *la débrouille* as a form of quiet popular resistance?

Fanny Hugues (Cems/EHESS)

This article takes part in the special issue coordinated by Ivan Sainsaulieu (Lille, CLERSE) and Julien Talpin (CNRS, CERAPS): The discreet mobilisations of subaltern classes and groups: Adaptation tactics or alternative forms of life?

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Abstract: This article examines the informal practices adopted by people to get by on low incomes in the French countryside and the different meanings attached to them. Two groups are distinguished: the first, from the agricultural or rural working class, resorts to *la débrouille* out of necessity and doesn't attach any political significance to these practices; the second, from the urban working or lower middle class background, politicizes its way of life as a means of reducing its dependence on the capitalist system. The article is based on interviews and ethnographic stays with 40 people living in six different rural areas in France. The analysis adopts an emic perspective of *la débrouille* to question its scientific (and political) interpretation in terms of resistance, showing the diversity of meanings attached to it, ranging from an ambivalent popular 'sense of self' to a more politicized appropriation of this working class way of life.

Keywords: *débrouille*, rurality, invisible economy, politicization, DIY, resourcefulness

Introduction

In the French countryside, many people get by from day to day, coping with limited financial resources, by shrewdly taking advantage of the market sphere or by doing without it. This article focuses on some of the everyday vernacular practices adopted by the rural men and women I encountered; practices that remain invisible to the national accounting system.

This article aims to explore whether these lifestyles can be construed as forms of discrete resistance by analysing whether or not informants attach a political meaning to *la débrouille* (getting by, making do, being resourceful). For this, we will rely on Lagroye's (2003) definition of politicization as the transposition of practices (not necessarily by political actors) into the political order. By integrating the actors' perception of what is political and by requalifying social activities as political, it runs counter to the alleged disinterest of the working classes in the political field—without, however, running the risk of over-interpreting the actors' discourses and practices as political by imposing academic category. In our case, we seek to understand to what extent frugal rural lifestyles can be interpreted as forms of economic and moral resistance to poverty and domination (Thompson, 1971), forms that are often expressed not in words, but in day-to-day practices (Collectif Rosa Bonheur, 2019: 213).

For this purpose, we will probe the everyday relationship that some individuals entertain with the political by examining modes of politicization that are not necessarily oriented toward the political sphere (Carrel, 2015; Le Gall *et al.*, 2012; Buton *et al.*, 2016). For a first group of informants, reliance on 'System D'¹ is not a politicized position or is not considered as an act of resistance, while for a second group, with specific geographical and political trajectories, a way of life founded on *la débrouille* is about quietly developing alternative lifestyles, distinct from the dominant system (Haenfler *et al.*, 2012; Frayne 2015). However, the latter do not take a public stance on it; many seek instead to hide the fact, and to live their lives alongside—rather than against—the institutions. These daily practices are performed, moreover, within the private domestic space or as part of a local mutual aid network. In rural areas, *la débrouille* is as much about circumventing the normative capitalist world of the market economy (Rubert, in this issue) as it is about pursuing autonomy by adopting practices explicitly aimed at rejecting the system, without actually quitting the system as such.

Analysing practices in terms of 'politicization' and 'resistance' raises methodological and conceptual issues. On the one hand, the framing of workers' practices by the notion of 'resistance' echoes an old debate in social sciences and a classic problem of interpretation. Which point of view should prevail? The *etic* interpretation (meaning defined by the researchers) or the *emic* interpretation (meaning defined by the informants)? If informants do not perceive their social practices as a means of resisting the dominant system, what gives researchers the right to do so? James C. Scott (1985), for example, raises this question in his ethnography of everyday class struggles in Malaysia. For him, people are silent about their intentions because they are too entrenched in peasant subculture and daily survival to express them. In this context, researchers can infer meanings—that is, resistance—from the nature of the actions themselves. However, opting for

¹ *Le système D* – D for *débrouille* or its more 'emphatic' variant *démerde* – is pithily glossed by Robert Neuwirth as 'the ingenuity economy, the economy of improvisation and self-reliance, the do-it-yourself, or DIY, economy'.

such a solution carries the risk of distorting or obliterating the diversity of meanings that people attach to their practices. In this article, we will focus on the multiple meanings given to their practices by the actors encountered (Sainsaulieu & Surdez, 2012), based on their experiences and on the contexts in which they live, rejecting any hint of miserabilism or populism (Collovald & Sawicki, 1991). This involves taking stock of the limitations that constrain the informants, as well as the creativity with which they manage them (Darras & Noûs, 2020).

On the other hand, how is it that daily life can become, or does become, political for some and not for others, even though all are engaged in similar lifestyles (Allain, 2020)? Does the discretion that surrounds these practices go hand-in-hand with a form of politicization, or might it instead lead to a situation in which people do not envisage their own behaviour as ‘political’ (Benzecry & Baiocchi, 2017)? While the notion of ‘resistance’ seems appropriate to qualify the practices of the second group, it is not best suited to framing the practices of the first group. There is another way to go beyond the dichotomy between resistance and passivity. This perspective pays much more attention to the ambivalence and uncertainty of working class practices. The German historian Alf Lüdtke coined the notion of *Eigensinn* (‘sense of self’) (1993) to describe how workers create spaces of autonomy in a context of structural domination by pursuing their own will and goals, by detaching themselves, by doing some work on one’s own account or by pilfering (Oeser, 2015; Renahy, 2015). These practices are never seen or conceived as an open rebellion against the factory and can even sometimes serve to reproduce domination by making it bearable. To see them only as a form of resistance would be reductionist, overlooking the ambiguity of the practices and the meanings attached to them. We therefore choose to adopt an *emic* perspective of *la débrouille* in order to question its scientific (and political) interpretation in terms of resistance, showing the diversity of meanings attached to it, ranging from an ambivalent popular *Eigensinn* (Lüdtke, 1993) to a more politicized appropriation of this working class way of life.

This article draws on on-going research into the trajectories, daily lives and *débrouille* practices of some forty people living on low incomes in rural areas. The localities visited in Tarn, Drôme and Haute-Vienne attract ‘neo-rurals’: former city-dwellers coming to live in the country, possibly members of the more affluent classes working in a nearby town or working from home, or small farmers taking over or setting up a farm (Grimault, 2020). Moselle, Sarthe and Ariège display higher levels of poverty (Coquard, 2019). The population density of the territories studied ranges from 25 pop/km² to 60 pop/km², which classes them as low-density rural areas (Taulelle, 2012). The fieldwork areas are situated about ten kilometres from small towns (population approx. 4,000), and between thirty to a hundred and thirty kilometres from cities.

Following the start of the study in the autumn of 2019, I met the informants partly through the intermediary of the non-profit organizations of which they were beneficiaries through food donations, fuel and wood vouchers, or financial recovery assistance (Secours Populaire, Familles Rurales, Solidarité Paysans)², but mainly, thanks to snowball sampling, I met the friends, acquaintances, family members or neighbours of these initial contacts.

² These three French non-profits work with people (private individuals and farmers) in financial difficulty, offering assistance in the form of food banks, legal support, and training. Some are based exclusively in rural areas, while others have local centres in every part of the country.

I visited some fifty people at home, carrying out one-on-one interviews lasting about two hours, and returned several times to see two thirds of them, in twenty different households, for follow-up interviews and to perform an ethnographic survey on most of them, as well as an ethno-accounting study.³

The first section begins by outlining the social profiles of the informants and their ambivalent attitudes to *la débrouille*, defining two ideal types: while some do not situate their lifestyles in a transformative political landscape, others take an explicitly political stance to justify their way of life. It then goes over a number of practices that make up these lifestyles and which are, by necessity, rooted in discretion. The second section addresses the heterogeneous interpretations of these *débrouille* practices according to the informants' varying degrees of radicalism and politicization, and in the light of the two ideal types. The third section, after touching on certain discreet stratagems and tactics that skirt around the edges of legality, seeks to understand more specifically why people belonging to the second ideal type bypass the law, while the others conform to it, by examining their differentiated material conditions and socialization histories. In the final section, these analyses are extended to the broader scale of life trajectories, to understand why some informants politicize their lifestyle while others do not.

1. Getting by 'on the side' in an invisible economy

The forty people in the study—twenty-two women and eighteen men—are, for the first group, situated in either the precarious or the stabilized segment of the lower-income population, and in the lower middle-class segment for the second group—with cultural capital but little money. They are relatively old (average age 55); eighteen live in heterosexual couples, while twelve women and ten men are single. Sixteen have no children, ten have children who no longer live at home, and eight have children (adult or minor) still living with them. Their educational level is generally below the national average, although it varies widely. Fifteen of the informants have a *Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle* (CAP) or *Brevet d'Études Professionnelles* (BEP)⁴ in construction, mechanics, cookery, hairstyling, secretarial work, landscaping or carpentry. Nine have a *Brevet des Collèges* (BEPC).⁵ Seven hold an agricultural baccalaureate, a (roughly equivalent) *Brevet de Technicien Agricole* (BTA) or a *Brevet Professionnel Agricole* (BPA) obtained by resuming formal education. Three have a qualification in social work, and three in the health field. One person has a general baccalaureate, and two have a degree (biology, psychology). One person has a *Certificat d'Études*⁶ and another has a master's degree. Most own their own homes: a house with some land (or even a forest), inherited or bought at low cost, requiring significant renovation work. Three own non-buildable land, on which stands a temporary dwelling (tent, shed or van); one lives with her parents. Only some members of the first group (three) rent an apartment or a house, while some of those in the second group rent out self-renovated dwellings, which provides them with a regular income.

³ Ethno-accounting examines the informal economy, unseen by national accounting systems, encompassing self-manufacturing, forms of mutual aid (barter, gifts), and unpaid or undeclared work. See the collective issue coordinated by Cottureau *et al.*, 2016.

⁴ Vocational high-school level qualifications.

⁵ General middle-school level qualification.

⁶ An exam-based diploma originally aimed at those leaving school after primary level; discontinued in 1989.

They have in common the fact that they are almost all from urban or rural working-class or farming backgrounds (a few come from the penniless intellectual middle class) and are not subject to income tax. They live with few available monetary resources, mainly sporadic and of different kinds: welfare payments, modest salaries, occasional working income, and small pensions. Nine of them are salaried employees—one working quarter time, four part-time and three full time—and five do jobs that are paid for by employment vouchers, such as gardening, DIY and cleaning for private individuals. Five are small farmers—four of them have their own farm—and live partly on the sale of their own produce. They often hold down multiple jobs, declared or undeclared, and their daily routines are marked by multitasking. Working income is often supplemented by social benefits such as an invalidity pension or adult disability allowance, supplementary or minimum income support, as well as child benefit. Eleven people are unemployed or not seeking employment; they live on their partner's income, their unemployment entitlement and/or the aforementioned welfare benefits. Eight are retired from farming, construction or social work; another is an artist. Their average monthly monetary resources come to €800.

These relatively precarious financial situations are bound up with a complicated relationship to work. On the one hand, many of the first group informants have been stricken by unemployment, sometimes being laid off after decades in the same company, leading to difficulty in finding another job (due to age or lack of qualifications), or resulting in health problems, which may hinder their ability to cope (Nelson & Smith, 1999). This may be compounded by a lack of mobility (no car, high fuel prices) and a context of structural unemployment. On the other hand, some second group members are expressly not looking for work, or say that they choose to do only a few hours' work (in private homes, seasonal work, online sales), to supplement their welfare payments, claiming that they do not need much money to live and/or because they want to escape the world of work. While hard work is a fundamental dimension of respectability (Hoggart, 1970), this second group is nevertheless well perceived and integrated locally, in all of the places visited: since remaining exclusively in the company of one's peers is to be avoided, events are organized, for example, to meet neighbours and other local people who are not otherwise known to them.

With their meagre financial resources, the persons encountered get by from day to day to live as best they can. As Carole, 43, a part-time social worker, puts it, *la débrouille* depends on 'finding systems to make it all work as well as possible for yourself' by meeting 'your needs economically, [while at the same time] allowing yourself some pleasures'. For some, *la débrouille* is a question of necessity, it is about having to cope with difficult economic situations; for others—those who brandish it as a form of opposition to a mercantile state system—it appears to be a matter of choice. Whatever the motivations, lifestyles based on *la débrouille* are characterized by similar popular practices: recuperating objects and materials, repairing, making, bartering food and labour for goods, producing (part of) one's own food, cooking, taking advantage of sales promotions, buying second-hand, and pooling tools and vehicles.

Observation of frugal rural lifestyles sheds light on the repair, maintenance, manufacturing and creation activities that flourish in a context of discreet subsistence work, as described in existing studies of the contemporary urban working classes (Collectif Rosa Bonheur 2017) or in Florence Weber's investigation of the 'travail-à-côté' of workers in Montbard, a small rural industrial town (2002). This notion differs however from *la débrouille* because of the socio-economic conditions of Weber's informants, who are factory shift workers, and because *la*

débrouille refers to a non time-bound work of subsistence and consumption, in order to get by from day to day.

La débrouille is about taking care of objects to make them last, such as when Claude retrieves a damaged woodworking plane from a scrapheap to give it a second life, when Rudolphe creates a pedal-powered washing machine from the shell of an old one, or when Simon converts a playpen into a laundry basket. These uninstitutionalized, unaccounted practices are part of a home-based invisible economy, which echo certain traditional practices from working-class culture, such as the evocatively-named *la gratte* (literally ‘scratching’)—petty pilfering—or *la perruque* (literally ‘wiggling’), improving one’s daily lot by using the factory’s facilities to make things for one’s own benefit (Anteby 2003; Roy 1952; Rosigno & Hodson 2004). Claude (63, retired specialist educator), son of a large Parisian working-class family, recalls his mother’s attitude to such practices when he was a child:

‘My mother never said to me “I’m going to sabotage the company” by taking away a crate of green beans. She would say: “Go round the back of the shop, there are some unsold green beans there; take some and come back home.” That was *la débrouille*; that was *la gratte*. Of course, there’s a political issue behind it: you take from the boss who doesn’t give to you, but you keep quiet about it. I never saw my parents call people together to ask: “What have you pilfered from your boss this week?” Everyone knew that everyone was pilfering, but it wasn’t built up into a collective way of acting [...] *La débrouille* is a day-to-day thing [...]. Sabotage is a form of struggle; it’s something different.’ (Claude, 63, retired specialist educator).

For Claude, sabotage—legal or illegal—is a form of head-on struggle that he sees as being in opposition to pilfering. Pilfering doesn’t prevent the company from functioning and seeks, by definition, to be discreet, like *la débrouille*. In his eyes, getting by in the countryside from day to day with little money is a matter of ‘stepping to one side’. ‘Without rejecting the system’, to quote Rudolphe (47, jobbing gardener), the idea, by means of day-to-day practices, is to ‘create your own system, cutting out the middle-men’ (Carole, 43, part-time social worker) i.e. the state, banking or even commercial institutions. In other words, to cite Pierre (55, self-employed builder): ‘You get involved with the system as little as possible, by fending for yourself as much as possible’. Recovering tiles from a manufacturer, electronic components from the waste disposal centre, furniture from a friend, wool from an acquaintance, repairing a moped, a concrete mixer or a table leg, transforming a clothes line into tomato stakes, making a cutting board from recovered wood, sharing tools... all these activities help to create a shadow system out of the dominant lifestyle, a system ‘on the side’. As Yoan (37, CAP-qualified electrician, unemployed) says: ‘It’s not necessarily militating *against*, it’s just a case of “I decide my life will be like this, end of story, like it or not”.’ Lüdtke’s aforementioned expression *Eigensinn* takes on its full meaning here: *la débrouille* can be linked to this ‘sense of self’ in Yoan’s words, as a way of cooperating with domination and leading a ‘good life’. It also differs from ‘resistance to’, oriented explicitly against named adversaries.

Another aspect of this invisible economy is the exchange of undeclared goods and services, which goes to the heart of rural *débrouille*. These practices are embedded in relations of reciprocity that are not simply bilateral but are part of a more general mutual support network (Pruvost, 2013). During the spring lockdown of 2020, Claude (63, retired educator) delivered free ovenloads of

bread to his neighbours, while Cécile (53, livestock farmer on minimum income support) left freshly picked wild garlic on her friends' doorsteps. It is not possible to manage without solid, reliable and lasting relationships with people who can help out in 'hard times', in situations where the reciprocity is more immediately obvious. As for example in the case of Carole (43, part-time social worker) who does the groceries for her parents, who have taken her in for a few years and Jeanne (53, undeclared farmer on disability allowance) who gives eggs to her cousin, who in turn helps her out with cash, in a context of relations marked by gift and counter-gift.

The practices of *la débrouille* generally resemble each other, but they are interpreted in different ways by the actors, who ascribe multiple meanings to them. Some of the discourses adopted are depoliticized, while others are explicitly political.

2. Differing interpretations of *débrouille* practices

On the one hand, some people attach no political discourse to their practices, particularly when they have no other choice than to resort to *la débrouille* out of economic necessity. Discreet practices—legal or otherwise—such as scavenging articles from waste tips, repairing, slaughtering one's animals at home, or bartering goods and services may be adopted for want of any other option, as is the case with urban scrap metal collectors who flout the standards in force for the sake of economic survival, without making any political claims (Florin & Garret, 2019).

Simon, 57, is from the Paris region and has a CAP in metalwork. After obtaining his qualification, he did his one-year military service, followed by temporary jobs, before becoming a security agent for many years. Nelly, 54, grew up locally and has a CAP in shorthand typing as well as a BEP in clerical work, areas in which she has never been employed. Having worked as a cleaner in a retirement home for thirty years, she was made redundant two years ago after stopping work for health reasons. They have been living together for twelve years, with three children, two of them from Nelly's first partner. Without a car, it is hard to find a job in rural areas, and anyway—given the cost of mileage, the inevitable loss of welfare benefits, and the lack of time at home to do DIY and help out friends and neighbours—there is no financial incentive to do so. The couple lives on jobseeker's allowance (€565) and on Nelly's invalidity pension (€479), as well as on child benefit (€130). Due to their high fixed costs (they rent an apartment), on top of which comes the cost of food, the bank account is constantly overdrawn. Undeclared income helps make ends meet: payment for looking after animals and for sewing work, and from the sale of knitted items and second-hand clothes on the internet. The couple also gets by with help from others: recourse to a food bank, occasional loans from friends and family, car-pooling, and gifts of vegetables from Nelly's father, or clothes and furniture from friends or acquaintances. Daily life is punctuated by the search for ways to get by, and the *débrouille* practices they adopt are intrinsic to that goal.

Simon: In a way, you just have to know how to fend for yourself (*être démerdard*).⁷

Nelly: We have no choice.

⁷ To be proficient at *la débrouille* – to really know how to *se débrouiller* – is to be *débrouillard*. *Démerde*, *se démerder* and *démerdard* are mirror equivalents in a more 'vernacular' register.

Simon: [We try to] get stuff as cheaply as possible. I retrieved some wooden pallets, and I made a workbench, from a pallet! Next to it, the shoe cabinet, that's homemade too! [...] When you're short of something, you have to try and make do with what you have. And if you don't have it, you know how to make it [...]

Neither of the two vote, and neither spoke in political terms during the interviews. Discussions with the couple tended to focus on the search for 'clever schemes' and on monitoring their spending. In this sense, living from day to day inspires *la débrouille* rather than collective action (Mayer & Braconnier, 2015); it depends on finding the most economical stratagems possible to keep a roof over one's head, find food, stay warm, and get around (Roche, 2016), without these practices being explicitly situated in a transformative political landscape.

This couple is representative of the first group, who do not politicize their practices. Seeing their practices as the preservation of a 'sense of self' rather than as the 'choice of the necessary' (Bourdieu, 1979) allows them to be more 'ambivalent' (Grignon & Passeron, 1989). Though enforced by social and economic factors, these practices also embody a means for the working classes to achieve some autonomy and gain self-esteem by demonstrating creativity, manual skill and cunning (Weber, 1991). The notion of *débrouille* contains within it this dual dimension of economic constraint and working-class pride.

Others embody the second case, by attaching transgressive discourses to their practices, which they interpret as forms of discreet resistance to the dominant market-driven lifestyles. Rudolphe, 47, single, no children, grew up with a journalist father and a mother who worked as a secretary at a university, as well as with a disabled sister. Having obtained his baccalaureate, he went to university but was unable to validate one of the academic years. After a number of temporary jobs, he became a waste disposal worker for ten years, then a maintenance worker for several years, which enabled him to get a loan and save up to buy, some fifteen years ago, a village house that needed a lot of work. Then he chose to work only a few hours a month (almost all declared) as a jobbing gardener and not to apply for welfare. Currently, he earns an average of €300 a month, and draws on his savings to make ends meet.

'It's not refusing work: it's reducing the share of work so as to have more time for yourself and to have a smaller environmental impact than using a car to get to work, or using gas and electricity... Simply by reducing, without rejecting the system. It's still an act of resistance. It's to show that I want to reappropriate what they're confiscating from us, what they want to make us dependent on. People who work are completely dependent on a system... [...]. We are in a struggle, we are resisting, against a pervasive dominant model.' (Rudolphe, 47, jobbing gardener).

Rudolphe's politicization of his lifestyle could be interpreted as a stratagem to keep manual jobs—the only ones he could realistically hope for—at arm's length. Likewise, presenting his practices, though partly forced upon him, as a choice may be a way to affirm his dignity in the face of the stigma associated with these lifestyles. It does indeed appear, however, that the diminution of his salaried working hours enables him to spend more time at home reappropriating popular practices such as chopping firewood, recovering items from the waste tip or at neighbours' houses, doing repairs, or creating a solar oven and a pedal-powered washing machine. He has also used this

available time to visit the ZAD⁸ at Notre-Dame-des-Landes several times, in order to lend a hand and to draw inspiration from the eco-warrior lifestyle. He would like to set up a self-managed water supply for his community; in the meantime, he reduces his consumption as much as possible (capturing rainwater, recycling water for multiple uses, using a bucket shower). In this second case, Rudolphe, and others like him, seek to gain autonomy from a capitalist system that dispossesses people of their know-how by turning needs into commodities (Mège, 2017)—through the houses they live in, how they keep warm, how they move around and what they eat—and he says so in as many words.

The actors' explicit appeal to, or silence about, ecological concerns further reinforces the ideal types outlined here. The politicization of *la débrouille* is partly linked to the expression of a popular ecological discourse for some, while others make no mention of such arguments, or see their practices as natural, an integral part of a common ethos (Thompson 1971). The example of the relationship to the soil is telling in this respect.

Nadine, 72, worked in a factory and on the land, and has always lived on the family farm, first with her grand-parents and parents, then with her husband, Roger, 79, a retired plasterer, and their daughter Carole, 43, a part-time social worker. The farmyard animals (chickens, ducks, pigs, poultry, goats) and the vegetables, fruits and cereals intended for the animals, grown without pesticides, were destined for family consumption and for barter with the neighbourhood. When Nadine's parents died, the couple decided to move the vegetable garden to the back of the house, to separate themselves from all the animals except the chickens, and to sow grass on the hectare and a half of land because of the excessive workload required, which had previously been shared with Nadine's two grandparents and then with her father and mother (episodically, due to a chronic illness).

'You throw nothing away, or what you had in the leftovers you give to the animals. We take the peels to the wood, to make compost. We've always done that in the countryside. [...] We were used to it, we didn't have a tractor; we relied on our own strength. We have a power tiller, but we do a lot of things by hand, we don't go out and buy [crop treatment] products. We're a bit like the doctors of the land' (Nadine, 72, retired worker).

When she was a teenager, a neighbouring winegrower offered to teach Nadine how to weed the vine: 'He explained to me all the diseases of the vine (...). My neighbour would show me: "you do it like that, you treat things with respect".' This double socialization in the care of the land is embedded in the history of the small French peasantry: half-farming, half-working, working without pesticides and with few machines... and eliminated by the structural reforms of the 1960s (Champagne, 2002).

By contrast, for those associated with the second ideal type, embodied by Rudolphe, ecological concerns are an integral part of what makes their lifestyle political. The practices they adopt and the ecological discourse they espouse are more radical—though without claiming to be 'green'. This may be manifested by the purchase of a plot of land: Gisèle (50, artist living on

⁸ *Zone à défendre* (Zone to Defend): neologism adopted for a militant blockade by ecological activists. The ZAD at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, near Nantes, contributed to the cancellation of a planned new airport; the one at Le Testet (mentioned below), in southwest France, succeeded in preventing the construction of a dam.

minimum income support) bought five hectares of forest with her savings, to ‘protect a little piece of nature and make it available to people who want to lose themselves in a forest for a while.’ Likewise, Barbara (46, part-time farm worker) and Thierry (50, undeclared builder) bought some land in order to plant trees but above all ‘to save it from industrial farming.’ Owning a plot of land is assimilated to the desire to maintain its biodiversity by rescuing it from the logic of productivism. This means protecting it legally as well as discreetly, without resorting to an illegal collective occupation by activists such as at the ZADs of Notre-Dame-des-Landes or Le Testet. These ecological mobilizations were nonetheless cited in the interviews by those who politicize their lifestyle as models in terms of social organization and the activities undertaken (recycling, building huts, permaculture); some have already visited the ZADs to offer help and support. Similarly, some took part in the *Gilets Jaunes* protest movement,⁹ and many backed its social and ecological demands. By contrast, the climate marches of recent years were never mentioned, and France’s green party (EELV) was alluded to by a few, but only to underline its lack of radicalism.

The differentiated interpretations of *débrouille* practices highlight two ideal types. In the first case, those who adopt this lifestyle out of necessity and see their practices as part of a moral economy do not attach a political discourse to it. In the second case, some couch their lifestyle—presented as a choice—in transgressive discourses, associating their practices with forms of quiet resistance to the dominant system. In the next section we examine these two ideal types by analysing the multiple relationships they entertain with the law and with the prevailing norms.

3. ‘Playing’ with legality: discreet stratagems and tactics fundamental to *la débrouille*

These practices for getting by from day to day are informal, undeclared and spread across a continuum that ‘runs from irregularities of varying significance through to radical illegality’ (Fontaine & Weber, 2010, p.16, as cited in Bennafla, 2015). Scavenging from waste tips, failing to declare paid or bartered work or income from the sale of certain goods (eggs, chickens, honey), failing to apply for a building permit, failing to tag one’s sheep and pigs (Vidal & Trouillard, 2017), raising them and slaughtering them at home for one’s own consumption and for the network of friends and family, or gathering wood from a state-owned forest... these are illegal activities in France. The latter practice—just as *la gratte* is associated with working class culture—harks back to the legacy of peasant resistance against the creeping encroachment of private property, manifested by the poaching of wood in 17th-century Britain and 19th-century France (Agulhon, 1979; Thompson, 2014). Such practices might have been expected to disappear with the advent of modernity, industrialization and the welfare state, but they are currently becoming more widespread in a context of mass unemployment and the dismantling of social safety nets (Narotzky, 2020).

The everyday relationship with norms, regulations and the law evidenced in certain informant interviews is a good indicator of the significance ascribed to their practices (Silbey & Ewick 1998; Talpin *et al.*, 2021; Chappe *et al.*, 2018). Two *débrouille* practices merit particular attention here: constructing one’s own buildings (‘self-build’) and domestic livestock rearing.

⁹ Before evolving into a wider protest movement, the *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Jackets) revolt stemmed from demonstrations against the impact of a new carbon tax on fuel prices in car-dependent rural France.

Noémie and Axel (36, part-time after-school activity leader) want to build a hut on their private land, in which they intend to install a dry toilet and a solar shower:

‘Well... you can’t! Because the planning department said it was a meadow, non-buildable farmland. But we didn’t want to build a house, just a little toilet block! [...] There are laws... it’s crazy. [...] It gets on my nerves, it’s so complicated. When it comes to administration, in France... this is a country where we like to make life difficult for people. [...] Everything has to be declared, everything has to be official, you have to go through all the hoops. There’s some as don’t; they’re like “alternative-illegal”. Luckily there’s a bit of System D...’ (Noémie, 36, part-time social worker).

Faced with building standards and regulations, Noémie and Axel feel they are trying to ‘swim against the current’, endlessly battling with the onerous legislation on alternative housing (Mésini, 2011). The couple take a stance ‘against the law’, while feeling caught in its grip, that of an arbitrary authority they feel powerless to oppose. Claude (63, retired specialist educator), meanwhile, positions himself ‘with the law’, in a ‘game’ that involves using ‘skills, resources and negotiations’ to arrive at his ends (Pélisse, 2005). He renovated a lean-to on his land by adding solid walls without a building permit. That meant, he says, that he had to be ‘very discreet’; as the old French adage goes: *Pour vivre heureux, vivons cachés* (To stay happy, stay hidden). When the unauthorized construction came to the attention of the local tax office, he went there on his own initiative—a clear plus-point in the eyes of the employee who received him. Claude showed her some photos of the original wooden lean-tos, and his construction was added to the land registry, as the employee deemed that he had acted ‘in good faith’. The trick, he implies, is to hide from the gaze of the law, and, if you are found out, to wangle a way (*se débrouiller*) to make the practice legal, which calls for a knowledge of certain laws.

Domestic livestock rearing, meanwhile, whether professional or family-based, is tightly supervised and controlled by strict health standards. Animals for slaughter must be identified¹⁰ and killed at the abattoir, though exceptions are made for controlled family consumption,¹¹ subject to spot inspections by certified officials. Josiane and Philippe breed Limousin cattle:

‘All the animals on the farm have to be declared and identified. Philippe wanted to have four or five goats, to make cheese. It was a right rigmarole: you had to have a number, declare the goats... So we got rid of the goats. He liked making his cheese, we used to eat the cheese from the goats, and we were forced to... [...] That’s what tends to spoil this line of work. What wears us down in this job is all the paperwork, the inspections; that’s what makes our life a misery. You have the right to raise one pig; if you have two or three pigs, you need to have a breeder number. Our friend has three or four pigs; she was told she had to go on a course at the Chamber [of Agriculture] to learn how to look after pigs. She said to me: “What’s the effing point of me going over there, just because I’ve got three pigs?” She pretended she hadn’t seen the email, but I reckon she’s going to have to go there at some point’ (Josiane, 60, livestock farmer).

Josiane and Philippe found themselves ‘facing the law’ and its impartial character when they felt obliged to stop raising goats after an inspection, unlike their friend who has continued to raise

¹⁰ Articles D212-19, D212-27 and D212-36 of the French Rural and Maritime Fishing Code.

¹¹ Article R231-6 of the Rural and Maritime Fishing Code authorizes the slaughter of ‘animals of the caprine, ovine, porcine species as well as poultry and lagomorphs when the slaughter is done by the person who reared the animals, and all the animals slaughtered are destined for consumption by his/her family’.

pigs (Ewick & Silbey, 2004). How are we to account for the fact that some people display consensual, non-politicized compliance with the law (Sainsaulieu, 2012)—albeit without following the legal norm—while others circumvent it, as part of a dissenting politicized stance?

An initial explanation relates to the degree of integration into a local mutual aid network, which, for the people in the second ideal type, who contest the law and politicize their practices, offers greater security when ‘taking on’ the law. An instructive example is offered by the collective approach taken to running a pig-breeding activity, and consequently sharing the legal liability. Roland, 84, a retired farmer, has for many years kept ten or so pigs, which are successively slaughtered and transformed into meat by friends and acquaintances during winter weekends; a clear infringement of the legislation, which authorizes home slaughter for non-lucrative family consumption only. The pigs are killed at his home—avoiding the transport logistics and abattoir fees—and each person prepares their own meat, enabling them to take home high-quality preparations while acquiring or transmitting know-how. Living a few kilometres from each other, Roland, Barbara (46, part-time farm worker), Thierry (50, undeclared builder), Claude (63, retired educator) and Paul (50, undeclared handyman) constitute a solid and extended mutual aid network, which is not limited to producing meat, but also manages a collective vineyard, and takes part in ‘solidarity-based building projects’. If they run into legal difficulties, they can count on each other, such as when Claude was recently sentenced to pay a €50,000 fine after selling a garage that he had converted into a house and which—according to the buyer—did not conform to the required standards. He was able to find the money thanks to the constitution of a €30,000 kitty by the members of the network, and is gradually paying it back.

A second explanation results from differentiated economic situations. Josiane and Philippe, who belong to the first ideal type due to their non-politicized practices and compliance with the law, have found themselves alone in facing serious financial difficulties for many years, further aggravated by recent legal problems. In 2001, Josiane, a manual worker, and Philippe, a farm worker, with five children in tow, took out a loan to buy a small farm with a house attached. The repayment demands piled up, and the couple found themselves over-indebted. A timely meeting with a non-profit organization enabled them to file for insolvency. In addition to this valuable assistance, the family manages more or less to get by through a number of individual *débrouille* practices, relying on food aid from a charity association, on Josiane’s sizeable vegetable garden and on the presence of farmyard animals, making them almost self-subsistent in vegetables, eggs and meat. Philippe’s mechanical skills allow them to avoid high repair costs for the car or tractor, which are essential from day to day. The struggles of their daily existence preclude them from taking any seemingly unnecessary legal risks.

A third explanation is that certain actors are marked by a disposition to transgress rules and laws due to atypical primary socialization. Claude and Thierry, who belong to the second ideal type, were immersed from childhood in their parents’ marginal and sometimes illegal practices, such as when Claude’s worker parents ‘pilfered’ from the factory, or when Thierry helped his bricklayer father to scavenge from building sites and from containers at the waste dump. By contrast, Nathalie (51, part-time dental assistant), associated with the first ideal type and who has experienced financial insecurity since childhood, acts as her parents did by complying with the law from day to day so as not to stir up trouble, and tries to make herself as discreet as possible, looking out for ‘clever schemes’ (sales promotions, gifts) rather than resorting to forms of illegality.

On one side are those who comply with the rules and do not politicize their lifestyle, albeit without necessarily consenting to the law, thus displaying an attitude that might be described as ‘strategic silence’, amounting to reluctant acquiescence (Talpin *et al.*, 2021)—putting up with (*faire avec*) rather than standing up to (*faire face*) (Cuturello, 2011)—and which is part of a low-key politicization (Balazard *et al.*, in this issue). On the other side are those who overtly politicize their practices and seek to slip through, around or between the regulations by exploiting the wiggle-room left by government legislation, thus enacting forms of ‘interstitial politics’ (MacGregor, 2019).

Integration into mutual aid networks, past and present economic circumstances, and primary socializations all shed light on the actors’ heterogeneous discourses with regard to the law. In the next and final section, we extend these analyses to the more general scale of people’s life journeys, focusing on the interactions between primary and secondary socialization, to gain a more detailed understanding of why some politicize their lifestyle, while others do not.

4. The (non)-politicization of *la débrouille* in the light of people’s life trajectories

Firstly, the people belonging to the first ideal type, who do not politicize their *débrouille* practices, are those who continue to perform the manual and agricultural tasks they observed and learned in childhood, unlike some belonging to the second ideal type, who have more or less become distanced from them. The first group typically grew up as part of a large family of workers or small farmers, for whom *la débrouille* was a necessity: pilfering from the boss, ‘repurposing’ the factory tools, scavenging from waste tips, from bins or from the street, repairing damaged objects and machines, keeping an allotment, doing repairs in apartments, garages or workshops, gleaning ‘stuff’. The learning of DIY skills is not easily expressed in words. Simon (50, unemployed, on couple’s minimum income support) claims to have learnt ‘all by myself’, as did Roland (84, retired farmer), who affirms: ‘I didn’t learn; I was there’. There is no theoretical approach; it is all learned by observation—especially through filial transmission—imitation, and trial and error; in other words, the appropriation of gestures until they are incorporated.

Roland is the youngest of six children from a very modest farming family. As a child, he helped his parents on the farm then, while still very young, worked as a farmhand on larger farms to supplement the family income. After military service in the Algerian War, he decided to take over the management of a sheep farm as a tenant farmer. Twelve years’ work enabled him to put some money aside, and he took out a loan to buy the sixty-hectare farm where he now lives. With 550 cows and sheep, it was very hard work. His formal agricultural training lasted only six weeks, because he had already learned the trade ‘by getting by on my own’, i.e. by observing his parents, and then by reading specialized books. At the age of 67, once the three children were adults, he separated from his wife, who kept the farmhouse. He decided to build his own house, up against a barn wall, for €12,000, using the money he had gradually saved up from his monthly pension of €700. He currently spends very little: his vegetable garden, his animals and his network allow him to meet his own needs. Self-sufficient production, mutual aid, recycling, repair, and self-build are practices from his childhood, but Roland, who grew up in a modest agricultural world that was not yet mechanized or intensive, does not present them as such. They are so habitual, so anchored in the narrative of life and in the daily routine, that they have become naturalized, and not a topic of discourse.

None of the individuals of the first ideal type grew up in a family environment marked by political activism, unlike two of those belonging to the second ideal type: the mother of one was a farmer who belonged to the Confédération Paysanne,¹² while the other comes from an urban intellectual family. While these configurations may have contributed to the politicization of these two people, the fact remains that the politicization of those belonging to the second ideal type post-dates their primary socialization; it should be analysed against the complexity of individual trajectories, which do not map neatly onto the social position of the family, since secondary socialization to some extent modifies social inheritance. Some of those who grew up in a lifestyle marked by *la débrouille* have a reflective political discourse about their childhood and their current practices, which may be explained by factors from their secondary socialization—factors we also find among politicized individuals who were not socialized into *la débrouille*, and whose trajectories intermesh with those of the first group.

Firstly, the politicization of *débrouille* practices arises after moving from town to country. Half of the informants grew up in an urban environment and came to live in the countryside as adults, mainly to move in with friends or partners, after inheriting a house in need of renovation, or out of a desire to experience the rural way of life. Almost all of these individuals speak about their practices in political terms. The space available in the rural domestic setting (workshops, storage areas, land, vegetable gardens) allows for the pursuit of *débrouille* practices they incorporated in childhood, or the adoption of new ones, combined with the opportunity to join a local mutual aid network and to meet people with similar lifestyles.

The members of the second group have much more cultural capital than those of the first, which plays an important role in the politicization trajectories studied, either because they come from a more privileged social background (for example, Rudolphe is the son of a journalist), or because they are graduates and have had a qualified job in the past (Damien is a former laboratory technician, Claude a former specialized educator), or because they have gradually acquired a non-objectified cultural capital through their reading (of practical works on permaculture, for example), or because of their earlier travels and different degrees of sociability. In this case, their *débrouille* can be interpreted as a distinctive (re)appropriation of working-class culture—symbolically valorized by politics—which distinguishes them from the first group.

Finally, previous experiences that engendered mistrust of state, banking and/or market institutions (overdraft charges, non-payment of eligible benefits, scams) contribute to the progressive politicization of *débrouille* practises familiar since childhood, but which are now presented as an instrument of autonomy, and in particular as a way of avoiding dependence on work, welfare, and supermarkets.

Damien, 49, grew up in a family environment marked by *la débrouille* and has progressively politicized his lifestyle. He spent his early years with his younger brother, his manual-worker mother, and his maternal grandparents, also manual workers, in a working-class district; his father was serving a prison sentence for robbery for the first ten years of Damien's life. Now a single father with a teenage son, Damien has a degree in biology which, when he was 20, enabled him to work as a laboratory technician for a year, until he left, 'disgusted' with the company's lack of

¹² The Confédération Paysanne is a left-leaning French farming union that defends small-scale agriculture.

ecological commitment. He links his awareness of ecological issues to the teachings of his ‘always-angry’ communist grandfather, whom he frequented daily, and who had experienced agricultural mechanization and the introduction of chemicals into agriculture, and stubbornly refused to use them in his vegetable garden. Ever since resigning, Damien has lived on minimum income support, and for several years has taken on some undeclared gardening, building and renovation work. When he arrived in his current region in 1998, he was renting a house for which he could not afford the monthly fixed costs. In 2003, after a long search, he bought one and a half hectares of land for 2,300 euros in cash.

‘When you have something open to you, a small window, a piece of land, you don’t look at all the little things, you don’t project yourself into the future, like ‘this will be boring’. It’s a case of “fuck it, I can have it—I’ll buy it and we’ll see”’ (Damien, 49, gardener and undeclared handyman).

He began, laboriously, to build a house next to the ruined sheepfold on the land with ‘rudimentary means’, without electricity or running water, using second-hand materials that were difficult to transport, mainly on his own. These practices were acquired in childhood, from a father who had made a profession out of recycling and DIY, and subsequently ‘on the job’ in the course of his various work activities (sculpture, gardening) and from friends. He started building his house even before he had signed the purchase agreement, and without a building permit, and was visited by the gendarmes on several occasions—it took several years before they stopped checking on him. Since then, Damien has lived in his house, lighting it with solar panels, heating it with wood from the surrounding forest, which he himself cuts, collecting rainwater, and growing his own fruit and vegetables in the garden. He is an avid reader of novels and contemporary essays. He sees his home as his ‘escape from capitalism’, away from a ‘system that is destroying the planet and jeopardizing the future.’ Living in an ‘isolated site,’ remote from the gaze of others, at the end of a track that is only drivable for half the year, is for him a way of ‘taking a step aside’, ‘being on the fringe’, escaping from a conventional lifestyle that brings with it bills, rent or loans—which he could not have afforded with his meagre financial resources—and enables him to live out his anticapitalism, discreetly (Frayne, 2015).

Those who were socialized into *la débrouille* in childhood, particularly by acquiring technical know-how, do not politicize their current lifestyle. However, their primary socialization is often counterbalanced by their secondary socialization, which has a politicizing influence on individuals belonging to both of the defined ideal types.

Conclusion

A first group, from the agricultural or rural working class, resorts to *la débrouille* out of necessity and does not attach any political significance to these practices. The second group, from the urban working or lower middle class, politicises their lifestyle as a way of reducing their dependence on and resisting the capitalist system. The members of these two groups embody differentiated relationships to law, the former valuing their respect for it while the latter allows itself to be liberated from it. For the latter, this is made possible by the degree of integration into a local mutual aid network, past economic situations not marked by over-indebtedness, and a willingness to transgress rules stemming from primary paternal socialisation. Finally, the analysis of trajectories

sheds light on the way in which it is geographical mobility (from the city to the countryside), the accumulation of non-objectified cultural capital as well as the mistrust of state, banking or market institutions as a result of past experiences, which lead to the politicisation of members of the second group. These elements are thus added to the primary socialisations based on resourcefulness common to the members of the survey, but whose practices are naturalised by the members of the first group.

The *débrouille* practices studied here are pursued quietly, on the sidelines of the dominant system, but what meaning do their protagonists give to this discretion? For all of them, it involves not over-verbalizing their practices, not ‘making a big deal of it’; but different registers emerge. On the one hand, not attaching a political discourse to their practices when speaking to a researcher may be interpreted as a way of protecting themselves against any repercussions on their daily lives—for those who operate in the cracks of the system and have no other tools available—when dealing with an investigator from the outside world, linked to institutions of power, despite the anonymity of research. On the other, where these practices do relate to the political, speaking out about that relationship remains a sensitive area for those who prefer to remain silent. They confide in the researcher, who seeks to understand how the actors interpret their own practices, and in the restricted circles of their friends and family, without their words being explicitly intended to go any further, so that they can continue in this way of life.

Studying this discretion inevitably raises ethical questions. This research consists in uncovering the ‘hidden transcript’ (Scott, 1990) of people who adjust their practices in order to get around the dominant system, by making their actions invisible. This may indeed be a fundamental strategy of these lifestyles, designed to ensure *la débrouille*. What, then, might be the consequences of an article such as this one, which helps to make these practices visible, when they must remain invisible if they are to endure? What if public policies were to catch up with these lifestyles and render them impossible? What if more repressive measures were taken against these actors? (Collectif Rosa Bonheur, 2019). On the one end, these fears are taken into account, and must be weighed against the importance, defended by the people in the study, of enabling others to understand these stigmatized yet little-known lifestyles in all their plurality. On the other, these practices are important to understand because they upset our understanding of modernity and industrialisation; they appear to be growing and they might present a challenge to the existing social order. In addition, they might be seen as a glimpse of a "heterotopia", where, quite aside from the dominant structures, different forms of social organisation can take root.

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