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# Reclaiming the *Saltus*

Changing values and property relations on pastoral land,  
evidence from the Cévennes mountains in France

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to “Planetary rural geographies”.

## Working paper

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I'd like to start by thanking you warmly for giving me the opportunity to take part in this conversation. Especially as I am coming from two foreign shores: France and ecological economics. The work I'm about to present is part of an ongoing thesis on the integration of the ecological functions of soils into the French land tenure system.

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# 1. Introduction

In her call for a theoretical approach to ruralisation, Monika Krause raises the following question: "(...) *what are the elements of the rural and how can they be disaggregated so that we can look for empirical phenomena that would otherwise be obscured[...]*" (Krause, 2013, p. 7). I propose to take this path and look closer at specific rural geographies: rangelands or pastoral places.

Pastoralism is commonly defined as extensive livestock farming and grazing. From a *planetary thinking* standpoint, it can be described as a practice involving a multispecific and mobile collective, with humans, herbivores, and dogs moving to adapt to the spatial and seasonal distribution of vegetation. This singular assemblage developed during the Neolithic period and involved two key components. First, it is rooted in the domestication of a narrow set of animal and plant species enrolled in a production regime. It also relied on the intensification of human use of land, employing cutting and burning to shape favourable environments (Ellis, 2021). Its spread has set terrestrial ecosystems and their communities on a co-evolutionary path that has shaped vast areas of land. Today pastoralism is the most widespread land use worldwide, covering at least 25% of terrestrial areas and providing significant economic, social and environmental contribution to peoples in over 100 countries (Manzano et al., 2021).

Yet pastoral collectives are currently at a crossroads: their ability to navigate planetary changes and invent new forms of mobility has been constrained by several decades of adverse economic and institutional reforms. Notably they have been challenged by the extension and intensification of private property territories worldwide (Blomley, 2016). Meaning that they cannot be maintained without in turn challenging the exclusive and absolute logic of Western property.

What values and property relations can sustain pastoral collectives in the context of global change? This presentation tests the assumption that the notion of *saltus* can be used "as a key to analyse agriculture/property/nature relations" (Eychenne & Noûs, 2022) on the Cévennes case, a mountain region in the south of France.

In what follows, I will first introduce this curious concept of *saltus* and show how it applies to the Cévennes. I will then outline the idea that the history of this term and the values attached to the areas it covers sheds light on the processes of modern ruralisation in Europe. Finally, I present an overview of land tenure arrangements designed to revive *saltus* socioecosystems in the Cévennes, analysing their institutional dimensions and the values of pastoral areas that underpin them.

## 2. Analysing pastoral geographies through the *Saltus*

The notion of *saltus* is part of a typology of Roman origin that distinguishes components of rural landscapes: *Domus*, *Hortus*, *Ager*, *Saltus*, *Silva*. While it originally held legal and land-related significance, its use has endured into the modern era in the fields of agrarian history and geography, particularly to describe rural Mediterranean landscapes (Centeri et al., 2016; Clément, 2008).

The *saltus* can be described as an intermediary place, located between the *ager* – dedicated to crop cultivation – and the *silva* – a wild space used for its timber resources. From an agrarian perspective, it is an uncultivated area where spontaneous growth of vegetation is valued through grazing. *Saltus* areas encompass herbaceous, bushy, or lightly wooded zones, such as meadows, steppes, barren heaths and certain wetlands. Traditionally, it is also a marginal area where farmers are unwilling or unable to settle, and where pastoralism appears to be an economic way of making the most of poorly fertile soils.

This largely explains the *saltus*' pervasiveness in the Cévennes. Situated to the south of the Massif Central, where Mediterranean and continental climatic influences meet, this mid-mountain region boasts a diverse landscape, characterised by rocky massifs, rolling hills and valleys. Mostly unsuitable for cultivation, these reliefs have been developed by pastoral practices for three millennia, mainly by expanding over the *silva*. Transhumant sheep and goat herding developed notably in the Middle Ages and has strongly marked the rural geography of the region, linking the lower plains of the Languedoc to the Cévennes peaks which provide summer pastures. Here, the *saltus* can be found at all altitudes and in a wide variety of profiles, ranging from garrigues (to the south), meadows, moorland, peat bogs and wooded pastures under chestnut and oak trees.

## 3. The evolving values of *saltus* and ruralisation process

One of the benefits of the notions of *saltus*, *ager* and *silva* is that they make it possible to depict ruralisation processes as reconfigurations of both the values attributed to these spaces and the relationships between them. In traditional mixed farming and livestock systems, *saltus* were valued for their productive function. Of course, by enabling livestock to be reared, they contributed to the production of milk, meat, leather and wool, as well as being places where fruit, wood, mushrooms and game were collected. Most importantly, the *saltus* played an essential function as a source of fertility through the transfer of manure to the soils of the *ager*.

In Europe, this symbiotic relationship began to erode in the modern era for symbolic, institutional and technical reasons. The naturalist imaginary that emerged with the Enlightenment depicted rangeland as “wasteland” that needed to be improved by the hand

of man towards more accomplished forms of "nature", through cultivation or afforestation (Beau, 2022). These narratives led to the devaluation of the collective use rights that had been associated with these places, and prompted various forms of appropriation conflicts such as the *enclosure* movement in the UK or public appropriation by national forest administration in France (Beau, 2022; Bloch, 1930). The 20th-century agricultural modernisation further diminished the significance of the *saltus*, with the loss of its traditional function of fertility source in favour of synthetic fertilizers. This resulted in an intensification of the *ager* to sustain humans and livestock.

However, amidst ongoing planetary changes, pastoral practices and *saltus* are being reinvigorated by multiple, sometimes conflicting, values. Primarily, these open environments are now recognized for their significant biodiversity: most are protected under the European Union's Habitat Directive (Crosnier, 2006; Feurdean et al., 2018). From this perspective, pastoralism is promoted as an ecological management technique. More broadly, pastoral collectives are increasingly seen as providers of environmental services that protect natural spaces, mitigate fire risks, and maintain landscape aesthetics (Berriet-Sollicec et al., 2018; Eychenne, 2018; Manzano et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2014). Concurrently, pastoralism is gaining cultural heritage recognition, notably with the acknowledgment of transhumance by UNESCO. Although they recognise that pastoralism offers a livestock farming model that is more respectful of the living world, pastoralists often resist being labelled as service providers or folklore relics, as it downplays their productive and economic role. Finally, rewilding advocates are questioning the position of pastoralism, suggesting it should coexist or even give way to reforestation and the return of predators like wolves, bears, or lynxes.

The *Cévennes'* *saltus* have experimented such cycle of devaluation & re-legitimation. Although it survived relatively better than in the non-mountainous regions of France, pastoralism declined sharply from the middle of the 19th century, under the influence of a combined dynamic of rural exodus, agricultural abandonment, and fierce state reforestation campaigns (Cornu, 2003). This economic and demographic decline led to a number of efforts to revitalise the area. In 1970, it became the first inhabited space to be designated as a national park in France. This specificity required balancing environmental conservation with existing economic activities, thus prefiguring a sustainable development approach, confirmed by its designation as a biosphere reserve by UNESCO in 1984. Nationally, pastoralism's value for mountain economies and environments gained legal recognition through the "Pastoralism" (1972) and "Mountain" (1985) laws. Finally, in 2011, the area was included on UNESCO's World Heritage List as a "living cultural landscape of Mediterranean agropastoralism".

#### **4. Land tenure arrangement for reclaiming the *saltus***

However, several circumstantial factors still threaten the viability of pastoral activities in the region (Berriet-Sollicec et al., 2018). The globalisation of agricultural value chains has disrupted

its economic model. Agricultural abandonment has caused a significant reduction in grazing areas in favour of forest cover, while the remaining grass resources are declining in abundance due to climate change. Land issues exacerbate these difficulties.

Extensive pastoral activities mean herders often own only a fraction of the land they use and have to reach agreements with other landowners. Area depopulation has led to 'residentialisation' or rural gentrification: a significant share of current landowners are secondary residents who bring a culture of absolute and exclusive property, prioritising individual appropriation of landscape amenities over the collective practices that have been shaping them. Combined with the severe land fragmentation, this trend has led to a sharp increase in the transaction costs involved in securing access to pastoral resources.

In response to this situation, which herders describe as a 'land blockage', various stakeholders interested in reviving *saltus* socioecosystems are negotiating solutions. A classic way for facilitating the use of land on a relevant agropastoral scale is based on pastoral landowners' associations. Introduced by the "pastoralism" law (1975), this private law instrument enables a group of landowners to form an association, with the aim of organising the pastoral management of their group of properties, via a contract with one or more herders. Long under-used in the Cévennes (compared to other mountain regions) it's gaining renewed interest, particularly in the *Lozère département*<sup>2</sup>, where its deployment is facilitated by dedicated agricultural organisations. During my investigation, I encountered two such associations being set up on wooded land (chestnut groves), both initiated by the local municipalities (as associate owners) with a dual objective: to revive local agriculture and preserve natural areas – notably for fire prevention.

The lower Cévennes valleys and Garrigue zones, to the very south of the study area, reveal a quite different type of ownership arrangement. The *Hérault* department has acquired and manages large areas of pastoral land via the "sensitive natural areas" tool. This policy instrument enables departments to collect funds by taxing development operations in order to pre-empt and acquire threatened natural areas for protection and public access. As the department is undergoing a significant urbanisation dynamic, particularly around the city of *Montpellier*, it enjoys substantial financial resources that enable an ambitious acquisition strategy. The department has formed a partnership with a regional environmental association (CEN Occitanie), which carries out diagnoses of the land acquired and draws up ecological management guidelines. The land is then made available to herders, generally free of charge,

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<sup>2</sup> "In the administrative divisions of France, the department (...) is one of the three levels of government under the national level (...), between the administrative regions and the communes." ('Departments of France', 2023).

subject to these guidelines. Here, pastoralism is used for maintaining semi-natural open areas and their biodiversity.

At the other end of the transhumance routes, on the summits that serve as summer pasture, lies another instance of public ownership. In the decade following its creation, the Cévennes National Park public authority has acquired vast surface of these *saltus* places to safeguard their multifunctionality. The aim was to maintain the pastoral vocation of these mountain pastures, which play an essential role in the continuity of transhumance on a regional scale. At the same time, the Park wanted to maintain the ecological equilibrium of these open environments and preserve the "emblematic landscapes" that favour tourism. These public lands are leased to herder groups, subject to the park regulations. The Park authority notably strives to accommodate pastoral activity with the conservation of the wolf, a protected species whose return to the Cévennes has been confirmed since 2012.

I'd like to finish by mentioning the *Intermunicipal pastoral pact* initiative. Resulting from a grassroots approach, this text emerged from discussion groups initiated by herders and a legal anthropology scholar, engaging local elected representatives and citizens. Ratified in 2015 by a community of 15 municipalities in the *Gard* department, the pact recognises the pastoral vocation of their territory (article 3) and "the collective interest of pastoralism" (article 1). It establishes collective regulations, including permitting passage and grazing on unfenced private property and integrating pastoral zones into urban planning documents. It also emphasizes maintaining the collective and pastoral nature of transhumance paths. Finally, it sets up a discussion forum bringing together various stakeholders of the territory. To implement these locally negotiated regulations, the community of communes has recruited an employee who promote the text among landowners, elected representatives and breeders, and to facilitate their day-to-day coordination. This effort has facilitated the installation of several livestock farmers, the transfer of herds, the reclamation of agricultural wasteland and the creation of the first pastoral landowner association in the department.

## 5. Conclusion

Shaped by the practices of more-than-human collectives, according to a formula that originated in the Neolithic period, pastoral lands are distinctive rural geographies. Through the Mediterranean notion of *saltus*, they appear as intermediate, marginal spaces, where agriculture and life dynamics intertwine. After decades, if not centuries of depreciation, these places of common action and ordinary nature are gaining renewed interest due to their multifunctionality. Nowadays, however, this revaluation must address what some have called "the pastoral paradox" (Reid et al., 2014): ensuring the mobility of non-humans despite intensifying territorialisation of property in land (Blomley, 2016).

In the Cévennes region, collective action is being taken to negotiate land arrangements that allow saltus lands to be maintained or recreated through pastoral collectives. Led by local players acting on a variety of scales and promoting diverse values, these initiatives are generating multiple forms of pastoral land governance. However, one question arises from this overview: **who is reclaiming the saltus?** In many cases, these emerging governances are structured around land ownership (whether public or private) and contracts. As a result, pastoral collectives are instrumental to the projects of a landowner and are seldom involved in the decision-making structure. In this geolegal landscape, the *Intercommunal Pastoral Pact* initiative holds a singular position. Rather than building upon land ownership, it questions its importance and tries to establish “more-than-human property relations” in favour of pastoral collectives, in the same fashion as Katrina Brown *et al.* (2019) observed with the South-Sami reindeer herders in Norway.

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