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# The conviction of the inevitable

## Collapsism and collective action in contemporary rural France

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*Ethnography* [To be published]

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### Abstract

The idea of a possible collapse of thermo-industrial societies became more prominent during the 2010s, particularly in France. The present article investigates this phenomenon by focusing more specifically on the *belief* on which it is based: the conviction of the inevitable. How does this conviction, which mixes cognitive and emotional registers, come to grasp certain individuals? And what do these people do with it? Contrary to various studies in the social sciences, the ethnographic observation of two collectives that have been affected by this conviction and have settled in the French countryside makes it possible to draw the contours of authentic collective actions. The article also shows how this conviction arises or is reinforced, emphasizing the potential importance of certain personal experiences and certain structural tendencies characteristic of contemporary democratic societies. More generally, studying the conviction of the inevitable in the context of collective actions also helps to identify snippets of imaginaries and practices that are developing in the shadow of the Anthropocene.

### Keywords

collapsology, collective action, countryside, apocalypticism, environmentalism.

The idea of a collapse of contemporary thermo-industrial societies has become more prominent in recent years. This is evidenced by the growing success of this theme in works of fiction, a sign among others of a certain “normalization of apocalypticism” (Barker, 2022: 806). What is most often referred to as collapsism or catastrophism (Lilley et al., 2012), however, is far from being a new belief (see in particular McNeish, 2017). The term collapse, for example, began to haunt the vocabulary of political ecology as early as the 1970s (Semal, 2019: 163). It also slipped into the conclusions of the Meadows Report on the ‘limits to growth’ published in 1972. Perhaps we can even envisage deeper roots to this encounter between ecology and catastrophe: after all, as early as the middle of the 19th century, a best-selling book by the French writer Eugène Huzar announced *La fin du monde par la science* (*The end of the world through science*) (Fressoz, 2010).

If the theme of civilizational collapse therefore has a history, its contemporary meaning suggests certain specific features. The narrative serving as its backdrop seems, first of all, to have evolved since the beginning of the 21st century: an apocalyptic reading of things, closely linked to the nuclear risk that imbued the environmentalism of the 1960s, seems to have been gradually challenged by a post-apocalyptic vision (Cassegård and Thörn, 2018). In other words, it is no longer a question of believing in the possibility of disasters but of considering that the catastrophe is *already* here or unavoidable. Added to this is the greater spread of these notions across Western societies; a spread that most certainly echoes the rise of “climate anxiety,” especially among the younger generations (Marks, Hickman et al., 2021).

France, it seems, is particularly concerned by the expression of this “radicalized” ecological concern (Chalaye, 2023). It is true that, since the first half of the 2010s, French public debate has seen the rise of a relatively well-structured form of collapsism, known as collapsology (see Tasset, 2022; Cary, Garnoussi and Le Lann, 2022). Collapsology presents collapse as a likely and irreversible process at the end of which the majority of the population will no longer have its basic needs met by services regulated by law.<sup>1</sup> Such a situation, it is claimed, will result from the convergence of different crises, made more evident by the ‘complexity’ of modern societies: the environmental crisis, of course, but also the crises in energy, the economy, democracy, etc. Collapsology captured, at least for a while, the attention of the main French media, becoming a real publishing success in the process. One of the books associated with it,

*How everything can collapse*, co-written by Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens (French original published in 2015; English translation 2020), has sold more than 100,000 copies. This book has undoubtedly contributed to popularizing in France a set of ideas long confined to the circles of political ecology. Mobilizing a wealth of data, graphs and statistics, its two authors have clearly helped a certain number of readers to give another dimension to the “perplexed panic” (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, 2016: 4) that feeds on the daily images of climate change.

The primary ambition of the present article is precisely to focus on some of the people who entertain the possibility of the end of *a* world (and not of *the* world, to use the explicit formula of the authors of *How Everything Can Collapse*) and who, above all, have decided to prepare for it. In the eyes of the people we will meet in the following pages, the collapse can be *ongoing* or *to come*, *beneficial* or *catastrophic*, *sudden* or *gradual*. Some of them also reject the label of “collapsonauts” or “collapsologists”, which they consider overused (often because of its success in public debate). All of them, however, agree about what I have chosen to designate as the *conviction of the inevitable*. These individuals believe that what exists - whether it is thermo-industrial civilization as a whole or some of its elements, such as the urban model - is *inevitably* destined, if not to collapse, at least to sink into a dysfunctional state that will make it unsustainable.

We have good grounds for speaking here of *conviction* rather than of *belief*. Admittedly, the terms are easily confused in that they cover the idea of holding something to be true, probable or possible. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, however, clarifies things by defining conviction as a “strong belief on the ground of satisfactory reasons or evidence.” The very idea of evidence is definitely what allows us to distinguish this form of reasoned certainty from belief. It is especially essential for understanding what follows. What the individuals at the centre of this article have in common is the fact that they base their support for the idea that collapse is inevitable on data that they perceive as objective, even scientific. As we will see, drawing on the notion of conviction also emphasizes the intimate rooting of this same support.

Starting from this situation in particular, we will here attempt to understand how these people move *towards* and *with* such a conviction but also what they do with it, both from a practical and an ideal point of view. Such an enquiry is perhaps all the more meaningful since research devoted to belief in a collapse has *often* concluded in individualistic forms of escape (characteristic of survivalism in particular), in apathy (see Schneider-Mayerson, 2015) or in collective actions that are hesitant, to say the least

(Tasset 2019).<sup>2</sup> Studies dealing more directly with group initiatives have made it possible to outline two models. The first involves accepting the catastrophe and adapting to it culturally and mentally (Cassegård and Thörn, 2018). The second is based on the development of intimate arrangements that enable some climate activists to suppress the conviction that it is already too late, in order to convince themselves that they can still “save what can be saved” (de Moor and Marquardt, 2023). What I have observed since the end of the decade of the 2010s, by focusing on two collectives associated with this constellation of ideas and settled in a countryside that they think or objectively will provide a refuge from the dangers to come, is quite different, however, and makes the contours of this conviction even more enigmatic. Taking this conviction seriously also involves gaining a better grasp of what it might be reflecting. Its contextualization is thus necessary. Does it, for example, maintain a relationship with any other of the trends which, alongside ecological concern, are currently affecting Western societies? On a more individual level, how does it fit into the biography of those people who hold such a conviction? Through these questions, we hope also to identify some of the visions and some of the *ways of doing* (militant and daily) that are being shaped in the shadow of the Anthropocene.

### **Elements of context and methodology**

This enquiry, then, is based on the observation of two collectives that were formed in the second half of the 2010s in the French countryside, in the south-west. As such, they are representative of a revival of neo-rural and neo-peasant collectives in contemporary France (Sallustio, 2022; Snikersproge, 2022).

The approach that I chose to adopt led me to take part directly in the activities that make up the daily life of these two collectives. More or less explicitly, this participation has always seemed necessary for my acceptance as a social science researcher. However, I feel that it does not undermine the precision of the ethnographic perspective. As Loïc Wacquant has pointed out, “it is imperative that the sociologist submit himself to the fire of action *in situ*; that to the greatest extent possible he put his own organism, sensibility, and incarnate intelligence at the epicenter of the array of material and symbolic forces that he intends to dissect” (2004: viii). And this, to a certain extent, is what I am trying to achieve by not attempting to avoid the back pain resulting from an afternoon harvesting fruit and vegetables in the pouring rain, or getting scratched hands from hours of weeding in stifling heat. I am also present at different moments of

collective life, such as meals, for example. But if links have inevitably been forged over the years (the data at the heart of this article were collected between November 2019 and June 2023), I obviously keep a certain distance, a stance which I may be led to insist on at the different moments when decisions involving the collective are made. The fact that, so often, I find myself literally alongside my respondents, and sometimes even imitating their gestures (during work in the fields, for example), does not attenuate the distance specific to this particular social relationship that is part and parcel of ethnography: I remain at the same time “an alien and a familiar presence [...] a presence that intrigues [...] or arouses expectations” (Fassin, 2016: 297) (evidenced by the curiosity of several of my interlocutors regarding my future publications). My exteriority is based, finally, on one essential factor: unlike those I study, I have no firm opinion about the probability of a collapse of thermo-industrial society and have never made any secret of this since starting to work on this type of experience.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to speak here of experimentation rather than experience, insofar as it is a matter, for those taking part, of trying out practices, principles or even lifestyles that set them at a distance from what most of them have hitherto known. The first collective is part of a communalist framework. Several dozen people from the four corners of France have joined it since its creation. Some have bought or rented buildings while others live in yurts, converted trucks or caravans. The original aim was to allow city dwellers to settle in the French countryside, in view of a collapse. The commune has about ten agricultural hectares for this purpose, on which a core of about thirty very committed people is active. The second experiment is being conducted by a group of just under a dozen or so people who have bought a hamlet and aim to achieve self-sufficiency in food and energy, also in view of a collapse. The development of this “neo-village” (since that is how its occupants present it) is partly based on a system of exchange with the inhabitants of the surrounding areas in order to create a local solidarity.

These two collectives differ from each other in many respects. The average age is around fifty years in the neo-village, while the commune, which seeks to be intergenerational despite all obstacles, is mainly represented by a group of thirty-somethings. For reasons that most certainly have to do with the above, joining the commune does not require any financial investment. All you have to do is park your truck or pitch your tent on one of the common lots. Conversely, the neo-village involves a legal structure that requires buying shares if you want to join in the venture. Despite

these notable differences, these two collectives nevertheless share certain essential characteristics, in addition to the conviction of the inevitable which, to different degrees, their members hold. Each is, first of all, anchored to a project that is purportedly critical of the dominant social, economic and political order. Common amenities, open pricing and exchange thus lie at the heart of their practices. They are also small open worlds: these experiments mobilize individuals who were originally foreign to these places of life but aim to forge social ties with the inhabitants so as to better blend into the local landscape. Finally, and perhaps above all, these two experiments are collective actions whose particularity is that they are neither there to voice protest, nor explicitly confrontational, at least in appearance.

Along with observing the daily lives of these collectives, I have, to date, conducted a little over thirty interviews, which have allowed me to grasp the relative social diversity of my interviewees. Indeed, while this type of collective, imbued with ecological sobriety, is often associated with the middle classes, the reality that I have observed is a little more nuanced, especially within the commune. The individuals I have encountered here were, a few months or a few years earlier, engineers, specialized educators, graphic designers, an optician, a baker, an industry executive, a pastry chef, a worker-boilermaker, a temporary worker in the healthcare sector, etc.<sup>3</sup> Apart from their singularities, however, these individuals have one essential thing in common: their biographies had all branched off in new directions (Hackstaff, Kupferberg and Négroni, 2012) before they joined these collectives. To put it another way, they had all changed their lives. These bifurcations could be described as *total*, as the changes concerned their professional, private and residential spheres all at the same time. They are also *active* because they were initiated voluntarily, with the hope of reconfiguring the space of possibilities. Finally, many of these life changes have often resulted in a drop in income, the abandonment of a certain comfortable lifestyle and the entry, via a professional retraining already ongoing or else in preparation, into activities often requiring a lower level of education or training.

### **Birth of an anxiety**

Patricia has just hit her fifties. When I meet her for the first time, it is two years since she left Paris to commit to the experience of living in the commune. She now lives in a house which she tells me is large enough to accommodate and hide “lots of people” in the event of a crisis or disaster. Equipped with a well, the garden is mostly covered by

an orchard and a vegetable garden. Before moving here, she was a trainer in a large public company where she also held union responsibilities. She links what she describes as her “tipping” into collapsology to a political discussion with one of her friends:

I was talking about the emergency in terms of social struggles, saying that as long as the labour movement hasn't won a struggle [...] we won't be able to give ourselves the means to change the system in which we find ourselves. So he takes a step back and he says to me: “Look, it's actually worse than that. It's not an emergency in terms of social struggles and common rights, workers' rights... We've come to the end of mankind, in fact. So go and look at the websites on collapsology,” he tells me.

Perhaps it was more surely through the ensuing accumulation that Patricia actually “tipped over”. For several months, and without telling her friends and relatives,<sup>4</sup> she watched videos of interviews with the main figures of collapsology, read online articles on the collapse of biodiversity, checked out YouTube channels offering overviews of the subject, etc.

Two things emerged here, which I found systematically, or almost, in other interviews. The first involves the “electric shock” that Patricia says she felt when faced with a mass of data sketching the outlines of the environmental crisis and, more generally, a future or ongoing collapse of the thermo-industrial civilization. The evocation of such a feeling, which is reminiscent of the phenomenon of “awakening” noted by Kezia Barker among American preppers (2022), is recurrent in interviews, especially with those who say they had a fairly low ecological sensitivity until now. “Moral shock,” as conceptualized by James Jasper, seems particularly appropriate here (1997). Jasper uses this phrase to designate a social experience that takes the form of a visceral malaise following an unexpected event or a sudden change in the environment in which individuals live. A sometimes strong reaction ensues, which can take the form of a distancing from the world, a reassessment or a questioning of it. In the case of my interviewees, and in particular Patricia, we can very clearly observe a new hierarchy of priorities.

A sudden new awareness following a shock is not, however, the only template of how someone may advance in collapsism. A number of interviewees say they have long been sensitive to these questions and regularly associate this phenomenon with a



childhood spent in the countryside, in contact with nature. Alex, who grew up on a farm, sees the way he joined the commune and, more generally, a “slightly marginal way of life,” as “the culmination of a few years of reflecting and questing on ‘What should we do?’” “How are we to live with the information we have today?”. Sophie, for her part, tells me that she learned very early on from her parents that she lived in a “finite world” and therefore feels little affinity with the solastalgia often felt by collapsologists.<sup>5</sup> But even for these individuals, the encounter with collapsology has helped to shape the reasons for their anxiety. It indeed offers a relatively broad overview of everything that, cumulatively, can potentially lead to a collapse. Most often, this dimension helps those who discover it to more easily articulate the reasons for their concern. “Everything finally made sense,” said Olivier, who said he had felt a sense of “relief” after years of idleness and questions. Alex, another member of the commune, puts it just as explicitly when he mentions the fact that the discovery of the collapsologists’ theories (“on the internet, Facebook, etc.”) allowed him to “connect together isolated problems.” Having specialized in renewable energies after his studies in engineering, and sensitive to environmental issues since childhood, he came to take an interest in the issue of oil, which until then had been unfamiliar to him, as he moved further into the collapsological universe.

The experience of these individuals actually reveals a fairly common process among those who take an active interest in contemporary collapsology. In fact, it is just as if different areas of knowledge converged to produce a “shattering totality” (Tasset, 2022: 94).

### **Gradually, a “logical horizon” is emerging**

The first months following the encounter with collapsology are most often marked by a quest for information, which leads to immersing oneself in a galaxy of graphs, figures, statistics, arguments and varying positions requiring a certain amount of self-teaching.<sup>6</sup> The various elements that get collected in the process then comprise so many exhibits which, gradually, seem to outline a system that proposes to shed light on the current and future situation. The French terms for “exhibits” in this sense is *pièces à conviction* - all the more appropriate as these elements directly favour the development of a statement or judgment, without compromising a critical gaze. This is true, for example, of Diane and Jean-Marc, members of the neo-village. In the early 2010s, the couple made the choice to leave France because of a political climate that they considered

harmful. In their sixties and with no family responsibilities, the two sold their property and left for South America. During the third year of this journey, with stays in Mexico and Paraguay, they by chance discovered an online video in which Pablo Servigne, the co-author of *How Everything can Collapse*, details the current situation and the events to come. In the grip of what they describe as “stupefaction,” the couple undertook, for a month, to verify each bit of the information put forward by the essayist (“We stuffed ourselves with data, to understand it, to be sure that it wasn’t bullshit”). At the end of this process, Diane and Jean-Marc reached, like others before them, a kind of “logical horizon” (Citton and Rasmi, 2020, p. 173): the cloud of data condensed and then produced something obvious, all the less debatable in that it came with all the trappings of scientific truth. Arnaud, a young thirty-something who failed to complete his training in computer engineering, says as much when he explains that his discovery of collapsology exposed him to conclusions that he “found unquestionable”. In his own words, he therefore had no choice but to “go along with it.”

In any case, the apparent rationality of the collapsologists’ arguments serves as a basis for the support of these people. This support is, in any case, omnipresent in the discussions of the future that I have had with most of them: the concern is justified, ordered and shaped by various data (on peak oil; on the production of phosphate, essential for agriculture; on the low food reserves of the world’s major cities, etc.) which my interlocutors have a good grasp of, and which, above all, are quite skilfully interlinked. The presentation page of the neo-village website, for example, includes twelve graphs purportedly describing the evolution of the earth system. It displays, among other things, the evolution of the concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere since 1750, the curve of evolution of the tropical forests, the curves of the concentration of methane, the surface area covered by domesticated land, ocean acidification, surface temperatures, etc. Once again, it is in these figures, in these objective data, that the “logical horizon” takes shape, serving as the basis for the conviction of the inevitable that my interviewees share. This conviction therefore carries with it a fairly perfect connection between knowing and believing. This is certainly where the “power of expression” of the theories of collapse lies: in the mobilization of a mass of data which makes it seem impossible, “whatever the entry point,” to “escape from the labyrinth” (Chateauraynaud and Debaz, 2017, p. 53).

### **Placing the conviction of the inevitable within the folds of the social**

Whether or not they are related to a “moral shock,” support for theories of collapse does not occur in a social vacuum. Nor does the “logical horizon” impose itself on just anyone, anytime and anyhow. The obviousness of this fact appeared to me quite early in the conduct of this survey, during a weekend presentation of the commune project that was attended by a hundred or so people, singles and couples as well as families. During the discussions in the assembly, the people present seemed to take up a discourse that was ultimately quite consistent with what I could expect as I discovered this field of research. Most, for example, justified their presence by their concern in the face of a world changing in ways deemed to be irreversible and imposing the need to constitute “islands of resilience” in the countryside. In the evening, however, during the more informal conversations allowed by dinner, the evocation of the collective peril (the environmental situation) coexisted with mention of various accidents of life and other personal events (recent burnout, professional marginalization, remission after a long illness, etc.) which I could not rule out as having nourished the conditions of possibility of support for collapsism just as much as the desire for a change of life.

My immersion within the two collectives made it possible to put this hypothesis to the test and, above all, to clarify it via the life stories collected. It thus quickly became apparent to me that ecological concern was born or hardened at particular times in the lives of individuals, times that generally preceded their biographical bifurcations<sup>7</sup> and their move to a “resilient” collective. In the aforementioned case of Arnaud, this concern took shape at a time when he had just failed to obtain his engineering degree and was therefore forced to renounce a social status into which he had projected himself for several years. This young man, already in the grip of a feeling of professional and personal stagnation, then plunged into a mixture of “sadness and anger” and, by force of circumstance, went through a period of “biographical availability” (McAdam 1988). Spurred on by discussions with his girlfriend, he took advantage of this free time to watch lectures on the internet dealing with collapse and environmental disasters. As for Patricia, whom we met at the beginning of this article, the concern came at a time when she had concluded, apart from her own case (“I’ve lost all the battles I fought”), that the trade union struggle was not going to lead to any real social progress. Her private life was also the object of significant transformations. A few months earlier, Patricia had left Paris, where she felt oppressed, in order to move in with her family in the suburbs,

in a house with a garden. However, she quickly got bored and felt isolated, which, in her words, reinforced her discomfort. It was during this same period that the aforementioned conversation took place, opening the doors of collapsology to her. The third example is Sophie, who for ten years had worked as a specialized educator. This thirty-something woman says she loved this job too much to accept being increasingly subject to institutional logics that forced her “to do more with less.” She was, more precisely, exposed to the managerial principles which, since the 1980s, have promoted budgetary austerity in the name of a “modernization of the French socio-economic model” (Amable, 2017). This was mainly accompanied by a decline in the quality of the public and para-public sectors and the working conditions of those who contribute to them, on the one hand, and an increase in social and territorial inequalities on the other (Margairaz and Tartakowsky, 2018). Believing that her mission no longer had any meaning, she resigned. She took a year off to think about her future and finally decided to take an agricultural course, while becoming acquainted with various collapsological groups whose views seemed to click with her upbringing. Finally, the case of Pierre, a founding member of the neo-village, reveals these processes even more clearly. Like others within these collectives, he has, as an executive in the automobile industry, directly experienced this intensification of work observable in the West since the end of the 20th century (Adăscăliței, Heyes, and Mendonça, 2022). This results in particular in an accumulation of constraints, an increase in the mental and physical load weighing on employees, contradictory injunctions and management by numbers. Because it impoverishes the very nature of work, this phenomenon generates various ills, including the “loss of meaning” mentioned by most individuals who have chosen to change their lives and join this type of collective (Samak, 2016). This is the situation that Pierre experienced. Having worked for fourteen years in the same company, he found himself in a situation of near burnout. This state was fuelled by the deterioration of his professional environment and, perhaps above all, by his inability to hide any longer from the inanity of his work (which he describes as a “bullshit job”). He then felt the need for an escape, which the discovery of permaculture provided him with:

We had our house, which we had built in the middle of the forest. With a big garden, half a hectare [...] What was I going to do with it? I was working all the time... I told myself I could set up a little vegetable garden [...] I gave myself a week of internship [in permaculture]. There, I met people who radiated happiness.

I was starting to feel bad in my job [...] and there, I saw people who were earning nothing but, well, how happy they were. It was an electric shock [...] And at that moment, I began to discover collapsology. In fact, it's the logical conclusion when you discover permaculture. [...] It led me to ecology when previously I didn't give a toss.

In any case, the “shock” that would ultimately lead him to collapsology was all the more intense given the huge contrast between what he saw in the world of permaculture and his own emotional state (“For years, at work, I kept wondering ‘What the hell am I doing here?’”). In a few months, he developed a certain expertise in terms of collapsology (he gave two lectures on the subject, one at his workplace, the other within the framework of the environmental association) and became involved in a process that saw him quit his job, sell his house and head off to the countryside with his wife in order to “take shelter.”

Beyond their diversity, these four cases suggest the need to describe the life contexts (private and professional, mainly) of these individuals at the time when their conviction was forged. All of them explicitly report particularly deep disillusionment and disappointments during the months preceding their decision to change their lives. Without trying to overuse images and metaphors, we do in fact quite distinctly perceive forms of collapse in their private lives, in the most recent phases of their journeys. What had collapsed was, respectively, Patricia's hope in political and trade union action; Arnaud's socio-professional ambitions; a profession that Sophie loved and that made sense to her; and, finally, a form of illusion for Pierre, the illusion that had driven him for years to turn a blind eye to his professional dissatisfaction.

We can hypothesize that these experiences contributed to making these individuals more open and more sensitive than others to the discourse of collapsology. It seems that the latter resonates with these biographical elements and, more precisely, that the thesis of a generalized dislocation of the “system” appears all the more plausible when a person feels they have personally experienced some of its consequences (the loss of meaning in work, the competition for profit, etc.). Samantha, for example, who is training in herbalism after having lost all illusion as to the usefulness of her profession as a trainer, sees the regulations restricting the use of certain plants as so many “attacks on freedom” which herald a “democratic collapse.” It is probably in this intermingling of the global and the personal that the conviction of an inevitable fate is forged and

reinforced. Pierre is very explicit on this point: “I had two triggers [which meant it was no longer possible to continue]: the first was work, and the second was receiving information about collapsology.”

This obviously does not mean that everything is equal in their eyes but, more simply, that these different elements support and confirm each other. If it cannot therefore by itself explain the decision to change one’s life, support for the theses of collapse gives it all its coherence. Arnaud, who was born in the early 1990s, describes this phenomenon fairly well:

I find myself faced with something that proposes a postulate dating back to 20 years before I was born, and is simply being confirmed... so, I’m in an “OK, fine...” mode. And it makes sense of the fact that the whole bullshit job was bugging me and I want to do my own quiet little thing... And also, all of that tells me it’s a good idea to do quiet little things.

In other words, the discovery of the extent of the environmental disaster made the loss of interest he was then feeling in his professional life coherent and perceptible. This loss of interest certainly made him more attentive and open to collapsological discourse. When he talks about these “quiet little things,” Arnaud is mainly referring to activities tending towards ecological sobriety and respect for the environment. This young man, whose ecological awareness had long been limited to sorting the rubbish, bought with his girlfriend a piece of land, about fifteen hectares, after joining the commune. Both of them make a particular point of never entering the wood which partly covers this space, so as not to disturb the fauna and flora. For the same reasons, they never walk outside the narrow well-beaten paths that cross their meadow.

### **From conviction to action?**

Is conviction in itself sufficient to explain commitment to a collective action or, more precisely, the constitution of an “intentional acting-together” (Neveu, 2015: 9) at the heart of these two collectives? Admittedly, this is a very particular form of believing, which mixes cognitive and emotional registers (Tasset, 2019). The search for and handling of data and information are very often justified by the anger, astonishment and fear engendered by the threats that loom over the living world. In recent decades, the social sciences have shown the importance of emotions (anger, shame or pride, for

example) in understanding the shift to action - especially when the latter is “political” (Gould, 2009) - or, at the very least, in apprehending what individuals can partly rely on if they are to act (Jasper, 2011). However, taking these same emotions into account is not enough to fully grasp the conditions that make the forms of engagement that interest me here possible. In the present case, the shift to these collective actions, whether in the commune or the neo-village, must above all be read in the light of the biographical bifurcations to which these people decided to commit themselves. However, the driving forces behind these changes in life stem, as we have seen, from many other factors (professional dissatisfaction, illnesses, the realization that they had failed in various ways, etc.) than just bewilderment in the face of the environmental threat. They are also active bifurcations, experienced as choices; above all, they are deemed to express a refusal: the person involved will no longer “play the game” (Simpson, 2014: 25), no longer consent to the dominant social order and norms. It is perhaps all the stronger here since most people have, sometimes for many years, consented to this order and its norms, for example by leading what some now depict as a “normal and orderly life”. This refusal can concern a professional activity, reduced to the rank of “bullshit job” (Graeber, 2018), as with Pierre, or directly linked to the devastation of the world. So Erwan gave up his job as a graphic designer because he could no longer bear to work for a sector – advertising – which he considered to be at the service of the main actors in this destruction. As for Simon, he left his executive position in industry after starting to feel that he was endorsing the logic of greenwashing. The association between ecological concern and collective mobilization is, therefore, not self-evident. It has even been rejected by some research in the social sciences. Schneider-Mayerson, in particular, demonstrates this well in his study of “peakists” (2013; 2015). In his view, far from organizing en masse, these individuals, convinced that peak oil will initiate a ‘post-apocalyptic future’, are prisoners of a ‘libertarian culture’ omnipresent in American society that drives them towards fatalism, passivity and individualistic protective reflexes. Things are obviously very different for people committed to or gravitating around the commune and the neo-village. For those most affected by collapsism, the idea that one cannot prepare alone for the disasters that lie ahead predominates. Integration into a collective is even presented by some as an antidote to the feeling of aimlessness that had burdened them until then. On the other hand, no one doubts that a collapse, whatever its form, will affect the population as a whole, even those who have taken care to prepare for it: “We won’t be completely

sheltered, but we'll still be a bit better protected than the others” But what separates my interviewees from the sample populations studied by Schneider-Mayerson lies mainly in the fact that a large number are distinguished by a past made up of various commitments that have, in any event, shaped dispositions for integration into a collective and, perhaps even more, an inclination to collective action. The case of Emma seems to suggest as much. She was born in the early 1960s in a family very close to the upper echelons of the Communist Party. When she looks back on the time when she joined the commune, this former psychologist, who had left the Paris region, considers it necessary to specify that she has “always been a committed kind of person”. So, in her view, it was inconceivable that she would not join “committed people, who think together.” Luc, in his fifties and after a long career within anarchist groups, frames the need for collective action in equally explicit terms:

There are lots of people who leave [the system] and go off and hide alone in the forest, in a cabin. [...] On a personal level, I think it's also a way of heading for disaster: you can't do things on your own. It doesn't work any better than capitalism. [...] Even if you produce your electricity and harvest your food, poach two or three rabbits, there are things you need that you can't do alone. You have to get together with other people...

As for the few people who have not experienced any commitments in the past, they still claim to have a “leftist” sensibility which they present as a criticism of “individualistic” behaviour.

These commitments mainly involved associations and organizations (usually protesting against consumerism, against the extreme right or on behalf of the defence of the environment), but also social movements (Nuit Debout, the Yellow Vests, etc.).<sup>8</sup> But now, everyone is starting to take a critical look at these experiences and, more generally, at an activism made up of meetings and demonstrations. This reversal can partly be assessed in the light of some of the developments of French democracy. As Fabien Jobard and Olivier Fillieule (2020) have shown, government members have systematically reminded everyone, since the end of the 1990s, that “the street does not govern,” and in particular have acted accordingly (by disregarding the protests against their reforms): this has led to a loss of effectiveness in the traditional ways of expressing protest. Accentuated by a weakening of intermediary bodies, mainly the trade unions,



this situation may have led some people to reconnect with older forms of expression, as evidenced by the increasing amount of vandalism of the official premises of elected officials, and gatherings on the public highway without prior declaration. Combined with other phenomena, such as the growing awareness of threats to the environment and the living world, this may have also contributed to making more legitimate and coherent the transition to commitments similar to those underlying the commune and the neo-village - commitments in favour of a better control of one's existence and living spaces (Jeanpierre, 2019). These same commitments also reflect a readjustment of political ambitions: it is no longer a question of demonstrating or campaigning for global change but of "bringing a territory to life" when you have made it your place of residence and subsistence. A few months after joining the commune, Luc and Brigitte acquired a small truck which they transformed into a mobile grocery store:

Our ambition isn't to sell vegetables. It's [...] so that we can live and help other people live here... and to allow people to continue to live here because they'll have access to food [thanks to the grocery store]. It's political.

### **The collective shaping of the conviction of the inevitable**

If the fact of being convinced of the inevitable is not enough in itself for someone to take action, it can on the other hand provide information on the overall shape that such action can take.

First of all, one can note that the literature of collapsology reserves a special place for small collectives, which it presents as particularly conducive to "resilience." Hadn't the villages of late antiquity, as one of my interlocutors points out to me, survived the fall of the Roman Empire? Mutual aid in villages is more evident, and decision-making faster in the event of a threat. The development of these groups in rural areas obviously owes nothing to chance. The countryside is unanimously perceived as a refuge, unlike the urban world that threatens those who inhabit it. For one of my interviewees, the very essence of the city could be summed up by the knife attack he suffered a few years earlier; an assault, he says, that convinced him to leave for the countryside. Many of these people also see the future as a theatre of armed conflict, where cities would be the first targets of bombardments and military occupations. However, as I have already said, everyone seems aware that in the event of major disasters, no one will be fully protected.

However, it should not be inferred from these projections that such individuals live in a completely darkened mental environment. Far from it. If, after they settle within a collective, they retain the ambition to adapt to what threatens humanity, these people aim above all to bring about a “different future” (Descola, 2019). There is nothing surprising in this, since dystopia and utopia generally go hand in hand. The utopian goals of these two collectives are regularly asserted, in particular by their main originators. However, the commune and the neo-village do not convey just an “ideal,” as utopias traditionally do. This type of experimentation is also akin to what Blanes and Bertelsen refer to as a “praxis that generates mobilization” (2021: 7). A number of ordinary daily practices (such as tending the crops, the decision to sell vegetables at an ‘open price’ on the local market, giving a central place to agricultural commons, etc.) converge on the collective ambition to foster something that would keep at bay the nightmarish universe so present in the dominant interpretations of collapsism. Thus, for Louise:

The Mad Max vision is an unconscious theme, I think. It’s produced by capitalism, which says: “Okay, you want to imagine a post-capitalism, so we’re going to give you a nasty vision of it”. [...] We’re so saturated with it that we always fall back into what capitalism produces so that we can’t build up a positive vision [...] My reflection and my practice [...] go towards a form of collapsology of “Taking care of things” [...] something positive. [...] What I imagine, I’m already building it [*Author’s note: by creating or investing in local activities and associations supposed to “create links” with the inhabitants of the surrounding area*]. Because if you wait for [the collapse], it’s with your arms crossed... and you don’t do anything. That’s why I wanted to change my life, to build things, and in the countryside, too, because it’s a very neglected place [...] If you wait for things, you don’t do anything.

The creation of this “different future” is also based on the fact that the rural world has the undeniable advantage of making the place of life and the place of subsistence one and the same. Such a situation offers, of course, protection against the breakdown in food supply chains which, I am told regularly, will one day hit the metropolises. Thus, the sites on which the two collectives are deployed are largely dedicated to the cultivation of fruit and vegetables. It’s mainly a question of “producing” and, in doing so, of sketching out the contours of a self-sufficiency in food that should be achieved as quickly as possible. But, for a large number of my interviewees, (re)learning to

produce in order to satisfy one's needs will also reduce the material dependence created and maintained by the consumer society and, more generally, "the system." Thus, every first Saturday of the month, for one morning, the members of the neo-village open the doors of the "grocery store". It is a small one-room house, with tiled walls, which the rest of the time is used to make cheese from the milk of the three goats owned by the collective. The issue is obviously not to make any profit by selling the bags of dried vegetables, organic coffee and cans of vegetable oil that clutter the place. Purchased in bulk, the products are in fact sold at cost price and anything that does not find a buyer will be consumed by the collective over the following six months. It is much more a matter of convincing those who have made the trip that it is possible to get by without supermarkets. The reasons for this approach are both *catastrophist*, to the extent that store supply chains are seen as the first likely victims of a collapse, and *political*, with mass distribution appearing as one of the most glaring manifestations of the alienation generated by commodities. In fact, only Pierre and Estelle still venture into these temples of mass consumption once a month, and for things that they know they cannot do without, or that other neo-villagers ask them to buy; chocolate and toilet paper, mainly.

The multiple individual decisions that serve as the basis for these collective mobilizations should therefore not be too quickly interpreted as simple desires to "reconnect with nature," to use a formula often used in the media since the start of the Covid pandemic. Admittedly, the lifestyles of my interviewees are similar to those usually associated with "radical" ecology (promotion of light housing, a certain sobriety in energy use, etc.). These individuals also have a very fine and informed awareness of environmental ravages and the threat they pose to humanity. This awareness has even led some of them towards ecology. After his discovery of collapsology, Pierre, for example, got involved in a small local association for the protection of nature. Until then, he had never taken any interest in the environment, but he now devoted certain weekends to identifying frogs in ponds and, in doing so, observing with his own eyes the increasing fragility of the living world. His case thus confirms that "to become an environmentalist [...], one must learn to recognize and care about 'the environment'" (Tsing, 2005: 123).

However, not all of them claim to have any ecological sensibility. Jean-Marc, one member of the neo-village, puts it bluntly:

I have no environmental sensibility. [...] It's not my *modus operandi*. Of course, I'm sensitive to the beauty of a landscape [...] but that's not what affects me the most. Personally, when people tell me to "Save the planet!" [*He sighs*] The planet, well, it's going to be fine on its own [...] No need to get upset [...] The devastation of nature saddens me but, for me, it goes further than that: it's inhuman systems [which underlie it] and I see something eminently political there [...] I'm not bothered about the disappearance of the human species [but] I am bothered about the fate of all those who didn't want it, all those who didn't contribute to it but who will be the first to die. That's what saddens me. I'm very sensitive to human despair.

Like many within the commune or the neo-village, then, Jean-Marc came to the environmental question via anti-capitalism. This is also the case of Brigitte, a former librarian with a left-wing libertarian sensibility:

You're against capitalism and you realize that the effects of capitalism are to destroy this environment that you can't get out of [...] When I was a little girl, I didn't shed many tears over the baby seals. And the decline of biodiversity is a question that has only recently started to bother me. But now it *does* bother me! [This system] wrecks people and it also wrecks the conditions in which people live. But it's too late... So we're going to try to deal with it, as cheerfully as possible.

More generally, these positions invite us to reassess the idea that being attracted to the environmental question is the prerogative of a petty bourgeoisie anxious not to take a position. The accusation of depoliticization is also frequently made against collapsologists' theories. Yet it seems that this question has been a way for these people to rethink their critique of the social and political order. In one of the founding documents of the neo-village, collapse is even presented as "an opportunity": who will complain, write its authors, if "the oppressive system which has spread across the Earth disappears?"

Those, on the other hand, who say they *do* harbour an ecological sensitivity, sometimes dating back to childhood, are nevertheless able to adapt it to the imperatives and needs of the moment. Sophie, for example, has no trouble using a thermal brush cutter when it comes to freeing agricultural commons from overly invasive vegetation. Alex earns a

little money by occasionally installing photovoltaic panels for individuals. However, he does not see the need to use it at home insofar as his connection to the electricity grid satisfies him. Similarly, if the members of the neo-village have chosen to gradually do without cars, it is not to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions but, above all, to no longer depend on oil that is bound to become rare or to lose its usefulness in a collapsed world. This logic obviously leads them to use bicycles but also to learn how to handle and maintain tools such as the scythe, the lumberjack's handsaw or the Japanese saw that is supposed to replace both the chainsaw and the jigsaw. The acquisition of new skills is in any case a central ambition within these collective actions, which endeavour to break away from the specialization found in industrial civilization and develop a versatility more in line with troubled times: knowing how to milk goats and process their milk, graft fruit trees, recognize wild plants and mushrooms, etc. "We learn how to do things... When the shit hits the fan, we'll know how to do stuff".

The quest for autonomy is therefore the main objective of these individuals, above all concerned with no longer living under a social and economic order whose time is now running out. To be convinced of this, you just need to follow Pierre in the course of a single day. Every day of the year, this youthful fifty-year-old walks the 14 hectares of the neo-village and carries out many activities. He can spend the morning cutting down the dead trees that litter the ground in the woods surrounding the pond, trees that will be used to heat the collective's houses. In the afternoon, he devotes himself to completing and maintaining the hydraulic system he designed to irrigate crops from large water recovery tanks. For a few hours, he may also restore one of the houses that the members of the collective plan to rent. During these moments, his body and mind are therefore directly involved in consolidating the group's autonomy, whether in energy, food or financial terms.

However, my interviewees do not delude themselves about the difficulty of this undertaking. Above all, none of them – to my knowledge – imagine themselves achieving total self-sufficiency. The quest for self-sufficiency must therefore go beyond the borders of the collective and be linked to another major ambition: to weave a "social network" or, to put it another way, to find one's place in the local social landscape by integrating into sociabilities already established, or by developing new networks. Individually, some members of the commune and the neo-village play a very active role in a group that buys forest plots in order to fight against the practice of clearcutting, which is very common in the region. The effort is perhaps even more substantial in the

neo-village. One of the main ambitions of its originators is to develop an “extended community” around the core they form. The links woven with the inhabitants of the surrounding area are woven via “helping hands” and different forms of mutual aid (support when a local market gardener is physically unable to harvest, sharing of agricultural knowledge, participation in building a yurt with neighbours, etc.) but also via exchange. Some of the vegetables and cheeses produced by the members of the neo-village are regularly exchanged for craft beers, chickens or honey produced by other inhabitants of the locality. It is thus a question, while sabotaging a classic economic relationship based on money, of developing the self-sufficiency of the collective.

The quest for food self-sufficiency therefore involves this type of reciprocal relationship, but also the implementation of concerted local actions. In the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and as the threat of a global wheat shortage loomed, a crisis meeting was organized with individuals gravitating around the neo-village. On this occasion, the collective estimated that its annual flour needs would require devoting two hectares of its land to the cultivation of wheat. A local farmer, with the right knowledge and equipment, could be asked to sow it there and then harvest it. In a second phase, an agreement would be made with a couple of farmer-bakers<sup>9</sup> who are settling in the region, to pool the use of a mill. The flour thus produced would be stored in airtight containers purchased for the occasion and stored in one of the barns in the neo-village. Developing these links at the heart of the local environment can also lead, to use the very words of one of the originators of the commune, to working with the “fascist neighbour.” It is perhaps with him that they will have to deal in the event of a collapse, when the main state institutions will no longer be operational. Without going that far, the members of the neo-village also develop relationships with various local groups who are nevertheless a long way from their principles of life, whether they are hunters or neighbours practising intensive agriculture. Because they have been in this territory “since forever,” these people are indeed perceived as the guardians of an invaluable experience of the rural world. This last example (and the preceding ones) underlines the extent to which, in the eyes of these individuals, solidarity and mutual aid are both values and possible political strategies (Ross, 2015: 18). The members of the neo-village, who met through Facebook groups dedicated to collapsology, also regularly present themselves as a “crew,” that is to say as a group of individuals aware that they have everything to gain by sailing together in heavy weather:

If we hadn't been brought together by this project, we'd never have met. Or else, I'd have imagined he [*Author's note: Jean-Marc points to Pierre*] was a dumbass and he [*He looks at Olivier*] was a crackpot. But here, we know why we're all together.

And the other two men nod.

None of the collectives, in fact, offers any communal life. The majority of their members are very hostile to it anyway, which can certainly be explained by the fact that most of them have in the past led independent lives, alone or in couples, in which the private sphere was important. But beyond that, it suggests above all that these collective actions were mainly built on the sharing of a concern (and, perhaps even more, on the aforementioned conviction of the inevitable) and not on affinities, even if the latter can obviously arise later.

### **Conclusion**

It is indeed the outline of a “post-apocalyptic environmentalism” (de Moor, 2022; Cassegård and Thörn, 2022) that is sketched out by the conviction of the inevitable: for the individuals at the heart of this article, the collapse of the thermo-industrial model is no longer a mere possibility or threat but an ongoing process. The specific nature of this environmentalism is also due to the fact that it is focused both on the ecological sensitivity of those who participate in it and on their awareness of loss and destruction. Such a characteristic is certainly not unrelated to the fact that the conviction with which it merges is not based on ecological concern alone. It is also rooted in more personal and intimate experiences that individuals clearly integrate, without difficulty, into the collective destiny that the theories of collapse are deemed to reveal. The loss of meaning in work, the exhaustion of activist momentum in traditional forms of political expression, and exposure to neo-managerial principles thus appear as so many symptoms of a predatory logic also working against the environment. However, the adoption of this conviction does not shut down the horizons of these people. Quite the opposite: it seems to engender a kind of “alarmed reflexivity” (Li Vigni, Blanchard and Tasset, 2022) which in turn contributes to producing an imaginary and practices that make it possible to prepare for collapse but also, and perhaps above all, to conceive a time *after*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is the definition given by Yves Cochet, Minister of the Environment at the end of the 1990s; it resurfaces regularly in the French debate.

<sup>2</sup> One of the notable exceptions to this pattern is certainly to be found in the studies devoted to the Transition Towns Network (see Smith, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> I have specified the sociological contours of these populations in another article.

<sup>4</sup> The fear of being taken by their associates for “Cassandras” or “birds of bad omen” was often mentioned by my interlocutors.

<sup>5</sup> Conceptualized by Albrecht (2005), solastalgia refers to the psychological, even existential, suffering linked to climate change and the destruction of biodiversity.

<sup>6</sup> This is a characteristic found in the profiles of most collapsologists, as confirmed by Cyprien Tasset’s study of a collapsologists’ association. See Tasset, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> A “biographical bifurcation” is a “sudden, unforeseen and lasting change in personal situation and life outlook, concerning one or more spheres of activity” (Hélaridot, 2009: 161). It is therefore not a question of a “transition”, as “the end of studies or parental separation” could be for younger people, but of “the appearance of a crisis whose paths are, they also, initially unforeseen” and “within which an outcome will be chosen which induces a significant change of orientation” (Bidart, 2006: 32).

<sup>8</sup> Nuit debout is a largely left-wing/populist protest movement in France, roughly equivalent to the Occupy movement in the US and elsewhere; the Yellow Vest movement, also originating in France, began as a protest against rising petrol prices but soon involved a wider attack on the policies of Emmanuel Macron’s government.

<sup>9</sup> The farmer-baker controls the entire process leading to the production of bread, from the sowing of cereals to the sale of the finished product.



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