THE SPREADING OF A COUNTER-CULTURE: the example of the french back-to-the-land movement (1968-2018)

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THE SPREADING OF A COUNTER-CULTURE: the example of the french back-to-the-land movement (1968-2018)

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Abstract: This article studies the 60s-70s counterculture, taking the example of the French back-to-the-land movement that spread after the May 1968 revolt. It is based on an ongoing ethnographic research started in 2008 in the Pyrenees. After having outlined an atlas of the French back-to-the-land phenomenon, my aim is to analyze its reasons and persistences, 50 years after first people moved to the countryside to live in intentional communities. Some of the areas invested by those people still preserve the original counter-cultural spirit of the 60s-70s, attracting until today « new settlers » trying to live differently form the rest of the society, defend nature and re-create sustainable communities.

Keywords: May 1968, urban exodus, community lifestyle.

Resumo: Este artigo estuda a contracultura dos anos 60-70, tomando o exemplo do movimento francês de volta à terra que se espalhou após a revolta de maio de 1968. Baseia-se em uma pesquisa etnográfica em andamento iniciada em 2008 nos Pirineus. Depois de esboçar um atlas do fenômeno francês de volta à terra, meu objetivo é analisar suas razões e persistências, 50 anos depois que as primeiras pessoas se mudaram para o campo para viver em comunidades intencionais. Algumas das áreas investidas por essas pessoas ainda preservam o espírito contracultural original dos anos 60-70, atraindo até hoje "novos colonos" que tentam viver de forma diferente do resto da sociedade, defender a natureza e recriar comunidades sustentáveis.

Palavras-chave: Maio de 1968, êxodo urbano, vida em comunidade.

Introduction

The month of May 2018 celebrated the anniversary of the French 1968 movement, and its iconic narratives: Sorbonne University and Odeon Theater were occupied, barricades appeared in the streets of the Latin Quarter in Paris, around 9 millions of French workers were on strike... And hundred of intentional rural communities were established just after the failure of this revolt. Why, in the aftermath of May 1968, thousands of young city dwellers abandoned everything to join the countryside, ploughing fields or breading goats, and became "back-to-the-landers" ("*néo-ruraux*" in French)? What has happened to the movement? What has become of those radicals, 50 years later?

To try to answer these questions, I will share some results of an ongoing ethnographic research (combining archives, oral histories and observations, both participative and non-participative) started in 2008 in the Pyrenees, more particularly in the Ariège county. My aim is to analyze as well the original motivations of « néo-ruraux » and the persistence of the phenomenon, 50 years after 1968. In Ariège county, the original counter-cultural spirit of the 60s-70s seems to be mostly preserved, attracting until today « new settlers » trying to live differently form the rest of the society, defend nature and re-create new sustainable communities.

In a first part, I distinguish - at least - three different backgrounds of the french back-to-the-land movement; in a second part, I outline a general « atlas » of this atypical phenomenon, from the end of the 60s till now; in a third part, finally, I analyze Ariège county's case.

I. Backgrounds

French back-to-the-land movement results from at least three different backgrounds.

a. The long history of community-based utopias around the world

This background of the 60s-70s back-to-the-land phenomenon includes all those previous religious, philosophical, and political experiences carried out for centuries around the world, designed by American sociologists by the expression "intentional communities". Some examples: the "socialist utopias" of the 18th and 19th Century in the USA (Owen's New Harmony, Cabet's Icarias, etc.); the French anarchist "milieux libres" (beginnings of the XXth Century) ; more recently, the syncretic religious and anti-war *Ark Communities*, established at the end of the 1940s by the Italian philosopher Lanza del Vasto on the model of Gandhi's Ashrams in India.

b. The Bay area "counter-culture" of the 60s

Inspired by Theodore Rozak's classical definition (*The making of a counter-culture*, Anchor, 1968), I want to design more particularly two groups not really linked at that start,

that joined progressively around 1965-1966: San Francisco hippies and radical students of the Bay Area. Like the "counter-culture", rural community-based utopias were developed step by step: first, the phenomenon was urban and/or nomadic, then it became progressively rural. They got the focus more towards self-fashioning (including spirituality) and a radical ecological commitment: we can call it the "transforming by example" – following French historian Anne Lombard (*Le mouvement hippie aux États-Unis,* Casterman, 1972, p. 42) – because they tried, going-back to the nature, to show the rest of the society the concrete possibility of building alternative relations between the humans themselves and between the humans and the rest of the-eco system. Hence, this frame was later imported in Europe.

c. The 1968 French protests

French 1968 must be considered not as the single month of May's protests, but as a series of three main upheavals taking part from the beginning of the 60s to the middle of the 70s:

1. economic and educational upheavals. In a decade characterized by economic growth and a low unemployment rate, middle-upper class French students started to develop a fear of "social demotion", explaining, in the opinion of number of sociologists, their revolts. Additionally – that's very important for the back-to-the-land phenomenon – France was touched by a second massive "rural exodus" form the countryside to the towns. Indeed, the 60s achieved the transition from a subsistence farming and a fragmented peasant property to the mechanization and the extensive farming, aligning french agriculture to the requirements of the "consumer society";

2. cultural upheavals. French youth were massively concerned by societal and sexual problems shared by the "baby boom" generation all around the – western, and partially eastern – world, especially the persistence of traditional social structures (men's power and religion in particular), the birth control (the pill was authorized in France in 1967), and the sexual liberation.

3. Political upheavals. In a global context of decolonization, American imperialism, fascist regimes and the Vietnam war were largely criticized. But the Soviet model was not spared, and some radical groups were created on the left of the Communist Party, one of the most important parties of France at that time. We call them the "leftists groups" ("gauchistes"): maoist, trotskyist, or more anarchy-oriented (like *Enragés* and *Situationnists*).

These three different backgrounds are useful to outline an « atlas » of the back-to-the-land movement in France.

II. An « atlas » of the French back-to-the-land movement after 1968

A short quote of a book (*L'aventure hippie*, Éditions du Lézard, 1995) written by journalists and researchers Jean-Pierre Boyxou and Pierre Dealnnoy in the middle of 90s gives the fundamental elements of the « atlas ».

Summer of 1968. Like hangovers, the days after the failed [May] revolution leave a bitter taste. Hundreds of young people left the towns for the "desert region" of the South of France, to find an abandoned home or village where living together, and "differently" (p. 17).

a. Where did they go?

Mainly to the South of France, in the regions most touched by the rural exodus : the Pyrenees (Ariège county), the Cévennes (Ardèche county) and the Alps (Alpes de Haute-Provence county) but also in the center of the country and in the North-East. In general, we can say that those experiences were located on the two "empty diagonals" (meaning the less populated regions) crossing the country, the first from the North-East to the South-West, the second from the South-West to the South-East (except the coast and the urban areas), as we can see on these two graphics (the second is about the location of the most important communes in 1971 according to underground journal *C as community*, February 1974, p. 4).
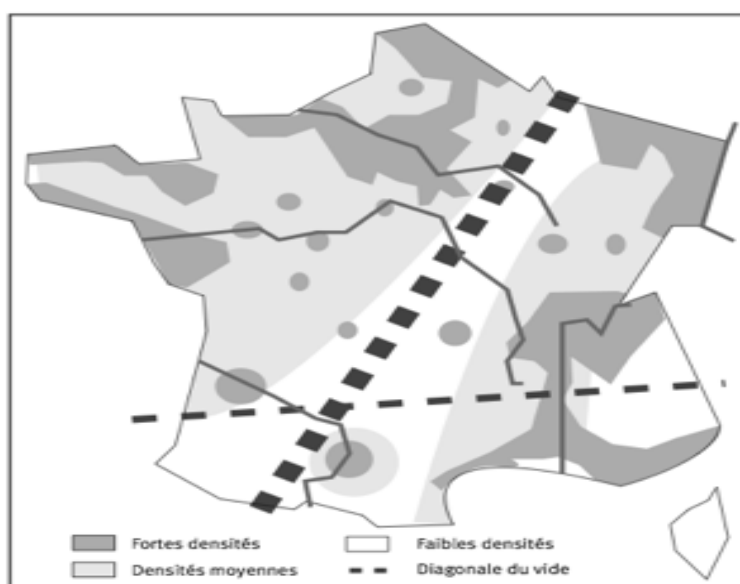

Fig.1-2
The two empty diagonals and the location of most important french communes in 1971
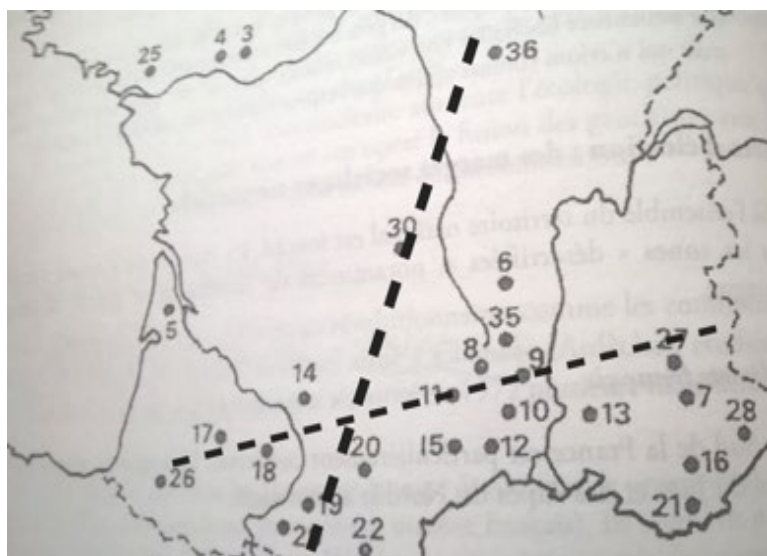*(source: private collection)*

b. When and how many?

The first French rural communes were established one year before May 1968, in Ardèche and Ariège counties. However, most of these experiences were founded after May: we don't know exactly the number, but, according to the testimony of journalists Pol-Roger Droit and Antoine Gallien, in 1972, there were around 500 communes, with different styles, hosting "more

than 5 thousand people in the winter and between 30 and 40 thousand in the summer" (*La chasse au bonheur*, Calmann-Lévy, 1972, p.14). The year 1972 is also important because, according to 80s-90s scholars, it has been the most active period of the movement. They generally used the image of a "wave of settlement" growing between 1968 and 1972, then decreasing quickly: sociologist Bernard Lacroix mentioned for example that 95% of these experiences failed before 1975 (*L'utopie communautaire*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1981).

c. Why, or better how did they go from the street barricades in May 1968 to a "revolution in the garden" after this social movement?

For a long time, sociologists explained the "utopian counter-exodus" of the 70s by the

"hangovers of May" and the fear of "social demotion". Gérard Mauger analyzed, for example, the transition from a "political leftism" to a "counter-cultural leftism" in a book of 1977 then in an article of 1999, by the deception of the "may generation" for the traditional politics, and by the fear of the middle-upper class students to get a lower social status once they graduate, in the context of a "new mass university" delivering more titles than available positions on the job market. After May, rural communes became a mean – amongst others (underground press, drug use, "hippie trail" to India etc.) – to withdraw *temporarily* from "the system" and its main symbol: the "towns". Why "temporarily"? Because in this vision, after having played, for some months (or years), the rule of "inexperienced alternative peasants", those "back-to-the-landers" were confronted to the economic and/or practical problems of community lifestyle and to the conflicts with the local population, triggering a failure of these experiences: a majority of individuals returned to the towns and re-integrated the "system" they tried to escape without social "demotion", while persons who decided to stay in the countryside, living in a more traditional family frame, became a sort on "new rural bourgeoisie". They got grants from the State to develop mainly touristic activities (equestrian centers, potteries, basketries, etc.) or

organic agriculture, integrating in that way the parish economy. They also invested the local political parties, and some of them became mayors of their villages in the late 70s.

To summarize, as well the relationships with the local population and their utopia "changed": those families of "neo-rurals are looking now for a "green", "healthy" and "authentic" lifestyle", as sociologists Hervieu and Léger wrote in a book of 1979 (*Le retour à la nature*, Seuil, 1979, p.98). The subtitle of their book is very interesting: "at the end of the forest... (there is always) the State". The sense of this sentence is double. First sense: it's impossible to escape the "system"; second sense: the State has found a satisfying arrangement, giving grants, to control the leftovers of a potentially explosive social movement.

Some recent studies published since the noughties emphasize two main limits:

1.   the focus on a single "generation", led by students stemmed from the middle-upper social classes. Julie Pagis, in her PHD dissertation published in 2014, insist on the existence of "micro-units of generation" with different social origins and destinies;

2.   the focus on a single "wave of arrivals". 50 years later, the presence of various others "waves of arrivals" can be attested, as I already showed in my Master dissertation of 2008 about Ariège County and Catherine Rouvière has shown more recently in her PHD dissertation about the Cévennes (Ardèche county), published in 2015.

In other words, in the past ten years, new perspectives have emerged to analyze the French back-to-the-land movement of the 70s. I will share some of my own results in a third and final part.

III. The case of Ariège: opening new hypothesis about the movement

This specific case brings answers to three fundamental questions.

a. Have community-based back-to-the-land utopias really disappeared?

A first wave of back-to-the-landers arrived in Ariège between 1967 and 1973. They generally lived in intentional agricultural communes, established in the valleys and hills near the town of Foix. However, a new – and massive – wave, composed both by individual and collective projects, arrived in that county – especially on the mountains and the hills of the Couserans, near Saint-Girons – between 1975 and 1977, followed by many others until today. Far from disappearing, intentional community-based utopias, in various forms, seem to be multiplying, and that's the first important result contesting the 70s-early 80s sociological mainstream. Some examples:

1. The Commune of *La Maraude*, established in 1984 in the village of Arrout. They have both agricultural / direct sale activities and host children from unprivileged Toulouse area in the school holidays. This commune is composed by 4 "senior members", belonging to the 68

generation, and two which are younger (they joined in the noughties). The trajectories of the 4 "seniors" seem to confirm Julie Pagis' analysis about the diversity of social origins of the 1968 protesters: Jean-Pierre is the son of modest craftsmen of Lille's region (North of France). He was married with Françoise, daughter of catholic industrial workers of the same region, when they arrived in the Pyrenees. They had both lived in a Communist Kibboutz in Israel and in an *Ark Community* in France. Evelyne, daughter of Italian immigrants of the Paris suburbs was the first of her family to finish her studies. The fourth "senior" member, Bergère, joined the project in 1986. Daughter of a rural policeman who died when she was 14, she came to Paris alone to work as a servant in a rich family. The protests of May 1968 changed her life: she took part in the Odeon Theater occupation, and never returned to her employee family after this experience.

2. The rural squat of *Le Palmier*, an ancient paper mill at the town exit of Saint-Girons, occupied in 2012. It hosted a dozen of anarchists, all belonging to the more recent "waves of arrivals" in the region. They organized political and cultural events (concerts, debates), before their eviction by the riot police in 2017.

3. An ecological village ("*éco-village*", in French) of yurts and huts established in 1992 by the members of the Saint-Girons-based association "*Le Mille Pattes*" around the ruins of a medieval Cathar castle near Durban-sur-Arize, on the hills-side. In 2008, at the moment of my visiting, 6 dwellers – both belonging to the 1968 wave or to the more recent ones – tried to cultivate lands and breed sheep.

4. Final example, the "communitarian valley" of La Crouzette, near Biert, established at the end of the 80s. This network of inhabitants of the same valley – generally arrived between the second half of the 70s and the 90s – share the same "counter-cultural values" and act for a new, well-balanced and sustainable community. They try to help each other and exchange products without money or bartering: the logic is more gift-oriented. In the 90s, it was composed by around 100 members, including children, considering themselves like to be a tribe. This original project was shaped on the model of the Canadian intentional communes, as one of the founders, Yves, explains during an interview I realized in 2008:

> in 1987, I visited a commune around L'Anse-Saint-Jean, in Québec. They had a lot of space, around 200 hectares they bought collectively […], but not a single house where they all lived together. Just some common spaces to work. So, when I returned [in my valley], we discussed it and said "why not?". […] I think that most [...] french communes failed because people worked all day together, lived all the day in the same farm, and finally a lot of problems emerged : in my opinion, it is linked to the catholic idea of the "monastery", all is in common, but finally you cannot have a private space for you. In North-America, it is different, it's a more "protestant" conception: they share a same ideal, the same means of production but they are not crammed together in the same little space".

b. How to explain that persistence?

To explain the persistence of community-based back-to-the-land utopias, rather than the mainstream sociological French vision associating the "hangovers of may" and the "fear of social demotion", we could use a perspective in terms of "career", following the interactionist's school analysis (in particular the classical article of H. S.Becker, "Notes on the Concept of Commitment", originally published in 1960). We could complete this perspective with more recent works about the existence of three different "life spheres", following social movement sociologists Florence Passy and Marco Giugni. These scholars explains that the maintenance of a political commitment isn't possible without a certain coherence with the two other life spheres, the work and the private relations. Combining these two perspectives, we can observe that the chances to pursue a "communitarian career" increase with the gain of everyday symbolic "side bets" they make on the production, the reproduction and the commitment, giving a coherence between their three "life spheres". When they start to "loose" one or more "side bets", the coherence of the "life-spheres" is affected and their "career" had more chances to stop.

c. How to explain the consecutive "wave of arrivals" in the Pyrenees?

Although back-to-the-landers have revitalize that region, reversing the rural exodus, they preserve a certain distance with the locals and aren't really integrated. Why? We could use another classic sociological concept, that one of the "significant others". The back-to-the-landers seems have built, there, a solid network of "significant others" trying to promote new arrivals and preserve the original logic of the "transforming by example" they imported from the USA in the early 70s. In that way, they preserve their distance with the local population.

The best moment to observe it is the open-air market of Saint-Girons, every Saturday. The market is a weekly "meeting point" for all the people who live in the region: when "locals" arrive generally early in the morning and just buy products, "neo rurals" arrive late and prefer drinking some chai, playing music or discuss with the "significant others" they know.

A little story about that, as a conclusion of the article: during one of my surveys, after having observed the market for 3 or 4 hours, I just would buy some goat cheese from Marc, a very committed producer (belonging to the "68 generation") nowadays retired. He always had some leaflets about Palestine on his table, ecology and he also sold, in addition of his cheese production, Chiapas coffee in solidarity with Zapatista movement in Mexico. When I arrived, he was discussing back-to-the-landers movement with two other people. He invited me to join. The problem was that a lot of customers, including tourists, stood in the line, and the most impatient went away 5 or 10 minutes after. As a sociologist, I was very interested by this inversion of the capitalist "Customer first" trade practice. But, by this little story, we can also observe the importance of the radical political commitment for Ariège's back-to-the-landers,

even those belonging to the "68 generation". Here, they generally refused to integrate political parties and generally didn't participate in the council of their village. They prefer to continue to act in solidarity with the third world, against nuclear business, for the environmental justice... Showing that "at the end of the forest, there is not always the State", as Danièle Léger and Bertrand Hervieu wrote in 1979. They seem instead to follow the hummingbird's logic, a native American Indian legend first reported by Pierre Rahbi (one of the pioneers of the ecology in France) mentioned by most of the people I interviewed to describe their utopic commitment and their place in the society:

> One day a terrible fire broke out in a forest. Frightened, all the animals fled their homes, except for one little hummingbird. The hummingbird swooped into the stream for a few drops of water and went back to the forest to put out the fire. Then it went back to the stream again, again, and again. All the other animals watched in disbelief: "Your wings will burn, your beak is too small, and one drop at a time you'll never put out the fire!" The hummingbird, without skipping a beat, looked back and said, "I am doing what I can".

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