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Discussion Notes 02

Millevaches powerful alternatives

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Millevaches powerful alternatives

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On the Plateau of Millevaches (France) resistance and alternatives are growing together with ecologist or libertarian philosophy. They can explicitly refer to author as Jacques Ellul, Charbonneau or, to be more current, Bernard Friot.

I will present how alternatives are building on Millevaches and what, in their form, is original and ambitious.

Millevaches, in Massif Central, is a very rural area (less than 10 hab/km²), far from big cities, where we find many associations, a dynamic life and a strong ideological movement which is influent in France. Several books are published *from* or *on* Millevaches alternatives. Edition “Repas” is one example, with books on “Ambiance Bois” (a sawmill with 20 workers, without hierarchy, and with equal wages), or “Télé Millevaches” (an associative TV without president).

As these books are telling us, we can meet associations or factories which adopt democratic status, without president, with a turn-over in tasks. They are very active in the local social life, through events, manifestations, debates.¹

Several people (mayors and citizens) adopt, in 2012, a “Plateforme” (that is to say a planning for future in Millevaches) arguing Millevaches is an open territory for people which desire to live in country, a territory refusing metropolisation and imposed policies. They aspire to a democratic functioning of decisions making. They also refer to rural communism, a past strong ideology on Millevaches in the first half of 19th century.

So, after presenting the original associations on place, I will relate the debates and actions around decisions making, the vitality of the territory and the will of solidarity.

Indeed, for example, Millevaches welcomes refugees, welcomes libertarian manifestations, and welcomes trainees in farms or society with a model “without boss”. So the alternatives appear as very powerful and Millevaches is a referent area in ideas around the conception of power, but also in rebel spirit.

Populism is often very present in the rural departments, rather for an isolation of cultural life and a lack of knowledge of people of different origins. Millevaches takes the counter foot with energy and find alternatives in the libertarian initiatives and innovations, vitalizing a deep rural space.

¹ Some examples: Ambiance Bois, Télé Millevaches, Lachaud Farm, Tarnac group, Pain levé (Collective Bread), la Renouée (house with different projects: grocery, brewery, associations’ offices, tisane dryer).

1 – The Millevaches escape from hierarchy and capitalism

First, why do you find this place so special, original, rebel, would you ask me. What have you observed on Millevaches which could evince we are situated on an anarchist area?

Of course, we could point some specificities of the area, but it's not such a key to approach eco-libertarian spirit than practices of some people.

When I studied the existence of different ways of power, I intend to meet various associations on Millevaches: « *The Region Limousin count reporting to its population, 2,63 times more associations than the nation [France] and Millevaches count, proportionally, 1,3 time more associations than the Region : it's 3,47 times more than the nation.* » already raised Olivier Davigo in the first number of the local newspaper "IPNS"² in avril 2002.

More than the brut number of associations, the number of libertarian ones impresses me. On the border of three French departments (Creuse, Corrèze, Haute-Vienne³), you can count several of them in each villages.

In addition, when I arrived, I see many posters of cultural manifestations and also anarchist tags. So intensive, it's quite rare in rural territories. So you can doubt some peoples are dealing with culture and politics. These activities often demand to group. And they let me suppose there were a public for them. So I had meet these people and will relate you who they are, what they do. So this first paragraph is essentially based on presence. It will describe you the alternative society on Millevaches, a society that surely influences me. Indeed, I can't assure to start from a neutral point of view but from an involved one: because I'm attracted by ahierarchic operations and because I leave quite close of Millevaches (80 km).

As I wrote in introduction, we find some factories and associations without chief in their status. It is claimed. It means people refuse an authoritarian way of power, fix, pyramidal and lead reflexions to avoid domination in relationships.

-Democracy doesn't stop at the door of the factory, said to me one member of the SCOP⁴ Cesam-Oxalis.

A member of Ambiance Bois related me the collective way of making decisions: each Friday mornings, all the workers are meeting around a table to discuss the planning and establish a rotation in tasks. But, of course, he continued, appear leaders: the first founders of Ambiance Bois or the "big mouths". These persons pay attention not to monopolise the speech, did he precise, and every one is invited to express. So they try that charisma (which could be called a fix form of power because materialised in the individual) doesn't bring a situation of domination in the group.

The sawmill "Ambiance Bois", created in 1988, is a reference of the actual anticapitalist face of Millevaches because it is one of the official structure without chief. The fact that the ahierarchic will is now widespread on Millevaches turns the place as a myth of libertarian initiatives. Ambiance bois is a member of REPAS which is a network of libertarian and ecologist companionship and there are often trainees in the factory. But they are also many students or trainees in other structures (especially in some farms) who want a experience of collective or ecologist practices, who discover and test themselves in a horizontal functioning; the number of these trainees contribute to give to Millevaches a pioneer and mythic picture of a libertarian society, a place to create utopias. Countryside is often

² « Data bases were on the one hand gracefully provided by under-prefectures (recording places of associations), on the other hand bought to INSEE. » specified Davigo. (Title of french article : « 100 ans d'association sur le Plateau », IPNS n°1)

³ Some names of crossed villages : Faux-la-Montagne, Gentioux, La Villedieu, Royère, Tarnac, Peyrelevade, Rempnat, Nedde.

⁴ SCOP = *Société Coopérative Ouvrière de Production* (workers cooperative society of production), workers are the main shareholders.

pointed as cut to culture, to modernity, racist and populist from “far right”; several habitants from Millevaches show that a jointly and severally liable peasant model strongly exist and can be desirable. Several people say that they choose to live on Millevaches for moral reasons, because they want to join a place with a marked left-libertarian will and participate to collective initiatives. So there is a fluid power of influence of libertarian milieu which reinforces the myth.

You’ll mistake if you think this collective spirit is concentrated on the industrial or the salaried world. Even if the landscape is very woody and farms not so numerous, the libertarian ideas can born in the peasant milieu or spread through the farms. Besides, on the Plateau, there is also one farmer in the network REPAS.

Several farms have grouped⁵ to welcome newcomers who desire to test themselves in agriculture. The peasants lend some lands for trainees to practice, but they insist on the fact they are not their masters or their chiefs. They can give advices if the trainees ask some, but the aim is that the young people lead their own activity. The aim is that newcomers in agriculture feel eased because the territory needs peasants and people. It was presented to me as a real desire to build good conditions for their first steps on place. They also look for a favoured status for trainees for their years of test being recognized as a job and they found one, exported from the workers world. This group of farm is non neutral: all of them are in a biological approach and are closed to ecologist ideas. Productivity is not their discourse, but quality, health of food. I assist to some kind of rural university where was shared rural knowledge. On Millevaches, you can also meet unofficial (professionally speaking) collectives of peasants and some very small farmers, trying to stay in margin to administration rules. They sell their production on local markets. To take a significant example, one of these markets took place every Tuesday evening on the square in the village of Gentioux. It was an occasion for people to sit at the pub or to organize cultural events. Because several people like to pursue the market ambiance during winter, they look for a house. Helped by the local association of urbanism⁶ and a collect of funds, they finally build a house which serve today to many people: an inhabitant, offices for association, an attic to dry medicinal plants for a peasant woman, a cave to a brewer of beer, and of course a small room for the grocery and the principal room, the entrance one, for the market et for manifestations... or politic debates dealing with the idea of decreasing and criticizing the industrial society and the metropolisation. You start with the organic agriculture and you’re led to politic actions. Recently, the fight is against a pellets factory which project to implant on the Plateau.

A lot of people from the market group of Gentioux where newcomers, as workers of Ambiance Bois were before them, that’s maybe why they pay a particular attention to welcome people on the Plateau. The life of a so sparsely populated area⁷ is dependant to new installations, especially in agriculture to occupy the landscape. So there’s a base of people very reluctant to “far right” populist ideas.

Nevertheless, ideas and actions of resistance have appeared on Millevaches before 1968 and the first wage of “returns to the land” and the will of repopulation. Of course, it was a maquis during the Second World War, but you could also note they have blocked a convoy on the way to the war in Algeria.

Since the end of the 19th century, the Plateau of Millevaches has developed a rural communism, very present, always perceptible in the votes at the elections. It was favoured (dixit Alain Corbin) by the close group spirit of little villages with common sheep paccage area and by the emigration of masons in Paris, who reported the Commune (Paris, 1871) ideas. The aim is not here to establish an historic filiation of libertarian Millevaches spirit but to focus on actual powerful alternatives, so I won’t list all the past rebel events. We can quote rural communism⁸ because several people refer to it to project an independent future for the territory.

⁵ The group name is « Paysan dès demain », situated in Limousin.

⁶ Arban, also in a specific status: SCIC, horizontal, permitting salaries and volunteers of the association to take decisions together.

⁷ It never exceeds 18 hab/km².

⁸ Rural communism, in particular on Millevaches, has been studied by Larid Boswell.

With libertarian ideas from 1968, today, these projections insist on the fact that future must be build with the basis people, that every body should participate to political decisions. The communist opposition to capitalism is increased with ecological-libertarian ideas of horizontality, and elected politicians of every trend have often difficulties to accept the irruption of an associative world and his claim of building territory. Indeed, administration function with a pyramidal organization: highest is the seat, highest is the power; and libertarians denounce this conception of society. « *Me, I claim my power on the air I breathe, on the water I drink, on landscapes, on the place where I leave* » tell me a newcomer from Ambiance Bois. Some people now assist at municipal council; it is often not appreciated by the mayor or the elected councillors.

Conflicts about the mode of democracy are palpable on Millevaches. In Gentioux, the actual mayor has pointed some newcomers as undesirable: the previous generation misunderstands decreasing desires of the youngest, especially the political will to escape the working world in peasant collectives. The oldest, who lived simply, find better themselves in criticize of technology and comfort. If we don't cross populist ideas on Millevaches, some tensions sometimes appear about administrative operations.

Deleron and Lulek describe an old one, in *Télé Millevaches* book:

« When Anne announced to the mayors, it was done, Télé Millevaches have filed its status and the association was officially created, the first question which goes out from their mouths was immediately :

-And who is the president?

-There is none.

-... ???

The mayors were not the only ones to be disconcerted. In the under-prefecture, the objector come to deposit the status was returned with assuring him that an association without president was illegal. A call to administration to explain, quoting some precedents, including an association whose status were deposit in the same services some years before: « It was a mistake ». The team doesn't disarm and come back to the charge. The under-prefect passes up the dossier to the prefecture, who send it to Paris at the ministry. From where, he comes back with the ministerial imprimatur: « They are right, the law from 1901 doesn't make the president mandatory » (p.48) [Deleron, Lulek, Pineau, 2006].

Status or other initiatives escaping from hierarchy are well known today, especially on Millevaches. But it was and it's always a strike. And there's a libertarian movement on Millevaches which never give up. They are now grouping and thinking how they can lead themselves the territory, as horizontally as possible, and escaping from the colonial status of the country. They want to be powerful and don't support imposed policies. After permit yourself to know how is composed the place, let's talk about the heart of the subject, the new and utopian alternatives policies.

2 – The claim of a local construction of future policies

Approaching the municipal election (2014), several people on Millevaches decide to group and proclaim that they want to deal themselves with the policies of the territory and write a basis document: “Propositions pour une plateforme commune de la montagne limousine” (Propositions for a commune platform of the limousine mountain). Amongst the first people which decide to group and engage themselves in this platform, we find a lot of people from libertarian associations, but also some citizens who desire to act on their living space, and also some mayors.

The writing document refers to some points and values that I have mention in the last paragraph. It is both a resumed text of the mythic values and ethic of Millevaches and a working document, an engagement for the future. You can find both facts and propositions. It is an ambitious and utopian plan, very significant when we want to describe and analyse the powerful initiatives on Millevaches. The will of being actors is here clearly expressed. The research of horizontal forms of power and of decisions making process leads all the thought of the platform.

The fact that people group to claim an horizontal mode of power, to claim its existence, the willing to anchor and diffuse it, is an evidence of the strength of the libertarian ideas on Millevaches. Elsewhere in the Region "Limousin", Millevaches is the referent place of anarchists.

In the introduction, the platform mention an ascertaining which remember us Armand Frémont discourse: "we are living a rare divorce between the lived territory and the institutional edifice". By the way, you can note all the negative implicit sense which is put in the word "edifice": it is a metaphor for the idea of verticality, of authority, of domination.

Armand Frémont, in his book (The Region: lived space), precise that a lived space is necessary the opposite to an aliened space. A lived space is those you definite by your presence, by collective actions on it, by links between people, you are an actor of it and the "lived space" has sense because you choose to travel it and to occupy it. It is a subjective space. As Frémont refers to liberty and alienation to qualify the space, we can directly find a similarity with the opening of the platform. The "lived territory" is a notion introduces by Frémont.

We stay in the oppositions pointed in the end of the last paragraph: local people actions and institutions. There is a kind of philosophic incomprehension which is reaching his summit. The base of opposition is dealing with authority or overture: because the space is on constant evolution with the inventions of people living on it, installing on it, it strikes with established habits of institutions. Which is instituted can't move anymore, and if it becomes laws rather than a museum (that is to say a history of reference), it becomes authoritarian. Of course, libertarian Millevaches spirit couldn't avoid a strike with institutions.

The text of the platform is presented in six points but we can distinguish two major ideas:

-A proclamation of an anti-metropolisation space which fights a social and geographic form of domination called "colonisation".

-An open and alternative space: open to people, to strangers, a place which needs new inhabitants, a place where you can experiment alternatives to capitalism.

An anti-metropolisation space

Paragraphs number 2 and 5 are on this line, called respectively "to get rid of our colonial status" and "build an outside from metropolis". The paragraph 2 precise that Millevaches is a zone of production, especially for wood and beef, that it exports raw materials and imports manufactured products. So they are only considered by the nation for their natural resources: a bed. In addition, all policies concerning the territory are taken in "metropolis": Limoges or Paris. So, the affirmation of the platform is: it is here and it is us, that must definite the territorial strategy". A proposition is to invite "ourselves" in the supra-territorial instances. That they do.

Another proposition is, for example, to buy some collective hectares of woods for local needs.

The paragraph 5 summon the rural communism as a tradition of Millevaches, an original politic expression that could be a starting point to find the quality of live that people are looking for. It purposes to tend to autonomy of the territory (a reduction of its dependence).

An open and alternative space

The four other paragraphs claim the original strength of the “Plateau”. If the anticolonial ones denounce the lack of democracy, these ones insist on the vitality of the place, it is nearly a call to come and live on the Plateau, to organise here a rebellion against capitalism and neo-nationalism.

These paragraphs are: “1. Opening as tradition”; “3. A certain idea of the richness”; “4. Repeople the territory”; “6. If we take up the challenge of “inventing here another life”, that is we should also invent here another way to organize”.

It is the opposite discourse from “far right” trends: they are saying strongly that they accept people on the territory. The first paragraph qualifies the opening as “non neutral” because migrations have installed several ideas: “blanquism, republicanism, red syndicalism, anti-militarism, resistance, cooperatives, internationalism, regionalism”. The two propositions which close the paragraph are already realised. It was firstly question to organize each year a festival of the limousine mountain, with some moments for local politic debates, in different villages. It is not so harmless because it sits libertarian ideas on public places and meets people who are not used with these ideas. Secondly, it plans to meet “friendly territories” elsewhere in the world. A group of people, for example, went to Chiapas (Mexico) and related their experience to others.

The paragraph 3 affirms that richness of the Plateau is not “development” but links between people and the proposition insists on local solidarity.

The paragraph 4 axes on an actual exodus from cities and purpose to organize the welcome on the Plateau and to see in visitors some potential future inhabitants and not some tourists that we should valorise.

Some people on the Plateau are very active in the reception of migrants, a “Cimade”⁹ antenna to receipt some ones on the Plateau was created, especially with Peyrelelade’s Cada¹⁰ center, center which welcome Kurdish refugees in 1993 during Iraq war. So this is really a rural place challenging with xenophobes propaganda and posing as an example by concrete actions. Indeed, several propositions of the platform are followed: it was not only a text for theory.

The final paragraph refers to popular education (learning the ones from the other) and claims for an appropriation by everybody of the public decisions with creation of villages comities or assemblies, which is done in some municipalities as Tarnac where municipal council is totally open to everybody.

A structured movement of alternatives experience is taking roots on Millevaches. The following of the platform and the organisation of the festivals requires reunions, these reunions are also a meeting of different libertarian movements. Different alternative associations on Millevaches claim to advance in the same direction: building a libertarian place. That’s why some people who deliberately want to escape from capitalism choose to live on the Plateau and thus explain their territorial choice.

Actually, the vitality of this movement has permitted the vast opposition against the industrial and financial project of a pellets factory. An argument of some tenants of the project is that a lot of opponents are not lawful because they are newcomers: a populist and reactive defence, the same that the one, elsewhere, who intend to reject migrants. So, in regards, there is a strong insistence on opening: people origin doesn’t import. All are actors and can participate to the construction of the territory. Indeed, after a considerable rural exodus, there are today a lot of people, living on the Plateau, which come from elsewhere... as elsewhere. But on the Plateau, there is an attraction due to the myth of an anarchism space and active libertarian newcomers are so installing.

In the pellets factory case, the xenophobant reaction is also a desperate tentative to legitimate an industrial project in front of a constituted opposition. Rather than newcomers, new ecologist ideas don’t consider production or certain jobs as desirable. Opposition, more than a nervous defence, is sat

⁹ Cimade : national association which deal with migrants aid.

¹⁰ Cada : Commission for an access to administrative documents

on theoretical basis and a organized reflexions which are in the platform, that is to say the built of a new peasant, anticapitalist, space with policies appropriation, connected to the world. The platform concludes with a universal sentence. It is written that the mastery of our destiny, the solidarity practices, inventions of occasions to create together, are a process that we must develop, push as far as possible, in every place where it is possible before extending in every place where it should be.

The following of the platform is an actual example of a new practice of democracy, more local, more direct...and without elected ones. It is associated to the will of permit the land to be desirable to each one. It represents a strong evidence of a rural took of power. And this will of local power claim its opening : it's clearly a different philosophy from autonomist and regionalist movements, which want to create a new little nation. The basis, here, is to build a turn of society.

We think to Ellul theory, to the anarchist critic of industrialism, which is more than a simple critic of capitalism and to Charbonneau critic of metropolisation. These authors are two references that several people give to me on Millevaches. So let's conclude with the philosophical or metaphysical ideas which have grown in front of the occidental comfort and which take us in a risk of the unknown, beyond enslavement.

3 – Au delà de l'asservissement (Beyond enslavement)

Habiter un espace aussi rural que la Creuse ou le Plateau de Millevaches porte à réfléchir sur les bienfaits du monde productiviste et industriel. On est justement bien content de n'en être pas entouré, de n'être pas envahi d'usines, de feux rouges, de ne pas vivre en suivant les ordres de la vie salariée. Le travail, notion présentée comme le graal absolu que nous devons poursuivre, est aujourd'hui remise en cause et on trouve des idées comme le salaire à vie (Bernard Friot) qui proposent de mettre à mal la forme d'asservissement induite par la recherche de travail pour vivre. C'est pourquoi on trouve sur le Plateau de Millevaches la constitution de collectifs : des personnes mettent en commun leur énergie, leurs idées, s'organisent, pour pouvoir bien vivre sans la nécessité du travail salarié. Le Dieu « emploi » alors a vécu. Avec lui, c'est le modèle industriel qui est contesté, celui qui a entraîné la création des gigantesques métropoles, celui qui veut produire toujours plus, qui nous serine que toute production industrielle ou technologique est forcément un progrès. Idée mise à mal très tôt par Jacques Ellul. Il nous rappelle que le modèle capitaliste va de pair avec le modèle industriel, qu'on ne peut pas avoir la société de production sans le capitalisme et il change en cela notre point de vue sur le confort. Le matérialisme nous laisse penser que le bonheur est purement matériel, le confondant avec l'aisance et légitimant d'une certaine façon la richesse ; Ellul nous raconte comment nos nouvelles technologies, nos produits manufacturés deviennent une aliénation. Cette théorie est parfois dure à entendre car elle nous porte à sortir de nous-mêmes, de notre contentement à la sécurité matérielle, de la satisfaction d'une bonne carrière. En plus de la critique marxiste qui montre que cette accumulation de richesse ne se fait pas sans créer des prolétaires, Ellul nous porte à questionner la désirabilité du productivisme.

Les religions nous ramenaient parfois à la condamnation de la cupidité ou de l'arrogance de la science et nous proposaient d'en sortir par la menée d'une vie honnête, juste, éthique mais nous offraient ainsi une vie finie, limitée, sans horizon parce que proclamant notre recherche d'ailleurs comme néfaste. La science nous sort en cela d'un enlèvement terrestre et nous offre un inconnu à conquérir perpétuellement. La société industrielle substitue à cet inconnu, à cet en-dehors de soi-même, un dépassement de la technique, des trouvailles matérielles toujours neuves et fait ainsi passer les moyens pour la fin. La production matérielle devient l'horizon à dépasser et non plus la connaissance abstraite. Comme la religion, et pour reprendre les mots de Kant, la société productiviste fait glisser les concepts de la raison pure dans notre espace préhensible ; stratagème pour nous asseoir dans une compréhension qui est une aberration. Et cela nous ramène alors à une forme d'aliénation par la conquête matérielle puisque tout devient préhensible dans le monde matériel : nous n'avons besoin de sortir de nous-mêmes que par la dernière prouesse technologique. On se laisse ainsi déposséder de notre faculté à créer des concepts, et on laisse le pouvoir aux fabricants.

La nécessité de créations et d'inventions soulignée dans la conclusion de la plateforme est ainsi une invitation à dépasser notre esclavage par la recherche d'ailleurs et d'altérité. Notre recherche de liberté de doit pas s'arrêter à une commande de progrès.

Cette conclusion inscrite dans la plateforme de la montagne limousine, en plus du fait qu'elle mentionne l'éducation populaire, devrait être une invitation pour la recherche universitaire à changer son cap libéral et à considérer plutôt sa vocation universaliste. Car à ne rechercher que sous caution, sous capitaux, à conditionner la parution du savoir aux codes des revues universitaires, on ne peut que le borner, le circonscrire à un cadre institutionnel, l'assujettir à la production matérielle. On lit, en effet, de moins en moins de fond théorique dans l'enceinte de l'université, et pour cause, la production d'idées y devient une question d'experts, de « docteurs », presque de carriéristes. Nous sommes proches de l'opposition entre associations et institutions soulevée par le milieu libertaire du Plateau de Millevaches.

La présence d'alternatives n'est pas qu'une présence concrète et matérielle.

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The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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