

## **Ecofeminism and the Limits of Radical Ecology**

**Article by Madeleine Sallustio**

March 20, 2025

By promoting self-sufficiency and localised farming, neo-peasant communities aim to offer an alternative vision to the capitalistic and productivist logic driving global agro-industrial expansion. Yet, despite recognising the similarities between the dynamics causing ecological collapse and those that marginalise women, these initiatives often reproduce the same male-dominated power systems. Even in progressive movements dedicated to degrowth, sexism can slowly creep in.

For a long time, European environmental and climate movements have been aware of the importance of considering social inequalities in their demands. Intellectuals, trade unionists, and political representatives have insisted on making ecology a social issue, attentive to the mechanisms of class hierarchy reproduction and the role of the techno-capitalist organisation in destroying ecosystems. However, while these approaches rightly highlight the central role of labour organisation in transition processes, they pay less attention to the risk of reproducing sexist power relations within radical ecological practices and projects.

This issue can be observed in the “back to nature” movement in Europe. Social scientists in various European countries have studied this phenomenon since the 1960s. Driven by environmentalist, anti-militarist, and libertarian anarchist movements, the protagonists of these initiatives are often young adults from urban backgrounds. They settle in rural areas to develop agricultural or livestock projects, sometimes aiming at food autonomy, but also with the goal of preserving peasant farming in the face of agro-industrial expansion. Today, amid climatic, political, and economic concerns, these struggles are also driven by survivalist motivations.

I have conducted participant observation fieldwork among self-managed agricultural collectives in France, Italy, and Spain. These communities of young adults, aged between 20 and 40, have chosen to develop a “peasant” lifestyle based on self-sufficiency and degrowth, where respecting ecosystems is as important as re-establishing a relationship with agricultural and artisanal labour, freed from the productivist logics and power dynamics characteristic of industrial wage labour.

The organic farming they practice is, in most cases, small-scale and based on polyactivity, self-consumption, and sometimes sales at local markets. Depending on the crops available on their land upon settlement, those involved in these projects engage in organic market gardening, goat or sheep farming for cheese production, and making bread, oil, jams, cider, or wine. They build and renovate old hamlets, carry out their own mechanical repairs, and cut wood for heating.

Beyond their drive to “do it themselves” regarding essential goods and services, these individuals are also proactive in organising cultural, festive, and activist events in the areas where they settle. Relationships with the local community can sometimes be tense depending on the region. Neo-peasants generally maintain a “low profile” to integrate into local social networks and demonstrate the benefits of their lifestyle and work without engaging in overt proselytism.

## **The ecofeminist proposition**

These self-sufficiency and collective living projects, which seek to embody “here and now” an alternative to industrial capitalism, are influenced by post-productivist libertarian ideas as articulated by philosophers André Gorz and Ivan Illich, and geographer Élisée Reclus. However, they are also part of the social experiments promoted by ecofeminism. This intellectual movement, which emerged in the 1960s, has seen a resurgence over the past decade, especially in France. It is based on the observation that the mechanisms of domination oppressing women are similar to those that exploit and destroy nature.

Ecofeminism has sometimes relied on spiritual and conservative assumptions, romanticising the supposedly intuitive connection between women and natural balance, and falling into essentialist and traditionalist narratives.

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By contrast, other strands of ecofeminism advocate for gender equality while seeking to elevate reproductive (domestic) labour to the same level as productive (paid) work. Highlighting the empowerment derived from self-sufficiency practices, these perspectives assign women a central role in constructing alternative ways of living. In this view, “peasant women” resemble a rehabilitated archetype of the “witch” – a knowledgeable, independent, and powerful figure capable of ensuring her own survival and that of her family or community, without relying on an employer or the state.

However, these are not the primary paths chosen by most communities I have encountered. With the ambition of task-sharing and horizontal labour organisation, domestic chores are, in theory, to be shared among all residents, who take turns cooking, cleaning, washing up, welcoming guests, or caring for animals. Yet this arrangement often fails to prevent the gendered division of labour and the social hierarchies that accompany it.

## **The “hard life” and ecological ableism**

To understand how neo-peasant lifestyles sustain sexist power relations, it is crucial to acknowledge the normative importance of work investment in these collective spaces – despite the absence of individual wages, as incomes are pooled or supplemented by various social benefits. Proactivity, availability, and flexibility in response to the demands of agricultural labour – much like in traditional farming – permeate all aspects of daily life. Working with “the living” and being as close to “nature” as possible entails submitting to the rhythms, cycles, and relentless demands of plants and animals. Agricultural labour is thus omnipresent even if it is neither industrial nor productivist, and it serves as a powerful legitimising force within these spaces.

This “work ethic” is partly due to the nature of farming but is amplified by the glorification of a “hard life”, a virilist normalisation of rural existence. This is also driven by the residents’ desire to integrate into predominantly male agricultural social networks, where physical endurance, self-sacrifice, and risk-taking are highly valued. Too much caution, taking medical leaves easily due to pain or injury, or refusing to

work without proper protection can be dismissed as “bourgeois intellectual” affectations – and call into question one’s legitimacy to identify as a “true”, “hardy” peasant.

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The low mechanisation of agricultural work, tied to a stated commitment to decarbonisation, as well as the physical inaccessibility of these locations, further demand significant bodily investment – lifting heavy loads daily (construction materials, grain sacks, hay bales, firewood), digging, and cutting trees. In this context, individuals with physical strength and stamina are particularly valued. Phrases like “he moves mountains,” “he’s a powerhouse,” “a stakhanovist”, or “a real workhorse” serve as indicators of one’s social utility, indispensability to the group, and in some cases, a survivalist readiness for societal collapse.

This valuation of physical endurance also results in less investment in domestic tasks. These activities, perceived as requiring less skill, technical expertise, or planning, are often delegated to transient visitors. Despite theoretical efforts to equate them with productive activities, domestic tasks are also less valued within local social networks. The “real” agricultural work is the work that is *seen* and *sold* – people are praised for the quality of their cheese, freshly rebuilt walls, or cleared plots, but never for eating a balanced diet, washing up regularly, or keeping a dormitory clean.

### **“What do you do with your days?”**

This situation marginalises women. Firstly, since most farming tools and agricultural resources are designed for male bodies, women must exert extra effort to prove they can meet the physical demands of this lifestyle. They often see their tasks as challenges they must pass to avoid being relegated to less physical (and thus less valued) work. As one woman told me:

*Every time, I end up in the kitchen during the haymaking. Then the guys come back and put their feet up at the table. (...) They say, “Yes, but it’s normal, everyone has their role, it balances out, we value your work.” Except I’d like to take part in the haymaking. (...) That’s all people talk about, we sing songs, it’s an event. Not like cooking, that’s all year round. (...) But the 25-kg bales are too heavy for me, I can’t get them on my back [and climb the slope], I just fall backwards. We could make 15-kg bales instead – it would mean more trips, but they’d be lighter. But some people resist the idea.*

Secondly, social dynamics often lead women to take on more domestic responsibilities despite a general commitment to equal task-sharing. This is particularly evident when they decide to have children. Pregnancy and motherhood are experienced as marginalising periods during which women step back from physical labour. To avoid appearing idle, they compensate by over-investing in domestic work.

*After my childbirth, I was completely exhausted, and I couldn’t bring myself to say, “No, stop, I don’t want to do anything anymore, I need to rest.” (...) It’s a pressure I’ve felt for years, where I try to maintain my level of productivity while breastfeeding and taking care of my children. (...) And the worst part is that this work is not recognised (...). One day, we were having a discussion in a meeting (...) and Javier responded aggressively, “You’re tired? But what do you do with your days?” (...) I know that’s what people say about me, but I thought about it, I wash the laundry for the house, I clean, I welcome the people who stop by, I do my rounds in the kitchen... And in fact, it’s a lot, but it’s not visible.*

Similar dynamics occur when women seek external employment, often due to family responsibilities (caring for elderly parents or children). As they spend less time on-site, they remain less informed about daily developments and improve their manual skills less, leading them to withdraw from collective decision-making on work priorities, investments, or production directions. Furthermore, their off-site jobs tend to be undervalued in neo-peasant discourse, reinforcing the perception that they need to “compensate” for their absence upon returning home. This, in turn, results in a more spontaneous assumption of invisible labour, reinforcing the idea that for women, “back to the land” is often closer to being “back to the house”.

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This marginalisation is exacerbated by their minority status within these collectives. The few women that live in these spaces are almost always present as part of a couple. And if their relationships end, these women are usually the ones who leave, being less integrated into both the collective and the surrounding village social life.

## **Radical ecology for all**

The climate emergency necessitates a reduction in consumption and a shift towards localised production models that minimise outsourcing and reliance on global supply chains. This means more labour – and that labour must be organised with an awareness of systemic power structures. “Doing it yourself” and reflecting on the implications of subsistence practices is an important political act.

However, existing neo-peasant initiatives reveal the broader challenges and limitations of post-productivist and communalist lifestyles. While these reflections emerge from the lived experiences of the people I met, they also resonate with broader political perspectives. Anarchist writer and philosopher Murray Bookchin’s communalism, for instance, insists that socio-ecological practices must not only aim to overcome capitalism but also challenge all forms of domination and oppression. This means moving beyond isolated practices of self-sufficiency to build genuinely emancipatory communities rooted in collective self-management and social justice. Achieving true equality in the face of climate change requires not only holding on to universality in our political projects or lifestyles – so they do not become privileged – but also establishing democratic mechanisms within them that amplify the voices of systematically marginalised groups such as women, disabled individuals, racialised people, or those from lower social classes.

We must aim not to discourage small-scale radical ecological initiatives but to emphasise that each social and ecological experiment we create – as essential as it is – unfolds within a constant, ever-evolving dialectic, shaped by the power dynamics of the moment and requiring continuous re-examination. These nuances, tentative experiences, debates, and ever-redefined hopes form the beating heart of a utopia that has never faded.

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Published March 20, 2025

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/ecofeminism-and-the-limits-of-radical-ecology/>

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