

## In Search of Temporal Ecology

Article by Alain Coulombel, Madeleine Sallustio

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Self-managed peasant collectives promise a more fulfilling way of organising living and work rhythms. But rural life is not without temporal constraints and compromise with others. Madeleine Sallustio, winner of the Political Ecology book prize 2023 in France, talks about the diverse experiences and struggles of these collectives, and how they can open utopian outlooks for the future.

**Alain Coulombel:** Your book *In Search of Temporal Ecology. Experiencing Liberated Time in Neo-Peasant Collectives* won the Political Ecology prize in France. How should the idea of temporal ecology be understood?

**Madeleine Sallustio:** Strictly speaking, temporal ecology has nothing to do with protecting the environment. In my research, we should understand ecology in the sense of a “milieu”, a “set” of temporalities, and assume that they interact, that there’s a variety of temporalities that individuals juggle with every day. A temporality is a relationship with time, and when talking about relationships with time, we may be referring to three different dimensions.

First of all, we might be talking about time horizons, which are the different relationships that people have with “moments in time”: the past, the present, and the future. In other words, how people think about the past, how they criticise or idealise it, how they understand the future, what their aspirations, fears, utopias, dystopias are. Second are the rhythms that govern life and work, with their cadences and repetitions, accelerations and decelerations. To study work rhythms is to consider the question of productivity, of what we’re supposed to get done in a given time. A third type of temporality is the way that work is organised, i.e. how individuals organise themselves and how they decide on their schedules (or have them imposed), how they represent time, how they collectively agree to think about time on a common basis, or don’t.

So, the original idea for this book was to say that these different temporalities overlap, and sometimes we have to prioritise some over others, like finding someone to look after our kids when we have to work. Once we acknowledge that there are different temporalities, we can also look at which temporalities prevail over others in society. In my work, I set out to show that the temporalities associated with earning a wage in a techno-capitalist context are imposed on the lives of human beings. All of our everyday temporalities have been organised to prioritise working time to the point that we must make our other everyday temporalities slaves that we pursue around the edges, after work, at weekends, on public holidays, and again: it depends on work.

With his concept of temporal ecology, William Grossin reminds us first that we all live in a multiplicity of temporalities. It’s something that was not necessarily obvious because, in traditional anthropology, there has been a tendency to think that each social group has its own way of thinking about time. For example, so-called “Westerners” might think that everyone shares linear time that is oriented towards the future and innovation, one that is permanently accelerating and devaluing the past. It’s not wrong, because there’s lots of work showing fairly clearly how these temporalities tend to dominate our existences, but

it's an approach that limits the representation of the diverse existences found in society. For example, I think that a French farmer, regardless of her temporal culture, has much in common with other farmers on the planet in that she has an appreciation for the temporal cyclicity in his work.

Acknowledging multiple temporalities can lead to demands for social justice. Why not try and better organise these temporalities to achieve existential and social balance? That is what William Grossin's concept of temporal ecology promises: the idea that, for each of us, there might be a satisfactory way of deciding how to organise temporalities.

My hypothesis is that this is exactly what people who join self-managed neo-peasant collectives are looking for: they are after a way of organising their living and working rhythms in a manner that is democratic and satisfies their desire for individual and collective emancipation.

**In your work, you emphasise both the neo-romantic vision that sometimes defines these neo-rural communities, as well as the very strong, farming-specific temporal constraints exerted on these collectives. How do these communities collectively manage the temporal constraints associated with agriculture?**

This is why the title of my book is *In Search of Temporal Ecology*. These collectives are experimenting, searching, and evolving in their quest for well-being. They are people who have been on a journey before they arrive in these collectives. They have travelled extensively abroad or in France, they have sometimes been WWOOFers, might have lived in squats, or been part of one occupation movement or another.

When they turn up at these collectives, the narrative is very much: "I've finally found my way, I'm going to live here and enjoy liberated work; in fact, I'm no longer even going to talk about "work", I'm going to talk about "activity" instead, because work has a negative connotation of enslavement, of no choice, of submission to schedules that are beyond our control." These people are young, too, mostly aged between 25 and 35. So they're people who sometimes idealise the supposed harmony of farm work without always having had practical experience of life in the countryside. At times, some of them overestimate the environmental sustainability of living there, whereas when you've lived in the country for a few years, you realise that you are very dependent on the car and other things. The narrative slowly changes.

In other words, despite their social critiques of work, the more they experiment with this way of life, the more they become aware of the pressures that stem from the temporality of agricultural work. When you decide to have goats and to make milk and cheese, it entails regularity, being active, getting rid of weeds, the brambles that keep on invading paths. You become part of a temporality linked to the seasonal cycle, of a process of perpetual renewal that can sometimes be discouraging.

*Being part of a collective informally reproduces all sorts of norms about work, and if you don't follow them, you risk either a telling off or marginalisation within the group.*

All of this deromanticises the vision of balance, harmony, idleness, "everything grows on its own". People who hoped to balance the temporalities of farming with, for example, the temporalities of making art, find

that “temporal ecology” isn’t that easy. Being part of a collective also informally reproduces all sorts of norms about work, and if you don’t follow them, you risk either a telling off or marginalisation within the group.

**Passivity is looked upon negatively in these collectives.**

That’s right, they can’t allow people not to work. It is never formalised, there are never working hours, you never clock in and clock out. There are of course clear meeting times for collective work or similar, but people are never asked to work this many hours a week, there are no employment contracts. There are no salaries, either. Despite this vagueness, people are expected to be proactive, to not only be independent but to take the initiative too. And people’s proactiveness and receptiveness have a real impact on their legitimacy, especially when it comes to collective decision-making. They are people who join these collectives so that they no longer have to distinguish between their everyday life and their work; they no longer want to distinguish between the weekend and their work days; they want to fully identify with all aspects of life, and their work to be something that represents them. And, as a result, they end up working all the time.

These are the conclusions people come to after a few years of collective life. They realise the extent to which all they do is work. When you walk into a room, there are always herbs drying, flowers drying, secateurs in the bathroom. You’re always in work clothes, always getting dirty. It’s hard to distinguish house clothes from casual clothes and casual clothes from work clothes.

**So, if there aren’t any rules, how do they manage the tensions that inevitably arise over how the workload is shared, for example?**

It varies a lot between collectives and depends on their maturity and the extent to which they are surrounded by other collectives who can provide them with tools and ideas, anticipate problems, etc. I’ve seen collectives that are quite different from one another. There have been collectives that were very spontaneous, that refused to organise themselves and that counted on people naturally managing themselves, only to run into fairly fraught problems. The symptom of a collective in which there’s lots of tension is a high churn rate, when the people in it keep changing.

There are other collectives, however, that have a fairly stable population: this could be because they are very close friends, or because they bought something together. As soon as people buy collectively, things become more stable than in places that are owned by organisations or rented. If, for example, the property belongs to a long-established organisation where everyone is welcome, it will see much greater turnover than a place that people have put their own money into.

There are no set reasons why people leave. There are some who quit collectives because it’s too much work, but there are also those who go because people don’t take it seriously enough. All things being equal, it also depends on the ambitions that people have for these collectives. Some want to be able to earn a wage from it and officially become farmers but, if the collective doesn’t allow this, they’ll go and do their experiment somewhere else. And, vice versa, some are there for the human experience, not to become farmers.

But just because work isn’t strictly controlled, it doesn’t mean that there’s no organisation. Quite the opposite: people spend their time making collective decisions on what they want to do, how they want to do it, with whom, for whom, at what price, etc. They develop all sorts of tools to help make decision-making horizontal, to ensure that everyone works and to prevent people doing nothing. I’m thinking, for example, about household chores, which are very often put onto a chart where people have to put their

name down so that everyone does their bit. But in reality, that's rarely what happens. It remains something that's very gendered, with women doing most of the housework, which also has consequences for their integration into collectives.

There are people who come from squats who say, "Watch out for gender domination: it's happening in these places. Let's deal with it!" They will, for example, suggest single-sex working parties so that women organise themselves and teach one another how to use tools that are often exclusively used by men, like chainsaws.

### **What's the average size of these collectives?**

These collectives range from 5 to 25 people; it also depends on the number of visitors. These are places where size fluctuates a lot. There is a core, but then there are sometimes mass exoduses or mass arrivals. I know that in France there are collectives that are even bigger. I'm thinking of those collectives founded in the 1960s, which can be pretty large.

### **Have you been able to compare the communities of the 1960s with the neo-peasant communities that you've observed in the field today? Did they face the same challenges?**

I came across a diary published by a collective that I knew, written by the founders in the 1960s. In this diary, you can see that the issues they faced at the time are akin to those that I observed in contemporary collectives. Questions regarding relationships of domination, gender, work, productivity, choices about what to buy and eat... Romantic relationships too. In fact, these things are fairly similar to what might happen today.

There are differences, of course, such as the financial fragility of past collectives, which is not the same at all. Today, the people that I've met have an RSA [*revenu de solidarité active* – a social welfare benefit], at the very least. They also benefit from the opening up of the countryside, which wasn't the case before. They aren't pioneers: they're in an environment where there are already potentially "allied" networks, where organic farming isn't something eccentric. For the people moving into neo-peasant collectives today, the impact is less costly from a social point of view and in terms of the financial tools and resources that they can draw on. That said, these settlements are taking place in a context where land prices have dramatically increased, property and agricultural markets are saturated, and there is high tourist pressure. This changes things for initiatives aiming to do away with private property: they become tricky to set up.

### **You mentioned how these communities are networked. How does this come about?**

They share their experiences – and more. There's a sort of activism tourism, which means activists move between causes a lot, they keep up to date with what's happening in the ZADs in Bure, in the Pyrenees, in the Alps. Individuals carry this news themselves: sometimes they go and take part in big events or protests to provide support, to learn, to meet people. They might provide sustenance by, for example, taking unsold produce from the market to a squat that's part of the movement. They may also supply equipment or labour to other neo-peasants. For example, they might say: "We've got a processing facility that meets regulations. Why don't you come and make your chestnut cream here? It would allow you to lower your production costs." They run lots of collective projects too. Neo-peasant collectives are also places where, because they have space, there are often big parties, concerts, *conférences gesticulées* [informal talks that are a cross between lectures and one-person plays]. Political meetings might also be held there, be they for national or international movements. When the Zapatistas came to Europe, for example, some of these places hosted them.

*Focusing on the present opens up utopian outlooks for  
the future.*

This idea of a network is incredibly important because I think it's part of the political utopia that many believe in: the idea that by networking, developing solidarity practices, by staying informed, you can weave a fabric of resistance, or even revolution, although people will never admit as much. There is constant swinging between utopia and the dystopia of a future world that does not augur well economically, socially, or democratically, with the rise of the far right across the globe. The people I've met are quite pessimistic about their chances, their levers for change. What we have are political contradictions, but they make things happen: the utopian and dystopian temporalities interact and, in so doing, make these practices exist in the present. If they were that defeatist, they wouldn't put so much energy into these initiatives. Why wear yourself out improving self-management if we're all going to be dead in 50 years' time anyway? Focusing on the present opens up utopian outlooks for the future.

**Do they regard their community experiment as an act of resistance against the prevailing model today?**

Yes, absolutely. It wouldn't necessarily be expressed by everyone in the same way and one of the things that I've had to reckon with is that I came projecting my own expectations. I was confronted with the distinctiveness of these collectives who want to escape political labels or a political programme with a universal vision of the stages that a society must go through to become fair and egalitarian. They have freed themselves from this; they avoid asking themselves these sorts of questions. It can be very irritating for a Marxist like me who tries to think on a more global level, who dreams of a cohesive model of society in which the working classes could unite.

But these initiatives exist and, as one of the people I spoke to for my book said, "at least it exists, and it's a quest, it's a search; there are spaces where people can ask themselves questions and experiment." I think that in the contemporary political landscape it's significant that there are people able to organise, to create an alternative temporal universe amid these dark, foreboding clouds, to have someone who says, "right, we're going to take the helm and try to go this way." These micro-experiments exist. They make the present very thick and rich, one that is shaping a whole generation of people. Perhaps these initiatives must be unstable, perhaps they are destined to be fleeting, but once people experience them, they become part of the reality.

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