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Refusal as a critique of the order of things

Bifurcations and utopian longings in contemporary rural France

Jérôme Tournadre

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS)

Affiliated to The Institut des Sciences sociales du Politique

(University Paris Nanterre, University Paris Saclay, CNRS)

jetournadre@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This text questions the 'theoretical hegemony' that seems to characterize the concept of resistance when it comes to assessing a challenge to the social organization or its guardians. Refusal, which is presented here as a form of constructive defiance, in fact proves to be just as relevant for this purpose, particularly when it comes to understanding collective actions that are non-confrontational but express a critique of the order of things. This is what the ethnography of utopian collectives established in the French countryside tends to show. The women and men who compose them, individually driven by the desire to 'no longer play the game', slip collectively, on certain occasions, into the interstices of the social order, acting together in order to refuse certain of its social, political and economic norms. Their ways of doing things and the social relationships they then form can prefigure certain features of a 'different future'.

Keywords: refusal, interstitial movements, commons, collective action, collapsism, utopia.

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Browsing the summaries of social science journals or the catalogues of university presses in sociology, political science or anthropology reveals the almost ubiquitous nature of the concept of 'resistance' within these disciplines. A quick study of political and activist imaginaries, in the West and far beyond it, would certainly lead to the same observation: the status of resistance as a 'crucial concept for any mode of liberatory, revolutionary, or transformative politics' seems incontestable (Olson and Zamalin 2024:4).

In the context of the social sciences of the political, this 'theoretical hegemony' (Brown 1996: 729), observed since the 1980s (Ortner 1984), has certainly been accentuated by the rise in power of the concept of 'everyday resistance' at the end of that same decade. By bringing together acts as diverse as 'foot-dragging, dissimulations, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats, and so on' (Scott 1989: 34), the pioneering work of James Scott has decoupled resistance from direct confrontation and therefore made it trickier to define. Subsequent developments have confirmed this movement: under the guise of understanding an ever more 'complex' phenomenon (Baaz, Lilja, Schulz and Vinthagen 2023), the profusion of concepts that borrow from the notion of resistance now leads to detecting its presence in the slightest signs of the contestation of power.

The 2010s, however, saw the emergence of another register of protest. For several years, in fact, a field of study has grown up around refusal (see in particular Simpson 2014; McGranahan 2016; Prasse-Freeman 2022). If resistance is an act of direct opposition to, or a reaction against,

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a particular authority (Hollander and Einwohner 2004), refusal involves a disavowal, a rejection or, more definitely, the desire not to recognize a power or some of its regulatory measures.

Refusal is distinct from resistance; but nor is it to be confused with the other form of critique known as 'exit' or, in a more sophisticated version, the 'revolutionary exodus' theorized by Italian autonomists in the 20th century and consisting of a massive defection, a group exit from the capitalist structure in order to weaken it (Graeber 2004: 60). To refuse is indeed to say 'no', but it is something else as well (McGranahan 2016: 319). The aim of refusal is to *produce* something. It 'invents new forms connectivity and generates new worlds and modes of being political' (Nyers 2024 : 389), separate from the zone of influence of what is being rejected. It is thus akin to a sort of constructive defiance, which refers to a two-step process, when resistance is an 'act' (Seymour 2006) or a 'practice', most often 'subaltern' in nature (Baaz, Lilja, Schulz, and Vinthagen 2016: 142; Koefoed 2017: 43).

Some people may wonder if refusal is not just another item on the long list of social science concepts. Recent studies, it is true, have shaped or updated concepts that, at first glance, would make it possible to do without this one. One example is 'exilic resistance' (Grubacic and O'Hearn 2016) or, even more, 'constructive resistance' (Lilja 2021; Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen 2023; Wiksell and Henriksson 2023): these writers' definitions overlap quite largely with those put forward by the theorists of refusal. Majken Jul Sørensen says of 'constructive resistance' that it emerges when 'people start to build the society they desire independently of structures of power' (2016: 57). While they favour a dynamic approach to resistance, these conceptualizations are nevertheless part of a movement which, because it tends to 'reconsider' borders (see inter alia Alexandrakis 2016), risks making this object too malleable and diluting its specificity.

Through this article, on the contrary, I have chosen to draw relatively clear boundaries between the different forms that protest can take (though this does not exclude areas of friction

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and overlap). I do so starting in particular from the idea that resistance is above all a head-on engagement. Such a definition would not help to explain what I am about to address throughout these pages: initiatives and practices that could be described as discreet[1] because they are neither confrontational nor do they voice particular demands.

Since the mid-2010s, the field of refusal studies has welcomed a large number of works on groups that are often assimilated to minorities or treated as such by administrative and political powers that they are generally unable to stand against, whether Tibetan refugees (McGranahan 2018), exiled Rohingya (Prasse-Freeman 2023), Indigenous women (Flowers 2015), migrants (Newhouse 2021), Kahnawà:ke Mohawks (Simpson 2014), etc. Refusal then proved to be an appropriate tool for understanding the meaning and nature of the struggles led by these populations. More specifically, its 'dialectic of negation and affirmation' (Nyers 2024: 388) shed light on their stance regarding the imposition or, conversely, the non-recognition of statuses, sovereignty, identity or, more simply, citizenship. It has indeed shown that these struggles could not be reduced to mere rejection but were also openings to 'other trajectories, other paths to success, other affiliations' (Newhouse 2021: 183).

While it explicitly sets out to contribute to this literature, the present article nevertheless introduces a more marked interest in the connection between the individual and the collective. Such an approach, which agrees a priori with the expectations of ethnography, helps one to understand in a perhaps more precise way the meaning given to the experiences that I study and the trajectories that have led to them. What we will discover here is akin to collective actions fuelled by various individual expressions of no longer 'playing the game' (Simpson 2014: 25).

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1 This is obviously not always the case with the forms taken by refusal. We see this particularly from the episodes, frequently met with in this literature, in which documents that impose an unwanted nationality are rejected. Refusal then very often expresses a clear element of protest, which helps to dramatize it.

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But the main focus here will be to observe refusal in contexts other than those that have been privileged until now; contexts that are often the domain of resistance studies. It will be shown that refusal can carry a broad critique of the order of things, whether they be of political, of course, but also social and economic nature. And this same critique can above all be made by individuals and collectives who, unlike what we've seen so far in studies of refusal, cannot be primarily defined as socially and politically dominated.

We will look, more precisely, at two of these groups which, in France, are formed in the countryside, where they try to define a *different* life. This phenomenon of going 'back to the land' or 'to nature', found in other countries apart from France, is not new and has been particularly well documented from the 1970s onwards (even if we could easily trace this migratory movement back to the anarcho-individualist 'colonies' in late nineteenth-century Europe). The social sciences[2] have regularly examined the case of the women and men who have chosen to escape from urban worlds to settle in rural worlds and adopt, often without prior experience, lifestyles that are mainly agrarian and constitute a 'neo-rurality'[3] (Wilbur 2013). What sets the collectives studied here apart, however, is the way they are marked by a collapsism that has been in full resurgence since the 2010s. Their members, whom we here encounter after they have decided to 'change their lives', are in fact intimately convinced that a civilizational collapse is underway or imminent. However, this does not prevent them from defending a utopian goal. We will see how both bifurcations and utopian longings can be understood as two expressions of refusal.

'Everyday utopias'

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2 For France, see the pioneering study by Léger and Hervieu (1979).

3 The term certainly needs to be used with caution. It implies a way of living in the countryside characteristic of new arrivals (Saumon and Tommasi 2022: 7), even though there is no real evidence of this – especially as what is associated with 'neo-rurality' now covers a range of disparate experiments, from eco-villages to spiritual communities and from punk-style rural squats to neo-peasant collectives.

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Because we need "concrete histories to make any concept come to life" (Tsing 2015: 66), this article will be based mainly on the ethnographic study of two experiments in which the same refusal can be found.

My encounter with these two collectives came about more or less by chance. I discovered the first through the website of the cooperative with which it was at the time associated. A simple electronic message, sent in the course of September 2019, allowed me to meet, in Paris, one of its instigators and to negotiate the possibility of going to study this experiment in the field, in south-west France. It was during one of these periods of immersion there that I heard about the second collective. A couple of wwoofers[4] had just spent a few days there. Informed of the investigation that I was then conducting within the first group, both of them felt that I might perhaps be interested in seeing this other experiment for myself. A first contact was therefore established through them.

The approach for which I opted led me to take direct part in the activities which comprise – or did comprise – the daily life of these two collectives: various kinds of work on agricultural land, attending meetings where decisions are taken, sharing in collective meals, etc. This method, which is after all traditional in ethnography, allows one to join in fully with the phenomenon under study (Wacquant 2004). It also makes it possible to observe the most everyday gestures and to vary the speaking situations. Usually, in fact, the discussions that would start in the middle of a session of transplanting seedlings or grafting fruit trees help to refine what I can gather in the context of more formal interviews. As for the latter, I conducted nearly forty of them, of the semi-directed type, between November 2019 and July 2024 (lasting from 45 to 120 minutes each).

[4] Wwoofing is a global movement based on relatively simple, non-monetary exchange: for a few days or a few weeks, individuals – woofers – offer their labour to farms and agrobiological operators in return for food and lodging and access to agricultural know-how.

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However, a number of essential things maintained the relative distance that generally characterizes participant observation. First of all, although endowed with a marked sensitivity to environmental issues, I have no opinion on the possibility of civilizational collapse. I never hid this from my interlocutors, who, in return, never tried to convert me. On the other hand, the discussions I've had with these well-informed people about the state of the planet[5] have undoubtedly sharpened my knowledge of living worlds in recent years. This certainly played a significant role in my decision to focus more clearly on environmental studies.

After nearly a decade of studying poor people's movements in the Global South, I undertook, with this research conducted in the country where I live, to observe individuals who are relatively close to me socially and sociologically. Most of them are graduates, and more often than not from the middle classes (even though the boundaries of this group are always difficult to define). However, all of them decided, a few months or years before I met them, to give up what was then their life and start a new one. This rupture in trajectories that, until then, were not so different from my own, has never ceased to intrigue me. The fact that my object intertwines both familiarity and unfamiliarity has certainly influenced my approach. I sometimes had to position myself intimately in relation to what I was hearing or observing, bringing my reflexivity into play even more acutely than usual (by asking myself, among other things, whether I would have been capable of making such decisions). As a result, I have certainly been particularly careful to maintain the necessary distance when collecting and processing certain data, such as life stories, for example.

The members of the first collective claim to form a 'commune' and not a 'community': in this way, they want to emphasize that everyone maintains an autonomous private sphere. This commune was formed during the second half of the 2010s, on commons that, at least during the first years, included two self-managed hostels and just under ten hectares of arable land. Several

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5 I have developed this point in more detail elsewhere.

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dozen people from the four corners of France joined the commune over the years. The activity of this collective is marked by different gatherings, from harvest on Tuesdays to running a market stall on Wednesday mornings, including various group meetings relating to the very functioning of the commune. Each month, twenty to thirty people also meet for half a day to decide on the actions they need to take to develop the project. The rest of the time is devoted to growing seedlings, transplanting them, mulching the soil with organic matter in order to nourish and protect it, weeding, building collective shelters in the fields, transforming the harvested produce into jars of soups, sauces and other blanched vegetables, etc.

The original dream, however, faded. Following a certain number of crises and just as many rebounds, departures and rejoinings, a core of individuals opted to reorient the association towards a cooperative model bringing together more individual projects. The fact remains that for nearly five years, dozens of women and men have, more or less consciously, experimented in this context with relationships and social practices potentially opening onto a 'different future' (Descola 2019).

The second experiment is being carried out about thirty kilometres away by half a dozen people who have bought up a hamlet and aim to achieve autonomy in food, energy and finances. As in the first collective, the members of this 'neo-village' (since that is how its occupants present it) do not come from the region. Most of them met via digital networks. Nowadays, most of their time is devoted to developing food crops for the present (and also for the future, via the creation of a cannery for the reserves provided), taking care of the animals (goats, sheep, chickens), renovating the hamlet's buildings in order to rent them out, and finding their place within the local social landscape. This last dimension sees them taking an active part in the events punctuating the life of the locality on which the neo-village depends, establishing mutual aid relationships with the residents or getting involved in certain local struggles (against the installation of photovoltaic panels on agricultural land, for example).

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The average age within the neo-village is around fifty years old, while the commune's inhabitants have mainly been in their thirties. but beyond this discrepancy, their daily activity is thus organized around moments and ways of doing things on the fringes of the dominant trend in current society (hence the regular tendency to describe them as 'alternative'), whether it be the use of commons, agricultural practices respectful of the living world or, as we will see later, the use of free pricing and exchange in some of their relationships with 'the outside world'.

Their members almost unanimously insist on the utopian dimension of their common project. This link with utopia is not in itself surprising, as this notion has experienced a certain comeback in recent years. This is all the more true when it can attest to a 'potential for achievement' (Elias 2009), which allows it to counter the traditional accusations of naivety and daydreaming. So utopia must be 'concrete', 'real', 'realistic'; and, perhaps even more, it must find its place in the daily lives of individuals. Defined in this way, utopia is less akin to an ideal, which it is in the most traditional sense, than to a set of practices which organize ordinary life and are oriented towards the definition of what *will need to be*, or *should be,* done. This logic drives the two collectives studied, which are close to 'everyday utopias' (Cooper 2013): the people involved in them emphasize what is 'doable and viable' given the context, while anticipating 'beyond and other to what they can currently realize' (Ibid.: 4).

The gaze of these women and these men is resolutely turned towards the future, which gives a prefigurative dimension to what they do together (on prefigurative politics, see, inter alia, Monticelli 2022). 'We have thought about the world we would like for those who will replace us when we are no more,' as the members of the Neo-village put it in their founding document. The point is to 'build alternative futures in the present and to effect political change by not reproducing the social structures' that are the objects of their critique (Fians 2022). Prefigurative politics consists, more precisely, in creating on a small scale the change that they want to see come about in tomorrow's society (Breines 1980). The political, economic and social model

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that emerges is therefore directly the result of 'experiments and lessons' (Martell 2023: 1). And this is exactly what one finds within the Commune and the Neo-village, whose members regularly resort to the ideas of 'experiment' and 'trial run' to explain what they are doing or would like to do, while affirming their desire to serve as examples to others.

Between hope and anxiety

While they are seeking to build *tomorrow*'s world *today* (Raekstad and Gradin 2020), these collectives are not being driven solely by an ideal of emancipation. Their utopian and prefigurative orientation appears to be as closely linked to a desire for socio-political change as to an imperative resulting from the global context. This tension is clearly evident in the almost ambivalent relationship to the countryside that this type of collective develops.

To begin with, these individuals regularly justify their decision to settle in the countryside by the existence of a rural harmony a thousand miles away from the alleged artificiality of the urban world from which some of them nevertheless come. The countryside *naturally* appears as a 'land of possibilities, protective of what is threatened by the economy (the family, the environment, solidarity, work)' (Snikersproge 2022: 113). This is why it would certainly be more accurate to speak of a 'desire for the countryside' (Hervieu-Léger and Hervieu 2023) or a desire for rurality rather than of 'going to nature' or to 'the land'. More generally, we again encounter here the critique of a certain idea of modernity – a critique that is consubstantial with environmentalism (Cronon 1995) but that, above all, drove the utopian migrations towards the European and North American countryside at the end of the 1960s. These movements rather faithfully embodied the 'Great Refusal' of consumerist capitalism and its civilization, in the words of Herbert Marcuse (1969). For this figure of the Frankfurt School, protest could no longer be embodied by a working class integrated into the system, but rather by political groups that carried a 'new sensibility', such as hippies, Black activists, or rebellious students. The Great

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Refusal was particularly valuable for raising awareness that it was possible to live outside of consumerist capitalism (see Dawson 2016: 110-120).

However, unlike those who preceded them, my respondents believe that moving to the countryside is justified less by an ideological bias than by a global context whose expected developments seem to leave them with no other choice. These two collectives illustrate quite well a current trend in migration into French rural areas. Since the 2010s, part of this movement has been tinged with ecological anxiety. The countryside started to appear as a refuge against predicted disasters (climate disruption, wars over natural resources, epidemics, famines, etc.) and, because it makes one's place of life coincide with one's place of subsistence, as offering protection against a collapse of the supply chains on which cities depend. Moving there is thus the result of a rational decision.

Such a situation is, in large part, to be compared to the resurgence experienced by collapsism in the West since the beginning of the century, as the reassuring discourse of sustainable development lost its coherence in the face of the ever more undeniable rise in environmental perils. This phenomenon seems to have been particularly marked in France in the 2010s (Chalaye 2023), where collapsology became established. Popularized by various essays published in the 2010s,[6] this effective form of 'popularizing scientific ecology' (Tasset 2022) provides powerful graphics and statistical data to announce the disintegration of thermo-industrial society under the effect of different global crises (environmental, financial, energy-related, geopolitical, etc.).

The members of these two groups therefore share, albeit to varying degrees, the *conviction of the inevitable*: what exists – whether contemporary society as a whole, certain of its elements, such as the urban model or public institutions, or more simply what most people refer to as 'the

6 The work by Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens *How Everything can Collapse,* sold over 100,000 copies when its original French version came out in 2015. Most French news magazines devoted front pages to collapsology and its different spokespersons in the second half of the 2010s.

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system', that is to say everything which, politically, socially and economically, is seen as responsible for the ills of the world – is doomed, if not to collapse, at the very least to sink into a dysfunctional state that makes it unsustainable.

This conviction underlies the 'intentional acting together' (Neveu 2015: 9) which turns these groups into collective actions: from its foundation, the project of the commune was to allow those who joined it to 'organize in the face of collapse', while one of the founding documents of the neo-village presented it as a 'trans-collapse' project, intended to alleviate the 'pain' felt in the face of the 'devastation overwhelming nature and human beings.' For most members of these collectives, one of the challenges is therefore to learn 'to feel at home in the anthropocene' (Vine 2018). This approach justifies the adoption of lifestyles that are necessary because the (imminent) future will impose them anyway. Thus, if members of the Neo-village are gradually trying to get by without their cars, this is not so much in order to reduce their carbon footprint (even if they are sensitive to this issue) as because they are convinced that it is necessary to prepare for the fact that these vehicles will soon be useless in a collapsed world without oil.

Certain aspects of these modes of existence, however, may prove desirable insofar as they help to alleviate the sense of helplessness that some people have felt upon encountering theories of collapse.

Socially typified concerns?

An alternative petite bourgeoisie?

In France, so-called 'alternative' experiments have long been associated with a somewhat bohemian marginality, embodied by individuals whose social status has declined. However, things have evolved since the beginning of the 21st century, as the climate emergency became more evident. A certain common sense now tends increasingly to associate representatives of the educated middle classes with such experiments. This trend became even more accentuated

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after the start of the Covid epidemic, as a large number of media outlets started to highlight well-educated individuals who decided overnight to break away from their comfortable urban lives and settle in the countryside, turning back to manual activities rich in 'meaning' and, more generally, 'reconnecting with nature'.

Presented in this way, this population is reminiscent of the 'new petite bourgeoisie' which, in the 1960s and 1970s, enthusiastically played its role as a vanguard in struggles over the art of living (Bourdieu 1984: 354- 365). The time has come, it seems, for the emergence of a *new* 'new petite bourgeoisie' (Parenthoën 2013), guided mainly by the feeling of belonging to the Earth. The hypothesis is attractive insofar as a number of studies highlight the greater appetite for environmental issues of populations relatively endowed with educational and economic capital, at least in the West (Carfagna et al. 2014). Better access to information, but also a concern for social distinction and, perhaps above all, a greater propensity to conform to social norms – as has happened in eco-citizenship – explain this situation.

That the type of collective that interests us here is less marked by ecological sensitivity than by anxious environmentalism does not seem to undermine this analysis. Many of the people I meet spontaneously associate their social background with the middle classes, and sometimes even with relatively privileged strata of the latter. Some also openly regret the way a certain restrictive homogeneity affects this type of collective. One often comes across the image of the 'group of ordinary white people', to use the explicit phrase used by Justine, who was there in the early days of the commune. Her father was an industry executive and her mother a doctor, and she introduces herself as a painter: 'All the same, we were all white and educated. We're not going to hide our faces: if we're able to take an interest in collapsology and question our lives, it's because we're privileged.'

The young woman is here taking up a criticism more generally addressed to the shifting and amorphous area where actions linked to the issue of the environmental question take shape.

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This criticism focuses on the low numbers of non-white and/or working-class people in their ranks. An episode taken from the neo-village's first months of existence may perhaps shed light on some of the causes of this phenomenon. The first members of this group had originally set their sights on a plot of land covering several hectares, the only building being a huge barn that needed to be renovated from top to bottom. The prospect of this titanic project, however, made one of the project leaders, born around forty years earlier in a small village in the Madagascar hinterland, react with some asperity. Sandra, her feet planted in the mud, while the whole group was inspecting the land and planning the work schedule, stated quite forcefully that for nothing in the world would she return to what she had known during those years spent in Madagascar: the dirt floors of the houses, unpredictable access to water and electricity, leaky roofs, etc. And in fact, without being as bad as total deprivation, the existence which characterizes collectives imbued with ecological consciousness moves by definition within the limits of what is necessary. Consumption is thus drastically reduced. Housing conditions are sometimes similarly affected, as is the taste for leisure which characterized people's lives before. This 'ecology of austerity' (Huber 2022: 38), characteristic of those who have been able to enjoy the advantages of market society and now derive from it a form of 'environmental guilt' (Guillibert 2023: 164), definitely struggles to attract individuals engaged in upward social mobility. However, in France at the start of the 21st century, the middle classes with an immigrant background are most often the product of this trajectory.

A more nuanced social and political reality

Should we therefore deduce from this that post-apocalyptic (Cassegård and Thörn 2022), collapsist or collapsological discourse is addressed above all 'to people whose world is still holding more or less together, come what may, and who enjoy a certain level of comfort - in short, people who have something to lose' (Thoreau and Zitouni 2018)? Things are obviously

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more nuanced in reality, and we can certainly see the influence of the forms taken by these collectives, which are not far from constituting two ideal-types of these rural utopias.

As with many eco-places that have emerged in France since the start of the 21st century, a person's entry into the Neo-Village involved, at least initially, investing capital, as this was essential to the acquisition of real estate. By the force of circumstances, this type of experiment therefore involves a social filter, albeit one tempered by a system of adjustments in the case of this collective: those who have greater assets contribute in greater proportions to the budget reserved for operational and investment expenses. The situation is significantly different within the commune, where there is *relative* social diversity. Over the years, I have met women and men who, a few months or a few years previously, were engineers, a senior manager in the textile industry, special needs teachers, a primary school teacher, an optician, a show-business technician, a self-taught computer scientist, seasonal workers in catering, a pastry chef, a salesman, a librarian, a painter, a temporary worker, jobless, a forklift driver, a mechanic-boilermaker, or a salesman in a pet store. Some bought a house immediately upon their arrival in the territory. But for many, it was enough to park their truck or caravan on one of the common grounds, find a place in a yurt, or be able to settle into one of the hostel rooms – most often in exchange for a low and infrequently demanded rent. Inevitably, this characteristic opened the doors of the collective to people living in somewhat precarious situations. Max, for example, had gone from one short contract to another, for a dozen years, in the health and social sector. Mentally exhausted, after several months of reflection, he decided one day to give up the keys to the apartment where he lived in a small town in the south-east of France and hit the road, with only a tent folded up in the trunk of his old car as his companion. His 'quest for alternative experiences' led him to the Commune, where he lived for barely two years, including in a room in one of the collective's self-run hostels.

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Although it stands out somewhat among the other middle-class children, Max's profile is neither unique nor all that surprising. In her work devoted to 'neo-rural' waves since the 1960s, Catherine Rouvière has clearly noted the arrival since the end of the 1990s of a population more precarious than those that had preceded it for three decades (Rouvière 2015) - a population that in particular sought more financially affordable housing in rural areas and, more generally, a framework allowing them 'to escape the 'decline in social status' they experienced in urban areas (low-income housing, little access to culture, few green spaces)' (Sallustio 2022: 43). This obviously results in disparities within the collectives, with some individuals being more dependent on the common project than others. For instance, within the Commune, the decision to part with the self-managed hostels for financial reasons generates a mix of nostalgia and disappointment for most, but it has a much more tangible impact on a few, who are forced to find a new place to live almost overnight.

Be that as it may, the observation of social homogeneity that a certain common sense tends to establish is often put forward as a critical argument. More precisely, it carries within it a certain suspicion that takes shape where the activist and intellectual worlds in France overlap: these experiences mainly provide representatives of the middle classes with an opportunity to distance themselves from any social conflict and, even more, to hold aloof from general social change by taking 'flight without regard for what remains behind' (Lordon 2021: 102). The charge against collapsological theories is even more severe. The collapsist narrative that these theories structure has regularly been criticized for being *depoliticizing*: its authors, it is claimed, refrain from identifying responsibilities in the current situation, in particular those of the economic logics that govern a large part of the world and the uses to which it is put, on the grounds that the most important thing of all is to prepare for what will happen (Villalba 2021).

Things are very different for most of my respondents, who adopt a politically unambiguous discourse. If they fear the suffering which will undoubtedly accompany a possible collapse of

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contemporary worlds, most of my respondents see it above all as an opportunity for what they perceive as the origin of the disaster to disappear, namely capitalism. Who will complain, write the authors of one of the founding documents of the neo-village, if 'the oppressive system which has spread across the Earth disappears?'

For many of those I meet within such collectives, collapsism thus asserts itself as an ultimately obvious way – being based on data perceived as objective and scientific - of expressing in a new form an older refusal of the world and society as they are.

A combination of individual refusals

What bifurcation means

Beyond the singularities of their respective trajectories, these women and men share one essential thing in their biographies: they all bifurcated before their arrival within these collectives. They have, in other words, 'changed lives.' This bifurcation could be described as total, since the changes concerned their professional, personal and residential spheres at the same time. A large number of these bifurcations also turn out to have involved 'downsizing' (de Rugy 2018), to the extent that they have often resulted in a drop in income, leaving a certain comfortable standard of living, and an entry, via actual or imminent professional requalification, into activities requiring a lower level of education or training.

The above confirms one thing: biographical bifurcation is a form of refusal.

Abandoning a life often described as 'traditional' or 'normal' and settling into a rural world that they are not always very familiar with clearly proves more complicated for women than for men. The former, particularly those in their thirties, have often started professional careers in areas such as culture, care, the 'social' sphere, communications or charitable associations, and the knowledge and know-how of these areas seem less valuable outside of an urban lifestyle. It is generally different for a large number of men, who manage to showcase their skills. The

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training in engineering followed by Léo and Laurent, for example, enables them to participate in more or less formal and episodic work on the construction of a building frame or the installation of photovoltaic panels. The same is true of Paul, who has dual training in boilermaking and mechanics, and has also built up a small carpentry job 'for friends'.

Understanding the causes of such bifurcation out involves reconstituting the life contexts (intimate, professional, etc.) of these individuals during the months, even years, which precede their decision. If people sometimes tend to isolate a particular triggering event (a physical attack in an urban environment, the discovery of the ecological crisis during a discussion with a friend, an altercation in a professional context, etc.), it is clear that 'the clap of thunder in a truly clear sky ultimately has little chance of occurring and, above all, of lastingly modifying the climate' (Bidart 2006: 40). In other words, the event occurs in the context of an already well-established malaise which it intensifies. Estelle, for example, one of the founders of the neo-village, suffered a car accident, from which she emerged unscathed; this was a sort of breaking point which led her to question the life that she was leading and to embark on a two-year stint of psychoanalysis:

> What's the point of living like this? I think my children must have thought they were called 'Get a move on!' They were the first to arrive at the daycare centre, at 7:00 am, and they were the last to leave, at 7:00 pm. Sure, we have a nice house – that's great! [But] at weekends, you spend your time doing your cleaning, your laundry, all the rest of your stuff... Help! Where am I going? How long can I keep going like this? Does it really serve any purpose?

So Estelle resigned from her job and, determined to give a 'meaning' to what she did, found a post in the 'personal services' sector. She quickly took on management positions and flourished

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in this milieu. After a few months, however, problems arose with her bosses, whose managerial and budgetary logic upset her: 'We were losing our sense of social issues'. Things were also changing in her private life: her children were growing up, Estelle dreaded the time they would leave home and the helplessness she might then feel. Above all, just then, her partner, Pierre, started to lose all interest in his profession while discovering the findings of collapsology. (Estelle did not agree with this view, even if she did hope to develop an 'ability to adapt' within the Neo-Village). Both quit their jobs a few months apart, determined to go and find 'shelter' in the countryside and, perhaps even more, to try out other modes of existence.

As with Estelle and Pierre, it is very often in the professional context that a large part of the discomfort arises that will subsequently justify the decision to change one's life. There is frequent mention of a 'loss of meaning' of work in the life stories that I was able to collect. As part of his career as a social worker, Luc, in his fifties, was forced to take over the management of a nursery. The account he gives of this experience is that of a bureaucratic nightmare, which kept him at a distance from what had until then been his core business. His days were reduced to administrative and accounting tasks, so he decided to resign after a few months and quickly noticed the ubiquity of these standards within the social sector and well beyond. Luc therefore resigned himself to 'no longer working like that, for that kind of society'. This type of situation is far from isolated, as is confirmed by the story of Annie, also a member of the Commune. This former psychologist, who worked in a municipal health centre in the Paris region, is keen to speak of the 'institutional mistreatment' that she and her colleagues suffered. During her last years of practice, her hierarchy notably forbade her from devoting 'too much time' to her patients and thus performing her job 'properly'.

The theme of the lack of meaning of work, something that combines a feeling of social uselessness, an inability to develop, and ethical shortcomings (Coutrot and Perez 2022: 20-21), has greatly gained visibility since the 2010s, as evidenced in particular by the success of

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discussions of 'bullshit jobs' (Graeber 2018). The fact that it has become a 'constant' (Samak 2016: 30) of back-to-the-land - or, more generally, back-to-the-countryside – itineraries may however suggest that it has mostly been transformed into a kind of map that people unfold in order to explain – and explain to themselves – *what has happened*. For the lack of meaning in one's work does not so much explain the situation, perhaps, as it needs itself to be explained. A subjective phenomenon, to say the least, it allows us to glimpse some very objective roots, those caused by the profound upheavals in the world of work since the beginning of the 21st century. It accounts more specifically for the phenomenon of an 'intensification of work' (Adăscăliței, Heyes and Mendonça 2022), where rushed work, management by numbers, increased mental and physical workload, and contradictory injunctions all intersect, but it also explains the growing bureaucratization of neoliberalized societies (Graeber 2015) and the rise, mainly among executives, of an 'ecological remorse' linked to the feeling of professionally taking part in the destruction of the environment (Coutrot and Perez 2022).

Refusal* vs *Taking flight

It is thus by means of relatively long processes, interweaving different aspects of what makes up an existence (facts, events, awareness), that the need to 'change one's life' becomes more evident. All these elements are then reinscribed in the rejection of a model of society which everyone believes is doomed in any case. They thus reinforce the conviction of the inevitable, which, in turn, makes the decision to bifurcate even more logical. The thesis of a generalized disintegration of the 'system' appears all the more plausible when a person feels they have personally experienced some of its firstfruits (the acceleration of work with a view to maximizing profit, the implementation of managerial rules that are considered absurd and ineffective, etc.).

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The above discussion could, at first glance, suggest that bifurcation is above all a way of taking flight. For those who undertake it, the main challenge seems to lie in escaping from a reality that they consider untenable, or even unbearable. At 37, Corinne decided to leave her job, her apartment in the Paris suburbs, and her partner, to take refuge in the countryside with her mother, before finding her place in the neo-village. She describes quite explicitly the feeling of oppression that had overcome her beforehand and made her decision a 'question of survival'. It was a matter of escaping a general climate made anxiety-provoking and oppressive by the rise of social conflict (notably during the Yellow Vest movement)[7] and by what she interpreted as the state's desire to stifle any criticism during the Covid epidemic:

> I was starting to freak out, but I didn't know why. I didn't have the words. I felt something. […] There was a voice screaming out from my solar plexus. […] I can only explain it like that. I felt something there. It was starting to scream very loudly […] I felt something, but I couldn't put my finger on it. When there was Covid, it started to scream a whole lot louder. I cried out in anguish every night. [...] I had a sort of awareness of a danger or something. […] And things weren't going so well with my darling partner. We couldn't talk anymore. I couldn't confide. […] I had to turn my back on this society.

While the vocabulary of exit ('flight', 'secession', 'desertion' or 'dissidence') comes up so often in the words of my respondents when they are asked to describe what led them to where they are today, it refers, in my view, to a process that is too limited in scope, and does not do justice to the logic of bifurcation. An exit only illuminates one part of the movement that my

7 The Yellow Vest movement, originating in France in 2018, began as a protest against rising petrol prices but soon involved a wider attack on the policies of Emmanuel Macron's government.

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respondents made at the very heart of their lives, while refusal embraces the entire process. Refusal arises at a moment when a limit has just been crossed and justifies that fact that a person no longer 'continue on this way' (McGranahan 2016: 320). This withdrawal of consent is particularly noteworthy, and comparable to a certain revolt, because most of these bifurcators have previously consented to a certain order of things, sometimes for several years.

However, there is more to bifurcation than that, something which one-dimensional concepts such as flight, dissidence, defection or secession struggle to account for. These bifurcations are in fact 'active', that is to say initiated voluntarily, with the hope of reconfiguring 'the space of possibilities' (Hélardot 2009: 161). Here again, refusal offers a particularly suitable interpretive template. If it marks the end of something, refusal also authorizes the emergence of an 'other way', of an 'other possibility' in which to invest one's energy (McDonald 2016).

Patricia is a youthful fifty-year-old who has worked for a long time in a large public company, where she also held union responsibilities. She explains very eloquently how the decision to leave her Parisian life, at first without her family, was made only when she was able to glimpse a whole range of opportunities and possibilities (a diversified fabric for voluntary work, dynamic forms of local social activity, etc.) on the Commune's land, at the end of her first visit. Without this, perhaps she would have settled permanently into a life that she judges, in retrospect, 'unsatisfactory' and full of disillusionment.

Beyond the accuracy (or not) of these demonstrations, what is the benefit of interpreting these trajectories in terms of refusal and not escape? It allows us, I believe, to avoid jeopardizing the political dimension of these decisions. You can leave the game and hide in the forest. This is the principle of taking flight and it does not in principle undermine this game. On the other hand, things can be very different when we escape its rules to create others, more in synch with our own beliefs. The alternative that then emerges gives us a glimpse of the logic of

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conflictualization to which I will return in more detail below, and which lies at the heart of what one is entitled to consider as political.

Between a new ethics of life and compromise

The virtues of the collective

The fact that these women and men have set their life changes within a collective framework is certainly no coincidence. Integration into a group is presented by some of them as the antidote to the feeling of listlessness that had hitherto overwhelmed them after their discovery of collapsism. For those who are most affected by these representations of the future, there is also the main idea that we cannot prepare alone for the disasters that are coming. Sophie, a woman in her forties, puts forward a few really quite explicit ideas about the need for collective action:

> People come here saying, 'I don't want to do what I'd learned to do any more and play a part in that disgusting system that's heading for disaster.' […] People know that they don't want to play a part in that, and that they can't change it from the inside. It's a waste of time. The balance of power is too unequal. So I get out [of this system] and I find people who also want to get out and do something else. There are lots of people who leave [the system] and who go to hide by themselves in the forest, in a cabin. […] Personally, I think it's also a way of hitting a wall: you can't do things alone. It doesn't work any more than capitalism. […] Even if you produce your electricity and harvest your food, even if you poach two or three rabbits, there are things you need that you can't do alone. You've got to get together with people...

Mutual aid and solidarity are therefore as much values as strategies in themselves, essential in the face of what lies ahead.

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But these rallies must also - and perhaps above all - be appreciated in the light of these people's life journeys. A majority of them have a past marked, to varying degrees, by experiences of commitment or activism. Most of the time, these investments were made in structures as diverse as associations denouncing the consumer society, causes such as the defence of universal income or organizations active in protest over climate change. Social movements, such as Nuit Debout[8] and the Yellow Vests, have also mobilized several people.

Nowadays, however, there is a general critical scrutiny of these experiments and, more generally, of an activism made up of meetings, demonstrations, leaflets and petitions. There is a prevailing idea that political engagement and, beyond that, the tools of participation are simplistic and useless.

This criticism can certainly be assessed in the light of some of the developments in the French political context. Certain studies have clearly shown that those in power have systematically reminded us, since the end of the 1990s, that 'the street does not govern' and have acted accordingly, which has led to a loss of effectiveness of the means of the traditional expressions of protest (Jobard and Fillieule 2020). Associated with the rise of concern for the Earth, such a situation has perhaps contributed to making the transition towards investments anchored in daily life and in a living environment more legitimate and coherent, as is the case within collective actions such as the commune and the neo-village. This is more or less what Patrick, who joined the first group when it was just starting to take shape, tells me:

> Demonstrations don't interest me any more. They're just a way of letting off steam. But here, I'm making my passive revolution, learning from life, influencing people, meeting my needs, taking care of things that matter and are under threat […] If

8 Nuit debout was a protest movement in France, roughly equivalent to the Occupy movement in the US and elsewhere.

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> everyone did that, there'd be no more problems… No more energy problems, no more pollution, you know?

These investments are especially accompanied by individual behaviours and discourses quite close to what we observe in the worlds of so-called 'practical' ecology. The emphasis is placed on activities that are part of the materiality of everyday life. Justine and Laurent, a couple in their thirties who spent an autumn and a winter in a caravan, on land in the Commune with no access to water or electricity, believe they have, on this occasion, accomplished a 'politicization of lifestyles'. They have achieved this by learning, through force of circumstances, to 'inhabit a place' in a situation of 'chosen precariousness': how can they organize access to water? how can they find collective responses for waste management, electricity production? Etc. Indeed, such ways of understanding how things are help to underline the discrepancies, even the oppositions, which slip in between survivalists on the one hand and collapsist collectives similar to those that I study on the other. While the former deplore 'The End of the World as We Know It' and the disappearance of the lifestyles associated with it, the latter view these ways of being and consuming as unsustainable and destructive, and hope that they will be supplanted by more 'reasonable' and 'reasoned' approaches in the 'world afterwards' as they imagine it.

Getting involved in new ways

My respondents generally have little doubt as to the fact that their lifestyles carry within them a logic of commitment. The latter is viewed by some of them as a reaction to the expensive lifestyle models to which they believe they contributed in the past. Others, on the other hand, see it as the logical continuation of older commitments. This is particularly true for those whose former profession placed them on the side of the 'left hand of the state', this 'set of agents of the so-called spending ministries which are the trace, within the state, of the social struggles of the past' (Bourdieu 1999: 2). These, found relatively frequently among my respondents, have

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long experienced their professional activity as a vocation. It is this way of approaching things that they claim to have imported into their new lives. A year after they settled in, Sophie, who had run a university library and says she has always fought for the public service, and her partner, Luc, a former special education teacher, bought a small truck which they transformed into a mobile grocery store. The idea is obviously not to make a fortune but to 'keep the area alive' by allowing older residents and those who cannot travel to benefit from a service that is, to say the least, essential.

The form of commitment that is thus emerging is in line with an active form of bifurcation. It embraces the desire to be consistent with the values we give ourselves and the awareness of the threats to the living world, even at the cost of a 'slightly marginal' type of existence, as a former engineer concedes. So it is not only a question of choices, but of ways of doing and being that the global context has made unavoidable. For Justine, who now lives with her partner in a somewhat dilapidated farm without running water, the challenge is not 'to wait for the collapse with our arms folded' but to 'be in step with [her] convictions' by taking 'care of things', by thinking about 'how we act in the world'. In his case, this involves, among other things, never entering the wood that covers part of the fifteen hectares that the couple purchased, so as not to disturb the fauna and flora.

This attention to living worlds is, in any case, omnipresent, even among those who say they are less endowed with ecological sensitivity than with environmental awareness. This is particularly true of Diane, a sixty-year-old woman responsible for the food crops of the Neo-village who admits that, for a long time, she thought that climate change was 'something quite remote'. Sometimes, on the odd morning or afternoon, I will help her weed plots, plant seedlings or graft fruit trees. A former hospital pharmacist, Diane trained in 'wild farming' a few years ago, and adopted a fairly simple principle: do not work the soil, so as not to damage it. It is in the top ten centimetres of soil – the level disturbed by any spade digging into - that

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90% of life is concentrated: earthworms, mycorrhizal fungi, bacteria, insects, etc. Thus, Diane entrusts the essential development of what she plants to this soil fauna and flora, but also to the plant cover (rye, oats, buckwheat, hemp, etc.) that she sows throughout the year to protect the soil of the collective vegetable garden. 'It's mainly the soil that needs to be nourished, more than the crops,' she insists. Her daily actions go beyond just agricultural issues: 'I'm actually making earth, regenerating the soil […] That's how I express my concern for living things.'

The relationship with oneself which runs through the personal commitment of these people is not, however, interpreted as part of a quest for spirituality. At most, it is, in several of my respondents, marked by the search for a concrete ethics, 'shaped by attempts to make of themselves a certain kind of person' (Laidlaw 2002: 327). Many people, for example, experience living conditions that might be described as pretty rough. This is particularly the case for those living in a yurt or in a caravan on bare land. We can obviously find economic reasons for these situations. We can also detect a concern for consistency. Dismantable and reversible, lightweight housing is, by necessity, more respectful of the environment. Whatever the true reasons, these conditions of existence are frequently seen as the expression of a 'chosen sobriety'. The latter fits very well with the dispositions to discomfort shaped, among other things, by the regular practice of scouting or camping in different locations during childhood, exposure to rudimentary living conditions during total immersions in foreign countries, long cycling trips, or the habit of travelling in a mobile home. These various moments have convinced them that they could, in their own words, live with 'just what is needed'.

Although these commitments are largely built on the rejection of certain dominant lifestyles, they do not necessarily imply a desire to break with society. Few of these individuals, in any case, fantasize about this possibility or about a potential counter-society. What they are trying to build is not meant to *directly* compete with the current social order but, as Patricia explains to me, it must be able to 'take over […] when [society] collapses'. The state, in any case, is not

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absent from their lives. While waiting to complete their professional retraining, some receive the Revenu de Solidarité Active (RSA), a social allowance intended to guarantee a minimum income to people without resources. Even Patrick, whose political sympathies lean towards the autonomous movement, recognizes that he cannot completely distance himself from the dominant social trend:

> I'd like to have a car and that implies having a bank account and also having insurance... So I'm keeping partly in touch with the system because I don't want to live totally disconnected from the rest of the world.

The existence of compromise is also seen at the level of collectives, which sometimes seem tempted, as is the case in many so-called 'alternative' experiments, to give the 'system' certain guarantees in order to extract from it 'the right to exist' in its gaps (Koop 2021: 130). Some members of these collectives have, for example, often gone to meet local elected officials in order to present the project and reassure people about their intentions. They also have an associative status, i.e. one that is recognized by the state and allows the Commune to request subsidies for certain projects such as the creation of a fruit and vegetable processing laboratory or a cooperative workshop for repairing agricultural tools. This should not be seen as an attempt at collaboration, as may be the case in other prefigurative experiments such as Auroville, which has maintained institutional links with the Indian government since its creation in 1968 (Clarence-Smith and Monticelli 2022). What is more evidently at stake are forms of opportunism quite unlikely to lead to co-optation, as the French state does not seem, in any case, to be particularly interested in these collectives (even if one can well imagine that their alternative nature justifies their being monitored by the state's bureaucracy, however minimally).

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Finally, while everyone praises the virtues of the collective, it is not free from internal conflicts. Tensions often arise around the limits that some and others assign to utopia. Within the Commune, for example, when some advocate not formalizing the use of the commons, others feel that some form of contractualization would guarantee security for everyone, particularly those who have been granted permission to develop more personal projects on the land (such as cultivating medicinal plants or small fruit trees) to generate income. This gives rise to tense debates where the latter are accused by the former of wanting to reintroduce the 'system's' rules into the very heart of the alternative experience. This kind of situation serves as a reminder that any collective action is the aggregation of more or less heterogeneous expectations and objectives.

A politics of refusal?

Identifying the political

Does the fact that these collective actions combine different individual refusals, often perceived as political by their authors, make them intrinsically objects of the same nature? This is far from evident, if we look at what the respondents say. Someone like Héloïse, who is just under 30 years old and worked in humanitarian aid after training in political science, believes that the commune is a 'collective project to fight against collapses', while Jean-Marc, just in his seventies and a former speaker once close to anarchist circles, sees the founding of the neo-village as an opportunity to 'remake politics'; but others aim to keep things more moderate… while admitting that the development of the commons and the search for autonomy are far from 'trivial' issues.

The simplest and least risky thing for anyone seeking the political is perhaps to fall back on what constitutes the basis of its definition: its conflictual dimension. Such a stance involves isolating the activities, moments and contexts of everyday life that are part of a logic of

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conflictualization, that is to say all those times where the collective and its members act in full awareness of 'the existence of split opinions over the issue at stake' (Hamidi 2006: 10). The approach here is all the more well-founded as these collective projects are both critical of aspects of the current order of things, and ambassadors for changing it.

The commons - the keystone of these experiments - obviously lend themselves to such an exercise in identifying the political. Almost ideally so. To the extent that their existence contradicts the hegemony of exclusive private property, it in fact places them directly in a logic of conflictualization. But two other practices, namely free pricing within the Commune and exchange in the Neo-Village, capture this process of politicization just as effectively. They help, more broadly, to outline the form of protest that this type of collective action can generate: a politics of refusal.

Mainly applied to the fruit and vegetables sold each week on the local market, free pricing is a convincing illustration of a fairly simple reality: prices do not systematically respond to the system of supply and demand but can also reflect political, social and/or moral choices. In this case, the free pricing that the Commune practices is justified by the need to 'rehumanize' social relations damaged by the search for profit (different arguments in favour of free pricing are summarized on small posters placed around the market stall and on the walls of one of the self-run hostels). In very concrete terms, this means that everything from marrows to carrots to cauliflower can have the same price, the price that consumers are willing and able to pay.

Because it disrupts things that everyone takes for granted (notably the evaluation and pricing of merchandise), this approach sometimes disconcerts people who stop at the collective's stall. A certain pedagogy then becomes necessary, as when Fabien suggests to rather clueless customers that they rely on a dice roll to determine what they will pay. Free pricing can also be 'expensive' when some people confuse it with 'free and for nothing', and leave with crates full

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of vegetables without paying a cent. Another system offers the beginnings of a solution: the price remains flexible, but the buyer is informed of the cost price of the goods and is, in fact, implicitly invited to pay at least this amount.

Finally, while free pricing has become a key element of the Commune's identity, it has not been imposed without internal debates. Some indeed feared that it would create unfair competition with other farmers at the market and consequently threaten the local integration of the collective.

There is essentially the same logic behind the exchange that the members of the neo-village practise and that they try to promote among residents who live in the vicinity. This collective's main ambition is to approach a state of self-sufficiency in food, so those who harbour this ambition grow fruit and vegetable all year round, sow wheat, and possess a few goats as well as a small flock of sheep. However, they do not delude themselves over their capacity for self-sufficiency. This observation, coupled with their desire to find their place in the local social landscape, has led them to promote a system of exchange in the surrounding area. They therefore exchange their vegetables or cheeses produced from the milk of their goats for honey, poultry, beer, fruit not grown in their orchard, etc. This can be within the context of daily relations with neighbours or even the mornings when the 'grocery store' is open. Once a month, the collective welcomes into the small house where it stores some of its stocks of dried vegetables all those people from the surrounding area who wish to buy lentils, vegetable oils or coffee outside the traditional commercial circuit. It's also an opportunity, when the weather is nice, to bring out a few bottles of wine and discuss local political news. Most 'customers' pay in cash but some also offer an exchange. One example is Emily, a cattle breeder from the Netherlands who lives a few kilometres away. Everything she leaves with is recorded in a register. This accounting will allow members of the collective, a few weeks or months later, to pick up some meat when the young woman slaughters one of her animals.

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Likewise, when Sam, who got involved in the venture in the first two years, lends out his truck, it is with the guarantee that the borrower will repair the faulty ventilation.

In all cases, as Jean-Marc points out, this is 'exchange and not barter': the latter is 'a transaction in the moment', without consequences for the future, while the former is meant to contribute to 'creating a territory of people ready to help each other.'

'Your power has no authority over me'

Free pricing and exchange are, without a doubt, two practices imbued by a logic of conflictualization: to put it as simply as possible, the individuals who adopt them do so while obviously being aware of challenging, just by making these choices, other, socially dominant ways of doing things. These two practices are therefore attempts to denaturalize present realities (Guéguen and Jeanpierre 2024). It could therefore be tempting to perceive a desire for resistance, as I did during my first observations - resistance to capitalism, for example. And we could even clarify things by deciding that including these ways of doing things in the daily and ordinary lives of these women and men makes them forms of 'everyday resistance' (Johansson and Vinthagen 2020). This analytical framework, however, quickly seemed ill-suited to what was being played out before my eyes: less a direct opposition to a power, which is the minimal definition of resistance, than a form of 'consent's revenge' (Simpson 2016), directed at the consent that has long been given to the social order.

If we return to the example of free pricing, it is indeed a question of informing a dominant order – an 'economic system crushing humanity', to use the words of the notice displayed on market days – that, once a week, its rules no longer apply *here*, in this marketplace. It is worth repeating, this time in the terms of Lisa Bhungalia: we are no longer in the register of 'I oppose you', specific to resistance but, more clearly, in that of 'Your power has no authority over me'

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characteristic of refusal (2020: 389). It is thus a question of 'negating that which negates us' (Garland 2016: 55).

This type of practice highlights how refusal fits quite perfectly with a major element of contemporary social theory. It is permeated by these *interstitial strategies* that Erik Olin Wright (2010) has eloquently defined. By valuing the common or seeking to offer something other than the classic market transaction, the women and men I am discussing here slip collectively into the 'spaces and cracks within some dominant social structure of power' (ibid.: 322). Their ambition is not to overthrow the 'system' or to destroy its logic but, more precisely, to escape the power relations that characterize it, in order to better define *another* possibility.

To put it another way, for them it is a question of building something not simply *against* but *in spite of* (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010) a social and economic order that everyone associates with the problems and difficulties that bedevil our time.

Concluding remarks

Resistance is therefore not the only way to shape criticism of the social order. Refusal can equally lay claim to this task – especially, perhaps, as it allows us to understand actions, positions, moments and, more generally, relatively discreet experiences by highlighting the political logics which sometimes run through them. In the present case, refusal helps to grasp how recourse to the commons, exchange, the quest for autonomy, and free pricing are as much an opportunity to *criticize* as to *ignore* the influence of several fundamentals of the economic and social order: exclusive private property, waged labour, and market value. We also encounter the twofold movement that characterizes it in the very principle of biographical bifurcation and, even more, of utopia. By definition, at the heart of the latter, opposition to the reality promoted by the dominant ideology (Boltanski 2008) and the creation of another possibility are intertwined.

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If this article stands out from a number of recent contributions to the literature of refusal, it's also because what it dissects is not expressed by individuals and groups oppressed by political or administrative power or trying to escape a subaltern position. Rather, this protest is part of what these men and women present as a deliberate choice they might very well not have made (admittedly at the cost of existential compromises, according to them). To paraphrase the title of a famous resistance studies reference, refusal is not just a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott 1985). It may also be a form of contest particularly suited to an era marked, in various parts of the world, by a distrust toward the traditional registers of political participation and the relative failure of many social and environmental struggles.

From a perhaps more epistemological point of view, I hope I have shown that refusal also allows us to broaden the horizon of the analysis of critique by not confining it to the world of theories of domination. Since it is not only the opposition to an authority but also conveys an idea of, or a desire for, change, refusal is certainly part of the field, generally neglected by sociology (Boltanski 2011), of theories of emancipation.

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