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The Dissenting Nights of the Neo-Wood Colliers of the Vercors: A Forest Chronotope for a Heterotopia

Christophe Baticle and Philippe Hanus

Introduction

- ¹ Over the past two decades in the pre-Alpine landscape of the Vercors region (France), collective charcoal pit reconstitutions (piles of beech gradually carbonised by pyrolysis to make charcoal) have been mobilising “neo-wood colliers”, trained by former professionals descended from Italian immigrants and joined from time to time by numerous members of the public (400 to 500 people) from varied social and geographical backgrounds to take part in nocturnal festivities. This group of neo-wood colliers gradually became autonomous and began to organise these events themselves, giving them a new collective physiognomy but, more importantly, investing them with meanings that far exceed a simple revival of heritage. Through the study of some of these reconstitutions in which we ourselves took part¹ between 1998 and 2016², we will look at the way in which groups can construct new alternative spaces on the fringes of the diurnal life of the valleys by the very fact of their involvement in projects with the forest as their setting, itinerant workers as the point of reference and which take place at night. In doing so, we shall question the creative and resistant micro-politics through modes of sociability favoured by the quest for a libertarian heterotopia (Foucault, 1984) in the face of attempts to control and takeover nocturnal activities³.

Photo 1. Construction site of the charcoal growers, Saint-Julien-en-Vercors, 2005

Credit: Benjamin Vanderlick

- 2 Based in an unusual location, a forest glade, the charcoal burning festival encourages individuals to come together in groups where they can escape from the usual rules and restrictions of life in society (family and professional routines, etc.) for an extended interlude. We aim to explain this experience in the light of the concept of chronotope: “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” which expresses “the inseparability of space and time” (Bakhtine, 1978: 237). As the Bakhtine chronotope applies initially to literary works, the approach adopted here will consist in an attempt to extract the heuristic dimension for “social worlds”, insofar as space and time can be considered as two interacting facets of social life (Löw, 2015: 15). In other words, study of the chronotope naturally leads to a reflection on the perception of (and action on) the world through temporal and spatial relationships in the broad sense, leading to geographical variations such as the insular chronotope (Bernardie, 2010).
- 3 It is suggested that in rural areas subject to intense mutation and traversed by large professional and residential flows, this revitalisation process, which is first and foremost a creation of the present time – based on a certain idea of “tradition” (Lenclud, 1987) – can strengthen a feeling of belonging (Sencébé, 2004). This is valid both for indigenous populations and new residents (Avanza, Laferté, 2005).
- 4 The analysis adopted here with regard to this mountain forest occupation derives its subject matter from the ways in which the night is used and perceived. During the nocturnal hours, the group watching over the charcoal pit can dream of a “tribal” sociability in a space some participants liken to the *wilderness* – where the traces of modernity disappear into the darkness.
- 5 In the first section, this involves classifying the participating public, mindful of the historic points of reference (under-pinned by remembrance) in which they are plunged in this region, one of the landmark sites of the Second World War. The charcoal-burning activity will then be described, and the way in which its laborious requirements reorganise social time frames, disrupting the relationship with the night.

Finally, we will aim to demonstrate how the resistant sociability of an achieved utopia (heterotopia) operates, based on the chronotope constituted around the burning charcoal pit.

Photo 2. A stylised pit ("charcoal, forest, resistance")

Photo C. Baticle, 13/07/2015

The region, the context of the action and the participants present

- 6 The forest – a space that is physical and social, natural and cultural all at once – plays a key role in the life and imagination of the inhabitants and users of the Vercors region (Duclos, 1986; Sgard, 1997). As one of the essential elements of the heritage of this mountain region, it is increasingly promoted (nature trails, exhibitions, etc.) by local authorities as much as by foresters, both as a means of preserving the biodiversity and a “landscape of remembrance” within which the traces can be glimpsed not only of the forestry and pastoral activities of yesteryear, but also the artisanal, proto-industrial and capitalist exploitation of wood-fibre commodities.
- 7 Within this forest universe, the charcoal production industry has left its mark both physically and in memory. From the Middle Ages onwards, teams of wood colliers (or charcoal burners) worked during the summer days in the forests of the Vercors region to transform beech wood into a high-quality fuel to be used by the metal-working industry. After 1875, against a background of crisis in the wood industry, forestry companies resorted to the use of seasonal workers from the valleys of Bergamo in Lombardy, then from Veneto after the First World War. Italians would play a key role in

the exploitation of the forests of the Western Alps up until the 1960s, when the industry died out (Hanus, 2000).

Photo 3. Majorino Benacchio, a wood collier from Veneto, forest of Coulmes, 1942

Fonds Benacchio, Vercors Regional Natural Park

- 8 The investigation unfolds in the heart of the middle mountain area (700-1,200 m in altitude), in small villages of the Isère and Drôme regions which nowadays have no more than 350 inhabitants, and which at first sight appear extremely enclosed and isolated. This impression is strengthened by the omnipresent blanket of vegetation. In this respect, it is significant that the first charcoal pit reconstruction took place in one of the villages that generates the strongest feeling of isolation: Rencurel, located at the gates of the state-owned forest of Coulmes, the heritage of which has been revived and promoted for many years (the forestry administration executives having fostered the idea of classing the area as a National Park during the 1920s) and today has a nature trail (Hanus, 2007). During this initial event (1998), the charcoal pit formed a sort of substitute “village fête” at a time when the village was particularly isolated, most roads linking it to the wider area being closed due to tunnel work in the Bourne gorges. It is therefore a region where the low population density and the difficulties in getting around have an influence on the ways of life (Mouret, 2017). Without bringing in altitude determinism, intense solidarity can be observed linked to weather-related constraints and the assertion of an idiosyncrasy, which whilst being discursive is also fed by collective practices such as the “fête des Coulmes” in the forest itself or communal firewood gathering. “It’s great in Rencurel because everyone works together. The municipal employees are available to help move the wood.” (S.C.). This part of the Vercors, far from the regional urban centres (Romans, Valence, Grenoble) and away from the mountain area’s large winter resorts (Villard-de-Lans, Autrans), is

frequently referred to as “peripheral”. Socially vulnerable individuals, or those wishing to break away from “standardised ways of life” find refuge here (Debroux, 2011). Locally, we heard rhetoric making a distinction between two territorial entities (Baticle, 2014): a so-called “South” part considered as rather rural which takes a sometimes autonomous approach, as opposed to the sector where “white gold” reigns supreme (the Isère area) or “North” part of the Vercors region, and which is seen as subservient to the Grenoble metropolis. In this discourse (farmers, elected representatives, tourism operators, technicians of the Regional Natural Park) in which the Drôme part of the area is often considered as pushed into the background, there is an echo of the old opposition between a “historic Vercors”⁴ and a “region of projects” corresponding to the “Four Mountains” area (North-East). Old divisions within the Vercors region regularly resurface. These controversies are obviously to be found with the neo-wood colliers who claim an attachment to the historic Vercors, deemed to be more “authentic”.

Photo 4. Old forest dwelling (Rencurel). “In this hovel lived our ancestors. A thought of the family”

PHOTO C. BATICLE, 25/06/2014

- 9 The individuals more or less involved in the preparation of the festival are from varied social and spatial backgrounds. The inner circle of organisers – grouped in the Atra Vercors association⁵ since January 2005 – includes multi-active open-air professionals (caving and ski instructors, mountain guides, rope access specialists, etc.), forestry technicians, artists and teachers, with a sound cultural capital, as well as economically vulnerable individuals. This “core”, composed of those who we will refer to as the “neo-wood colliers”⁶ (for the sake of convenience and to remove any ambiguity with regard to the experience of the Italian forestry artisans whose job it was, and from which they have borrowed some of the techniques and way of life) express a different story of the region beside those developed by institutions: University, Park, Dauphinois Museum, in which can be heard a claim of authenticity, an idea of freedom – the latter remaining to be conquered in the face of the “great commercial show of mass tourism” (H.-J. S.) – and a certain representation of the Resistance.

- 10 A second ring of regular satellites join them, attracted by the fireside ambiance, discussions in favour of “another world”: anti-consumerists, interested in food self-sufficiency⁷ and ecology who occasionally help out⁸. The third ring concerns the curious, intrigued by the unusual goings-on: inhabitants of the surrounding area, tourists, friends, descendants of Italian immigrants, mere observers of an apparently anachronistic process. Within the two previous groups, there is a very clear distinction between daytime visitors and those who take part in the nocturnal sociabilities. Indeed, the latter capitalise on ideological dispositions which make them counterparts worthy of sharing the “wood colliers’ night”.
- 11 Then there are the party animals who only take part in the musical evenings but who demonstrate the extremely extensive scope of the neo-wood collier network with other groups interested in alternative cultures. This dimension is essential. Music plays a central role in what brings the participants together during charcoal-burning festivals, and throughout the year, when the Atravercors network invites people to a multiple of do it yourself-orientated “parties” (Hein, 2012). Music groups belong to the wider affinity group extending as far as Belgium. As a result, a public composed of local people and those from other regions will gather around an “UBO” (unidentified burning object: the burning charcoal pit). The “local boy” (Renahy, 2005), sometimes stuck on the margins of the village, can thus occasionally rub shoulders with the members of a multi-territorial network, thus explicitly deviating from ordinary societal norms.

Photo 5. “Black Head”, performance of the artistic collective Culture Ailleurs (J. Lobbedez, A.J. Rollet, S. Perroud). Pit of the Papavet Pass - Trézanne (St-Martin-de-Clelles, Isère) May 29, 2010

Credit: Culture Ailleurs

The different stages in the process and the festivities that mark them

- 12 The charcoal-burning festival builds up over a long but discontinuous period of approximately six to nine months, at the end of which part of the neo-wood colliers will live in the forest for a whole month. The organisers have chosen not to enter it in any tourist agenda and more importantly not to schedule it every year to avoid becoming 'routinised' and the risks of a drift towards financial profit-seeking, refusing to apply for grants to "stay free; do what we want, as we want"⁹. A team of volunteers relay one another to participate in the numerous tasks this activity requires: in winter, negotiations with the public or private owner who donates their wood (which involves support from the local network); in May, marking the beech coppicing with the agents from the National Forestry Board (ONF); at the end of spring, felling trees and flattening the area of the future charcoal pit, plus chopping the wood, moving it with the help of horses, splitting it by hand and piling the billets, then digging a pond to collect rainwater in case of fires and gathering leaves to cover the pile. The logistics of the base camp and the infrastructure for the firework displays, concerts and the public must then also follow.
- 13 The charcoal pit consists of a hemispherical construction using 10 to 12 tonnes of wood covered with a blanket of vegetation and a layer of fine sieved soil. This "blanket", the subject of a multitude of comments as to its appearance, must have a good slope. It has a chimney in the centre made of small criss-crossing pieces of wood: a central totem which requires constant attention once the fire is lit. The participants therefore take it in turns to watch over it day and night. The fire lit in the central chimney bakes the entire charcoal pit by slow irradiation, burning for 10 to 20 days according to the volume. Firing the pile is the opportunity for initial celebrations: a human chain transports the flame from the camp-fire smouldering permanently in the base camp to the ladder where the final person is waiting. A group of percussionists lead the event. During the initial events, the "elders", Italian wood colliers, passed the flame to the new recruits. The aim is for all the participants, both young and old, to carry the torch. Then it is time for the concert which takes place under the huge marquee lent by friends from the Ardèche libertarian network to host groups who perform free of charge. The "participative culture" of the neo-wood colliers also means freely established prices for the food and bar, as well as activities that are free of charge: theatre, folk tales, basket-weaving, etc.

Photo 6. Ignition by the Veneto charcoal growers (Flora Secco-Revol and Sébastien Todesco), L'Echarasson, Saint-Julien-en-Vercors, 2005

Credit: Jean-Luc Destombes

- 14 The carbonisation period will move the events on from the festive, populous stage around firing the pit to a period of relative calm: the long days and especially nights of watching over and, “feeding” the pit, like a fiery ogre devouring everything it is given to eat. This involves alternating between allowing air to circulate and smothering it, wood to be burnt and water to kill the flames, and soil to prevent holes opening that are conducive to open flames. After dark, the person on duty gets up regularly to inspect the pile: “We do watches, a bit like on a boat.” If it roars too loudly on one side, a vent must be immediately blocked or a breach patched up. Conversely, if it is not burning enough on the other side, vents need to be opened to allow the fire to draw more. You have to sense when and where “it’s going to give”¹⁰, either falling in or allowing flames to appear which will ruin the process, and constantly reshape the pit as it shrinks to give it the proper conical shape. Increased vigilance is necessary in case of heavy rain to avoid the soil cover slipping and the edifice collapsing. Here the neo-wood colliers have introduced innovations. People on ropes set about installing a tarpaulin over the pile to protect it. Perpetuating “tradition” therefore should not be understood as a fixed form of reproduction. In particular, the nocturnal watches favour inter-personal discussion and existential questioning within the team. Debates are humorous and sarcastic, after the fashion in which James C. Scott (1990) reports the diffuse arts of resistance by derision. In the semi-darkness, sub-politics are unveiled to remake the world.

Photo 7. Coaling out, Saint-Julien-en-Vercors, 2005

CREDIT BENJAMIN VANDERLICK

- 15 Once the pit has “come to foot”, meaning carbonisation is complete, it is time for “coaling out”, when the pile is opened up and the charcoal is raked out, the “magic moment” when the “treasure” is revealed. The unknown nature of blind baking generates questions: will there be “brown ends”, pieces of wood that have not completely turned into charcoal? The fire is experimented with in an artistic form: bluish-coloured eggs, forged iron, etc. For several days (up to 5), each circular layer raked out provides information and discoveries. The charcoal removed is moistened then bagged and weighed. The operation is repeated 10 or 15 times, uncovering and recovering the pile, with the last raking signalling the end of coaling out. This raking may be accompanied by African percussion players beating the rhythm. This is the start of the second festival, each being marked by music. The bags are moved to the site of the concert which will via a human chain just as symbolic as the first. The participants are invited to come and sign the guest book, not with a comment but by leaving their sooty fingerprint. Most of the bags are sold on-site, providing the association’s petty cash.

Photo 8. "Signature"

PHOTO C. BATICLE, 11/10/2014

- 16 Between two rock or electro concerts, we then witness the demonstration of the desired effect of deliberately making the forest area wild, the expected product of the black night on a crowd in a trance: dancing starts to the rhythm of the African percussion taking on a psychedelic pace, producing a sort of phantasmagoric vision where the obsessive sounds mingle with the frenetic swaying of bodies and the fire of the brazier totem glowing in the night. The nucleus of the most dedicated neo-wood colliers have emerged from the cover of the forest to participate in a swaying choreography inspired by the imagery of neo-shamanism, accompanied by a succession of onomatopoeia supposed to express primitiveness. Maybe as a response to the slogan posted at the entrance to the clearing: "Tribal call: the charcoal pit needs feeding!" The gathering around the metal sculpture filled with smouldering charcoal then sets about the ritual of collective celebration and cohesion.

Photo 9. Poster announcing the firing of the pit in 2016

Source: <http://charbonniere.vertaco.info/-Atra-Vercors-.html>

- 17 In the same way, the practice therefore generates the use of specific vocabulary indicative of skill through shared words which form the basis of a feeling of belonging to the group: “peuillons” (clods of earth cut in the grassy clearing), “mouche” (brown ends that have not burnt) etc., and in particular a rallying cry: “Collier!” to which the reply is to shout “make it smoke!” as loudly as possible. This is how the network recognises each other in other local events where they feel their way towards one another. The charcoal pit provides yet more material for metaphors, such as the “smoky greetings” the president of the association throws out on social media.

Photo 10. Brazier totem

PHOTO C. BATICLE, 17/10/2014

The sense of an experience: heterotopia and chronotope

- 18 The experience of the charcoal burning festivals in the Vercors region can be analysed in two separate ways, which would appear to be contradictory. Seen from the outside, it is the noisy gathering of a “band of rebels”, as the founding nucleus like to define themselves. Seen from the inside, the “charcoal-sphere” is closer to community experiments in which the Zones to Defend¹¹ can be situated, with the difference that here the ZAD is part of the dream of an achieved utopia: life in the woods (Thoreau, 1854).
- 19 The activity itself, implemented in isolated parts of the forest, is much less of a hindrance than the presence of the activists for the protester potential it represents in the eyes of other fringes of the population. The latter would be mainly constituted of partisans of “technical progress”. In this respect, their critics are not mistaken in their target: the neo-wood colliers do indeed enter into the dispute concerning high-productivity modernity, and side in the nebula of groups favourable to degrowth. The debate on the Grands Goulets tunnel, which replaced the iconic road of the same name at the turn of the last century, is a good illustration of this division splitting the inhabitants between a concern to “open-up” and the desire to slow the onward rush of the developers (Rosa, 2013). According to this interpretation, tensions were created during the event in certain years, especially in 2012 when things almost ended in court due to the failure to comply with the dates of the authorisation for lighting fires in a drought context.
- 20 In this column, a small village also settled its internal differences between two antagonistic groups who were clashing on the importance to be given to tourism. The controversial charcoal pit could thus appear just as a pretext for other struggles concerning the legitimate use of the territory, as was seen in several years where some hunters saw the presence of the neo-wood colliers as scaring off the game.

Nevertheless, in September 2016, it was a specific malicious act which attracted attention. Part of the stacked wood was soiled with used oil. This antipathy, which seems to be largely in the minority, should not distract from the fact that this “game for spoilt children” as the neo-wood colliers do not hesitate to call it, is not to everyone’s taste. It is seen as such for the “oppositional public space” (Negt, 2008) which it authorises via the free expression of a subversive spirit (*eigensinn*, to use Negt’s term, or a “rebellious subjectivity”) which calls into question the capitalocene¹². A revealing example is: if the central nucleus usually adopts seasonal work (sometimes intensive), it is a way of freeing up rest periods “to laze about” (S.C.) or to “treat themselves to a month in the forest” (H). This way, the temporal alienation is circumvented by this chronotope which distances the lights of technical-industrial civilisation. The tension around the pit, because it is chosen voluntarily, thus refers to a moment of disconnection with the obligations of the “loan to be paid back” (H.L.). Through this intense experience of collective nocturnal life, aren’t the neo-wood colliers slipping into the shadowy areas of the capitalist panoptic in their own way (Crary, 2014: 26)?

Photo 11. “Black Head”, performance of the artistic collective Culture Ailleurs (J. Lobbedez, A.J. Rollet, S. Perroud). Pit of the Papavet Pass - Trézanne (St-Martin-de-Clelles, Isère) May 29, 2010

Credit: Culture Ailleurs

- 21 This experience is not *ex-nihilo*, and it is not just anywhere. To start with, territorially, the Vercors gradually (re)built itself after 1945 with the waves of new residents, as the custodian of a long-mythologised era which contemporary times have altered by the effects of industrial modernity. There are many signs here of the fact this area, perceived, as having landscape “qualities” conducive to an alternative life, is flooded with activities deliberately on the margins of social conventions or market rules: community cafés, recycling-repair centres, car-sharing before its time, “money-free zones”, nature or libertarian book fairs, etc. In particular, next to the two major employment sectors of farming and mass tourism, the last two decades have seen the

appearance on the one hand of a growing number of independent professions focusing on well-being or personal development and which mobilise a salutary conception of nature (naturopathy, art-therapy). On the other hand, craftsmen and artists have appeared, looking to make use of the local natural resources (blacksmith, sculptor, potter, plastic artist), and people seeking to return to forms of farming which also claim to be existential experiences (“transhumance revival” style shepherding). Finally, a vulnerable public have set up home here to the benefit of the regional capitals’ revitalisation policy, or even to live in more precarious housing: tipis, yurts, etc. Presented as the antithesis of these ideals of a spartan, nature-friendly lifestyle, the ski resort studio-cabins and snow cannons appear as repellents (the mountains of the northern Vercors, “sold for the interests of the society of lucrative leisure activities”).

22 Secondly, for the founding nucleus, the charcoal pit project was only a substitute for a broader ambition to break with established order: the sedentary clustered life of the villages¹³. It involved reviving a site strongly identified in people’s memories with the wood colliers of yore, the hamlet of La Goulantière (Presles) located in the forest of Coulmes. Today the hamlet is abandoned, but its heritage has been revived and promoted by the ONF, the Isère department Council and the Park (Hanus, 2007)¹⁴. This ambition was not limited to its residential element, but aimed to make use of the forest and glades: growing heritage cereals the old-fashioned way and restarting the bread oven to encourage a certain level of food self-sufficiency¹⁵. It was not known if this “collective habitat” would become permanent or seasonal, but there was a firm intention to make it an experience of life in the forest (Vidalou, 2017). “But if you do that without an educational project or whatever with a nice fat dossier, you’re not taken seriously and it doesn’t work” (C.).

23 Two conceptions of heritage are in opposition, that of the public institutions who revive and promote heritage “from above” and that of the neo-wood colliers which presents as being more representative (Tornatore, 2010).

“Because we think that the people who used to live there [La Goulantière], rather than putting cement on the broken walls like they have done and saying “That’s heritage...” In fact that really pisses us off to see that that’s what heritage is. It’s a couple of ruins? I think that the bloke that lived here would be much happier if there are people who rebuild the village, who live there.”

24 “There” is often under the dense cover of the forest of Coulmes, insofar as forest life is thought of as generating its own calendar and imposing its specific time-scales.

“I would say that to begin with, the charcoal pit is the idea of getting together with mates. But after it develops lots of things. For example, if you ask me where I want to live, I’ll tell you, in the forest. But you can’t. Yet the forests are state-owned and we are the State! So the charcoal pit allows us to spend a month in the forest like how people lived before. In the end, it’s a way of rediscovering a present moment, if you like... that doesn’t exist in our societies, if you get me? If you want to find a present moment, you have to go to countries where people look for food today. That doesn’t exist here. You are always talking about tomorrow or yesterday but that means you aren’t there. And with the charcoal pit, at the end of the day you’re there because you have to be there. It’s a real human life.” (H.).

25 It is even easier to understand the projection of the neo-wood colliers in alternative forms of collective life if we consider their journey in pursuit of new frontiers to cross. For a long time, this frontier was to be found in caving, in that it offered an unknown world. In the 1990s, a magazine (LSD¹⁶: Les Spéléologues Drômois) related prospective expeditions they launched on the mountain. From one darkness to another, it is the

same claim of “life in the present”. Through charcoal burning, a real chronotope is established in the sense that the experience depends on a rhythm analysis¹⁷ linked to the relevant social organisation, day and night, in the forest, a place rich in obscure evocations. The originality of the charcoal pit lies here in its ability to suspend the oppression imposed by the clock for the long interlude of the carbonisation. “Things that happen over time. If you sleep for a night on the Hauts-Plateaux, you wake up in the morning and you are elsewhere. When you manage to do it for a long time, you modify your rhythm without realising it.” (M.R.).

- 26 Because the forest, set on the borders of the village, plays the role of an ill-defined somewhere else in representations (Arnould, 1997), forestry workers find themselves in a situation of *strangeness* even though they belong to the village group by birth. The isolation of the wood colliers in the forest and the obligation to work day and night have fostered the construction of stereotypes since Greek Antiquity, disseminated by the cultivated elite through literature, reports of excursions by tourists in the Belle Époque, and in the newspapers and other almanacs. This is how the representatives of the legitimate culture manufactured their exact antithesis: “The obscure man from the shadowy woods”. At night, hard-working men (the peasants) rest whilst the man in black (the wood collier) watches over his pit. This master of fire finds himself symbolically assimilated with a universe of evil forces (Musset, 2000). In Western societies, blackness, strangeness and mystery draw conventional images of night-time, using the shadow of the Platonic cave in opposition to contemporary Enlightenment. The term “*nocturnity*” (Cabantous, 2009) is used to refer to this system of representation and practices which build and structure the relationship with the night, often with negative connotations, but paradoxically also positive ones. Although it is necessarily the seat of worry and fear and the scene of anomaly, night also allows humans to dream. Thus in the 18th century, the forestry brotherhoods - such as that of the *Bons cousins charbonniers* (“Good wood collier cousins”) in the Jura - with their initiation, integration and recognition rites (Merlin 2009), united workers who call themselves “cousins” although they share no family ties, or even geographical origins, but yet are connected by the symbolic fraternity of the coppices. Forestry workers therefore represented a sort of specific, primitive, mute humanity but which was also united and free on the fringes of the civilised world. With Romanticism, half-idealising, half-belittling representations of the “people of the forests” were widely disseminated in the social fabric. Nowadays, they are still very much present in common awareness, bringing perceptions coloured by folklore up to date in a phantasmagoric vision of the shadow realm. At the end of a slow process of sedimentation, the wood collier seems to have become a guardian figure of the Vercors, a “great ancestor” (Pelen, 2009)¹⁸.
- 27 Among the other symbolic resources summoned for the situation - either directly anchored in the region’s history or intentionally taken from a European cultural background, sometimes unconsciously - the Resistance during the German occupation obviously springs to mind, embodied by defiant young people, these “nocturnal clandestines” who had given up their social identity to breathe “air cleansed of the presence of the Nazis and their collaborators” in the woods (Marcot, 1997). Given the omnipresence of the Resistance night in the great story of the Vercors region, it seems relevant to question the way in which the protagonists of the charcoal burning festival see it. Some of the members of the Resistance themselves explicitly compared themselves to Mandrin or Robin Hood, the archetypal social bandit who found refuge

under cover of the forest. An expression heard many times on the site does indeed seem to indicate that the neo-wood colliers see themselves as fitting into this heritage in their own way: “We are NRV [énervés] (annoyed), the New Resistance of the Vercors”.

Photo 12. “Free Zone” poster

<http://charbonniere.vertaco.info/-Atra-Vercors-.html>

Conclusion: The long night of the wood colliers in the clearing

- 28 For the last two decades, the charcoal burning festivals in the Vercors region and their colourful nocturnal gatherings have been highlighting the traditional conflicting practices and representations of the mountain universe. Paradoxically, whilst encouraging a form of pacification of the tensions in local society – of which all the members are invited to gather around the fire at night-time – their protagonists have constantly revived (or even exacerbated) the debate between economic development and environmental protection, lifestyle artificialisation and a quest for authenticity. The neo-wood colliers of the Vercors, an assorted group of individuals refusing the “limpness of bourgeois life”, constitute an “occupying community” on an area supposedly “authentic” and part of public property: the wild forest (Baticle, Boutinot, 2018). Their rejection of constraints must therefore be understood from the angle of conventional and administrative obligations, “because we’ve given ourselves a real restriction: we lit a damn fire and our thing is a bit like watching the milk on the fire” (M.R.). During these extraordinary nights – shared by a small group around the hearth or in a “*foule sentimentale*” (sentimental crowd - reference to a popular French song)

during large musical get-togethers – in the forest, their differentiation work consists in distancing the efforts made by the economic and political powers to segregate and contain the day time, in particular that of leisure areas (Bachimon et al., 2014). This involves social criticism on their part of the conformism of the “good engineers of Lans who vote for ecology and afterwards travel 80 kilometres a day to go to work” (M.R.). In this sense, the clearing also becomes a political agora defying norms and institutions. A “game” is established with the fears of the latter, the refusals to comply allowing the libertarian spirit to reassert itself against the consensus with the authorities, in a careful blend of conflict and negotiation. Logically, support for the Roybon ZAD (Isère)¹⁹, rejection of the sale of public property (such as the Maison de la nature at Romans) or solidarity with migrants appear natural, without ever “taking themselves too seriously” (S.C.).

- 29 But is this a tendency to move towards a society of equals? Between the first reconstruction, when the local hunters held the bar in a joyous mix of generations and the last one (2016), the emphasis on libertarian culture can be observed to accentuate, and efforts at distinction can now find substance in food: eat organic, local food, limiting the intake of animal proteins. Exclusions thus proceed by symbolic auto-exclusion.
- 30 Little by little, the participants have thus constituted an affinity group which has been able to mobilise energy in favour of a “United Vercors”, in the context of territorial reorganisation imposed by law (NOTRe law). Paradoxically, this claim of intercommunality uniting the entire mountain bears witness to an attachment to the model of the Park, both scorned and at the same time used as a medium for recognition. The aversion to *top-down* organisations generates resistances which are also resources to build up a capital of indigeneness (Retière, 2003), even more valid as it is part of the mastery of a local ancestral practice (Stock, 2006)²⁰. However, this “wood collier spirit” can only take on its alternative colours through the nocturnal, forest configuration of the heterotopic system (Foucault, 1984)²¹ proposed, regulated by the obligation to be there, experiencing intensely and to the full a form of presence in the world with heightened awareness, to celebrate the present moment away from the limelight in the intimacy of the forest night²². As part of the charcoal burning experience, the relationship with the night is modified and reorganised by watching the fire, the dream of a great evening; the fantasised revolutionary night (that of the Sans Culotte, Carbonaris²³ or resistance fighters) extremely present in the imagination of some neo-wood colliers.
- 31 Typically, this places us at the crossroads of an operation to revive and promote a heritage, originally encouraged by the Park and the ONF, and a desire to free oneself from the social restrictions of everyday life by means of a space (the forest, the mountain) conducive to a utopia and placed in a gap in time: night-time, whilst common mortals are asleep. In this sense, it is a heterotopia²⁴ made possible by the chronotope of the smouldering charcoal pit: a place in the forest night at the same time as a machine to give oneself the illusion of going back in time.

Photo 13. "Black Head", performance of the artistic collective Culture Ailleurs (J. Lobbedez, A.J. Rollet, S. Perroud). Pit of the Papavet Pass - Trézanne (St-Martin-de-Clelles, Isère) May 29, 2010

Credit: Culture Ailleurs

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NOTES

1. As part of his functions within the Vercors permanent centre for environmental initiatives (CPIE), Philippe Hanus followed this initiative right from the start with the critical eye of the historian. It is an initiative that responded in an extremely independent fashion to the desire of the elected representatives of the Park to preserve and promote the heritage of the forest.

Christophe Baticle, a social anthropologist, spent over a year in the Vercors region as part of a post-doctoral study (under the direction of Karine-Larissa Basset and Véronique Peyrache-Gadeau; ANR-10-LABX-50-01), making use of participant observation and interviews.

2. The study focuses in particular on the event held in 2014 when interviews were conducted.

3. See the study day “Planifier la nuit? Quand les politiques d’aménagement s’emparent des enjeux culturels et festifs nocturnes”, Geneva, 21/09/2017.

4. Under the Ancien Regime, the Vercors toponym referred to a district in the upper valley of the Vernaison (Drôme). Around 1850, roads built to “open up” the area encouraged the arrival of the first tourists. Meticulously described by scholarly excursionists (Henri Ferrand) then by the geographers Jules Blache and Raoul Blanchard, the Vercors region finally managed to assert its name and its image as a “natural fortress” outside the immediate surrounding area. The events of the Second World War would contribute to the international recognition of this area, followed by the Olympic Games in 1968. The Vercors region has been a Regional National Nature Park since 1970, one of the first created in France (Sgard, 1997; Vergnon 2002; Wullschleger, 2004).

5. See <http://charbonniere.vertaco.info/-Atra-Vercors-.html>. The reference to the “âtre” (the hearth of the fireplace which is also where the family gathers in the collective consciousness) is obviously significant, as is the play on words “Atra-Vercors” - “À travers corps” (through the body).

6. They do not define themselves this way but rather as *Carboneros*, in reference to an imaginary Sandinista or Zapatista, an echo of the fight of indigenous American peoples for emancipation.

7. “At least, if everything goes pear-shaped in the future, we’ll know how to make charcoal” (H.).

8. Some ideological and militant positions resonate with those of Anglo-Saxon movements such as *survival* or *deep ecology*.

9. **Statements taken from the film by Bruno Allès:** http://vercorstv.wmaker.tv/Fiesta-a-la-Charbo_v853.html, 2014.

10. Op. cit., episode 2: http://vercorstv.wmaker.tv/Charbonniere-de-St-Julien-episode-2-la-cuisson-et-le-cavage_v845.html, 2014.

11. In the French context, a Zone to Defend (ZAD from the French neologism “Zones à défendre”) is understood as a space occupied to physically blockade a development project deemed to be harmful to the environment.

12. Films such as *Indignados* (2012), by Tony Gatlif or *Volem rien foutre al païs* (2007), by Pierre Carles, are references for the neo-wood colliers.

13. In this sense, for a time the question was raised of launching an informal housing festival, which is deliberately totally contrary to the LOPSI 2 (law on orientation and programming for the performance of Homeland Security) which reinforces the powers of surveillance.

14. In particular, some of the ruins were consolidated and a nature trail was created.

15. The 2014 event will see the building of an earth oven.

16. An acronym which makes the neo-wood colliers laugh.

17. Here, *rhythmanalysis* is the study of scansion, both social and biological, which organise our relationship with time, the invention of its mechanical measurement (the clock) having literally colonised our daily life (Lefebvre, Régulier, 1985).

18. Such figures of reference are not specific to the Vercors. For example, in the Grands Causses of Lozère and Aveyron, there is the same attraction for reviving the heritage of the shepherd, a symbol of a past misery which continues to serve as a framework to visualise the link between the “tendeurs” (thrush trappers) and their pastoral ancestors for whom it was a source of income (Baticle, 2017).

19. Born from the opposition to the Center Parcs project in the forest of Chambaran, supported by the regional authorities.

20. Behaving like a wood collier, gathering firewood, means adopting the attitudes conferred today on the wood colliers of yesteryear, the ideal way to claim oneself to be an authentic

“Vertaco” (inhabitant of the Vercors). In a sector where there are many holiday homes, the reference to “Vertacos” (a diminutive of *Vertacomicii*, the Voconce tribe established in the region at the time of the Roman conquest, according to Pliny the Elder) is a way of differentiating themselves from the terms used by the experts, who prefer Vercusiens or sometimes Vercoriens. It should be noted that the emotional aspect of the term Vertaco (stereotyped figure of the “unconquerable, hairy Gaul”) means that it is more valued by individuals claiming a form of identification with the region.

21. Some authors who have worked on the concept of heterotopia (Perraton, 2004) show that it involves real work on the configuration of imaginary, designed to create or recreate an ideal community. The specific feature of the forest heterotopia studied here lies in its place within an obligatory time-scale. Unlike other spaces which obviously produce their own history, the charcoal pit is dependent on a set of actions which take place within a seasonal time-frame. In terms of the ordinary everyday life of the inhabitants of our era, these stages produce another, deeply anachronistic time, yet which is tempered by modernity.

22. Bruno Allès, *op. cit.*

23. The literary work of Jean Giono (partially written in the area) is particularly appreciated by some neo-wood colliers, in particular *Le Hussard sur le toit* (1951): a novel infused with the revolutionary “nocturnity” of the *Carbonaris*, in the context of the Italian *Risorgimento*.

24. What Michel Foucault defines as “sorts of effectively achieved utopias in which real locations, all the other real locations which can be found within a culture are at the same time represented, contested and reversed, sorts of places which are outside all places even though they can indeed be localised” (1984: 754-755).

ABSTRACTS

For around two decades the charcoal burning festivals of the Vercors have been bringing together a group of individuals – with libertarian and/or ecologist aspirations – for the space of a few weeks to produce an unusual chronotope with the support of the local inhabitants: the erection then carbonisation of a charcoal pit in the forest, around which will be added the village of the “neo-wood colliers” and the festive infrastructures according to the rhythm furnished by the progress of the combustion, in the fashion of a heterotopia contesting daytime life in the valley. Above and beyond the heritage aspect, this collective experience of the night in a mountain forest does not exclude variations in the realms of the imaginary, symbolic and political. Behind the pretext of charcoal, their protagonists unite through a spatial practice (the clearing) and refer to the two great guardian figures of the region: the wood collier ancestor and the resistance fighter as “clandestines of the night”. The chronotope thus set up therefore borrows from heterotopia and heterochrony insofar as the diurnal and especially nocturnal forest system constitutes “another space” in an atypical way of living the rhythms of daily life in connection (fantasised to a greater or lesser degree) with the History of the Vercors region. These festive metonyms of time and space are spatial and temporal anchor points which indicate how this experience is established in situ to challenge the dominant system.

INDEX

Keywords: Vercors, wood colliers, fire, forest, heterotopia, chronotope, presentism, dissidence, festival, autonomy, night life

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