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# FROM THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP, A CASE STUDY OF THE NEO-COUNTRYMEN

Aurélie Clot\*

## RESUME

Since the 1970s, neo-countrymen represent a population that constitutes itself as "marginal", according to the criteria of "marginality" defined by Barel in 1982. In popular language they are also sometimes described as being in the situation of retreat or withdrawal from the society. Through their rediscovery of the countryman lifestyle and the reconstruction of the peculiar forms of solidarity, both through construction of their housing environment and the elaboration of communitarian activities, we observe that they rediscover the meaning of the social link lying in the heart of the citizenship. Effectively, it is by the social link that the citizenship itself is defined; nevertheless, in the case of the neo-countrymen its meaning is not identical as for the legislators and the majority of the population. In that case, the citizen participation of these individuals seems non-existent or seriously compromised because they are perceived to be refusing the collectivity; they are seen in favour of marginality, implicitly favouring specific country or region – a situation that Geertz characterises as the "local" versus "global" (1986), in this case the State and the nation.

**Key words:** Sociology of the Environment, Counterculture, Neo-countrymen, Marginality, Social link

## Introduction

Based on a field research conducted with individuals as well as families in Ardèche (Rhône-Alpes), we shall observe that although positioning themselves as "opposing" the society, the neo-countrymen, however, participate in some forms of solidarity lying in the heart of the debate on the citizenship. We shall underline here the awareness of their citizenship implemented by the actors through local conflicts sources of mobilisation: an important aspect seems to be

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that the citizenship as the social link and the participation in the social affairs stems from the conflict.

To start with, it is necessary to contextualise this research, conducted in fulfilment of the Master's degree. In our research we were interested in actors who build their own housing themselves (mainly in the form of detached houses), in our case in rural areas. This term of self-constructor is empirical, appropriate for the interviewees, and revives an ideal of "to make it yourself", resembling the "do it yourself" current born in the United States in reaction to the accelerating trend of consumption. It favours an active attitude of creation, by way of the recovery and the recycling for example.

These actors claim to be constructing their lodging by themselves, but in fact, we may discern the partial and varying participation of other actors, the inhabitant will always appeal to other persons and professionals in the process of constructing his or her house. The investment of time and money by the respective individual also varies considerably.

These practices of self-constructors of the houses have raised questions about the relationship of the actor to his daily and immediate environment, that of the house. Here the actor interferes with this space in a thoughtful and active way, that is: choice of construction, materials, spatial arrangement of objects and functional spaces, and intervention in the conception, the building, the decoration, etc.

This field of research also opens other set of questions and problems, in particular that of the relationship of the actor to a larger group and to the entire society, consequently to the citizenship or the nationality, possibly also Europe. Generally, it raises questions about the relationship between local and global territory.

## **Citizenship as a form of a social link with strong symbolic and imaginative connotations**

The terms of citizenship and nationality have very close meanings and it is rather difficult to differentiate them. It is in the work of **Lamoureux** (2000) that we discern references to the citizenship which can allow us to think of our neo-countrymen.

Citizens are not self-appointed, they become citizens at birth or they are invested with citizenship by the State upon their request and on the condition of meeting given criteria.

The nationality indicates affiliation of an individual to a territory/state based on the *jus sanguine* or *jus soli* principle. In this definition of the nationality, the dimension of membership in a “political community” is only marginally present, however, it remains essential. The citizenship is characterised by a set of rights and of duties, organising political power of the individual, with an emphasis on participatory and active citizenship. **Lamoureux** notes that the term of nationality in its ideal form can cover and exceed that of a citizenship: Nation is a production of “social link which is situated in between the symbolism and the emotional” (Lamoureux, 2000, p. 7). Citizenship and nationality are overlapping, although not substitutive concepts.

Citizen would thus be an individual belonging to a nation with an individual power. It is not our purpose to comprehensively review the semantics, history or legal aspects of the citizenship; instead, we attempt to approach the citizenship as experienced and understood by the rural self-constructors of the houses. The citizenship is a term connoted legally and politically, without considering its strong symbolic dimension.

The citizenship is a valuable reservoir such as the equality, the justice, as well as other values related to democracy. In this sense, the citizenship is immersed in the ideology.

Accordingly, to mobilise the notion of democracy it is to speak about citizenship. The mobilisation of the actors is effectuated by the call to democracy, as we shall see it in the small case study which we outline later in this paper. But at the moment let us return to our neo-countrymen, and to their practice and forms of solidarity-citizenship.

During our encounters with the neo-rural actors, and more broadly with the alternative environment, we observe specific forms of social links which create the citizenship or strengthen it if necessary. To question the citizenship in this particular case, let us first get acquainted with these actors and their lifestyle.

### **The self-constructors of houses or more generally neo-countrymen: the urban willing to return to the nature by building their premises in the campaign**

To uncover their socio-cultural profile, we may draw a small descriptive typology of the interviewed actors. The generational dimension is particularly important here. In the examined body of interviewees the largest part of them can be characterised by the fact that they started to settle in the countryside

from the end of 1970s onwards, influenced by the “hippies” movement, the profile of which is described well in the work of **Hervieu** and **Léger** (1979).

This very particular profile is complemented by two other generational categories. The first one is constituted by the children of these neo-countrymen, population of about twenty years old which lives, for economic necessities but not only, with their parents. However, they live in a particular way because they build light housing environments – such as the wooden huts or yurts – on the premises belonging to their relatives. So, while living in light housing environments, they can partially take advantage of the family house comfort: water, electricity and domestic appliances. They resemble the profile of a student using the domestic equipment of his or her relatives on the weekends, in particular the washing machine. In a similar way as a student, the “offspring” of the neo-countrymen he experiences the “independence” for the first time.

Finally, we may identify a third group of self-constructors of houses: 30 and 40-year-old persons for whom the initiative of self-construction of their housing environment is less successful. They are not completely settled and plan a lot into the future (they have several possible professional projects; they envisage an evolution of their lifestyle from the completion of their house, etc.).

The examined body of interviewee, however, consists mainly of neo-countrymen; persons of about fifty years that made a “return to nature” in the 1970s and 1980s (Hervieu & Léger, 1979). The neo-countrymen left their urban lifestyle and work to live in the countryside and experiment traditional jobs, in particular those of the agriculture.

The neo-countrymen wanted to return to the nature and to search for autonomy. Nevertheless, **Hervieu** and **Léger** show that they eventually became state employees or assimilated in a process of integration in the rural environment. Indeed, at the beginning of these “anti” movements, the neo-countrymen marginalised themselves by creating communities to test another ways of living the everyday life, particularly in regard to the work, the choices of consumption, and the forms of family life. Two difficulties appeared. On one hand, the community life was difficult to carry on and to maintain, on the other hand, the return to nature lost its utopian dimension, because it could be fulfilled only by the practice of jobs requiring certain know-how, the agriculture for example. Therefore, the necessity of becoming integrated into the rural environment quickly appeared.

With the passing of time **Hervieu** and **Léger** observe in regard to the neo-countrymen, that *“it is necessary for them to reason in terms of production and exchanges, to accept the economic rules of the game and also the rules of social game which correspond to them, according to which the individual does exist as a social being only in his capacity of the place he occupies in the production relations. This is illustrated by the trajectory of a given community, gradually moving from the anti-institutional experiment to the cooperative organisation of the agricultural work.”* (Hervieu & Léger, 1979, p. 101).

Farming combined with the problematic building of social skills represents the main source of disappointments and difficulties for the neo-countrymen. Therefore, they gave up some dreams about living in the countryside, most significantly the idealised dimension of the “return to nature”. They started to focus on more classic jobs recognised by the majority of the inhabitants of the rural environment. These jobs allow an easier integration; they are mainly in the field of education (the primary education in particular), and the jobs of the field of services. The integration manifests itself also in their participation on the local political life, at the level of the municipality. Nevertheless, some neo-countrymen distanced themselves from this type of integration and pursued their return to nature in a different way, by showing a more respectful adaptation of their commitments and original ideas. It is the case of the self-constructors whom we met; because as **Hervieu** and **Léger** note, *“The community utopia disappeared or almost disappeared, substituted by the ecological dream of a ‘green, healthy and authentic’ life”* (Hervieu & Léger, 1979, p. 78).

We identify two lifestyles of neo-countrymen – self-constructors of housing. We may identify a community that has durable shape and functions; everyday life and work remain collective. On the other hand there is a group of neo-countrymen who consider the life in community an experience and not a sustainable lifestyle. The second group mentioned constituted the major part of the body of interviewees. They live isolated, in family or in couple, and they care a lot about the environment.

With their lifestyle, experience and new environmental ideologies, we may look upon the community of self-constructors of housing as a population with shared values and common social representations. Although they differ in their age, origin and job, the interviewees share some important similarities in their experience and beliefs.

## **The return to nature as a social and natural investment in an environment**

The refusal of urban lifestyle allows for the new forms of sociability. First of all, we can observe it through the investment of the actor in the rural environment.

The countryside is valued as environment. It is an environment loaded with positive connotations which we can discern in the use of terms identifying the "nature" with the "good" or with the "right", with the "healthy", etc. The countryside is given a value according to the logic of "preserving the natural heritage" which is *"process which builds the countryside as such, trying to establish another relationship with the non-urban space, at the same time legitimising the possibility that this space becomes the concern of everybody"* (Micoud, 2002, p. 79). Patrimony or heritage refers back to the citizenship: *"to administer the circles in a patrimonial way is an order which substitutes itself for the one that ordered to defend territories in a patriotic way. Thus they become a new theatre on which a local human grouping can best become aware of its global citizenship."* (Micoud, 2002, p. 86)

The actor puts a lot into a physical environment, i.e. the house and his surroundings, and, consequently, on the superior level in the municipality. The actors do not cut down any investment with their new territory, that it is aesthetic, moral or citizen sphere. On the contrary, they are active in the process of settlement in the countryside.

The house can be considered as the work of his owner, the place in which he invested economically, symbolically, and socially. The house appears at first as an economic investment because his inhabitant and owner dedicated to its construction the majority of his monetary resources and considerable amount of time. Self-constructor of the housing tries to build a durable house, which he qualifies as "solid, beautiful, and healthy". He is personally involved into the construction of his house which is his personal "territory". The house and its surroundings constitute the immediate environment of his inhabitant. The territory, i.e. the house and its surroundings, are thus vested with new values, as well as with practices corresponding to it such as garden, flowers and diverse aesthetic arrangements, etc.

The house is thought as a long-term investment. The house becomes a living place where we settle, and not a stopping-off place. This can be compared to the idea of "heritage values" described by Micoud (2002, p. 86).

Neo-countrymen appropriate the space and the time of their new environment. They choose crops, plantation and type of farming to be practised, they design the building according to their aesthetics, for example the stone for house which has to "become integrated" into the landscape, etc. Therefore, they have their own representation of the countryside, created according to their image, for their taste.

But the personal investment is not only a self-centred attitude. The individual, investing a lot in a place, tries to protect it, to improve in accordance with his values. Now, for it, he also has to adapt to the contingencies of the environment, whether they are physical, political, economic, aesthetic, etc. The social sphere is reminded to the individual who cannot act according to its pleasures.

The interviewees share a lifestyle, common values which are mobilised during social exchanges, whether they are of political, economic, agricultural kind, etc. On the basis of these shared values, the actors create classic exchange networks, for example a market for small organic producers on Saturdays mornings. The interviewees also admit various exchanges in the realm of their leisure and artistic activities. Between the neo-countrymen, there is a universe of shared values, exchanges and thus a particular form of social link.

The interviewees, individual or living in community, can be qualified as "neo-countrymen", because they are coming mainly from the city. But they can be also qualified as "marginal" in the meaning that each of them at a given moment in life decided to live in the countryside and to question the lifestyle of the consumer society.

The self-constructors of houses constitute what **Barel** (1982) calls a marginal group. The "marginal" are a set of individuals identified by their similarities without really constituting a group. The term "group" is thus used rather as an equivalent of "type". The marginal individuals are similar as to their initiatives of self-housing and of return to the countryside. These life choices make sense for the individuals; they also share certain values, representations and practices. They made an enlightened choice, a choice to live in the countryside. This choice corresponds to a significant departure from the previous life of the interviewee, because by leaving the city he created new representations, values and forms of sociability.

We return to the **Micoud's** definition (1976) of marginality as "a behaviour of contesting of the social order" (Micoud, 2002, p. 18). The term of marginality is paradoxical, because it denotes at the same time the victims of the system, qualified also as "outcasts", as well as those who are actors, who voluntarily exclude themselves from the system.

The "marginal" appear as a group or rather as a category of persons trying to create a better life. We invoke the concept of utopia from **Pessin** (2001). The utopia allows thinking about new patterns of human relationships, transgressing the given reality; said otherwise, it is a question of challenging the standing system to create a new one. In the society the actors search for and themselves create spaces of freedom, margins which are simultaneously the spaces of creation. What is important about the utopia is its imaginative function. "The imagination is a ground for exploring novelty and unexpected." (Pessin, 2001, p. 32) The self-constructors of houses may be considered to be actors attempting to realise their utopia and to "give up themselves to adventurous life, strive to catch up their own lives, to achieve it, to master it" (Pessin, 2001, 33).

Self-constructors build themselves out of the new representations concerning the everyday life. For example, the relationship with others is valued; self-constructors appeared to us to be warm, cordial person, opened to the others, to the foreigners, what distinguishes them strongly from the local natives.

Quite like the utopia, we may conclude that the citizenship works as a social imagination for the self-constructors. The citizenship, as well as the democracy, are terms loaded with values of change and hope to make a "better world" happen.

### **Case study: conflict as a source of political participation, or entrance of neo-countrymen to the public sphere**

Neo-countrymen form a marginalised population that is stigmatised in the rural environment. In this marginality, the actors can either retreat (that is accept the marginality, attributed to them from the outside), or transform this marginality into a group of opposition. We are going to illustrate this last type of marginality by a protest movement reported by self-constructors themselves during my interviews.

Though the conversations were conducted on the issue of self-housing, certain individual actors decided to speak about a political subject they seem to be very concerned with, i.e. an opening of an industrial quarry site near a neighbouring town. It is significant that this subject was approached on an interview concerning the self-housing.

The personal position of each interviewee was consciously worded and without ambiguity. All the actors were unanimous; the quarry site was considered a source of diverse and important pollutions. Furthermore, this project had been defined "in a dark way; public inquiries were not very clear and unnoticed, and felt *a posteriori* as hidden from the knowing of the inhabitants of the municipality. The neo-countrymen became suspicious and saw in this project a conflict of interests between the city hall and the entrepreneur. In this suspicion was added one more; the feeling of contempt and indifference from the part of the elected representatives in front of the anxieties and the questions of the neo-countrymen, who were not given answers, neither heard out. We thus see two sources of anxiety and mobilisation: first, relative to the exploitation of the quarry site in itself; secondly, the questions and a deep questioning of the local politics.

Several types of mobilisations appeared to form a diversified protest movement. The actors organised demonstrations, gatherings, associations, until finally their appeal to the administrative court proved to be positive.

This event was a turning point in the formation an opposition group to the politics of the municipality. Thanks to the project of quarry site the neo-countrymen asserted their values (environmental and political) as they criticised decisions of the municipality incompatible with their own values and lifestyle.

Beforehand the same actors had social links of various kinds except politics; the links and exchanges revolved around leisure activities, work, neighbourhood, etc. From this event on the ideologies and the demands of the neo-countrymen crystallised from the political perspective. As was later studied and documented by **Stefant** (2008) in a monograph on this event, the opposition movement constituted through groupings such as associations denouncing the project of quarry site, and its respective participants later formed an electoral list.

We can see that a particular event may change the attitude of neo-countrymen towards politics of in a process of both exclusion and inclusion at the same time. Before this event, the neo-countrymen were marginalised by the

“locals”, they were designated to be excluded. During and after this event **Stefant** points to the exaggeration of this marginalisation, because the neo-countrymen were strongly stigmatised as neo-countrymen. Now, we can add that this marginalisation differs from a simple process of exclusion, in the sense that it ultimately allowed for a political integration.

Since **Simmel** (1995), we know that the conflict creates a new form of sociability. The conflict allows taking out the individuals of a situation of indifference, to overcome the individual positions of repulsion by the participation in a common cause. The conflict creates social link and allows emphasizing social networks which previously existed under a more dispersed form. A group constituted by the opposition and the hostility to this image of the mayor, the figure with negative connotations because it links all the problems and the demands of the neo-countrymen. The conflict thus has a destructive role of the previous image of the local politics, even if the actors do not worry or worry only a little about this sector. But by building a group of opposition which joins in a conventional politics such as local elections, the group becomes integrated in a justifiable way (contrary to the image of the “marginal”) into the local public space.

The term “marginal” takes on a positive connotation for the marginalised actors: to be marginal it is to be different, it is to have peculiarities which we try to promote and to defend. The feeling of membership builds itself around common values, in particular in regard to the ideals of democracy and citizenship.

The right to dispute the forms and the functioning of the society appears for many neo-countrymen as an exercise that legitimises their citizenship. The citizenship appears here as a process by which the citizen thinks of the society and exerts his influence. It is not a question of following the system, of subscribing to it without concession. Quite to the contrary, the actor regards the society critically and tries to assert his values. It takes two forms which are often coexisting in the life of the neo-countrymen: the mobilisation which can go until the militancy on one hand; on the other hand the will to approximate to its values and its ethics in everyday life. The citizenship does not take necessarily the aspect of the mobilisation in the public and political realm. Continuing their ideal, some actors created a particular, reflexive sociability, where the place as citizen is guaranteed. The actors perceive themselves as citizen while each of them is an actor of the society and acts according to its ethics.

On one hand, the environmental considerations decline in a personal dimension: the ethics, the practices of the everyday life, the consumption. On the other hand, they meet at the level of local politics, in particular through fights for local causes which join patrimonial considerations of protection.

Through the example of the marginal group which was constituted as a part of a group of political opposition, we see the conception of citizenship appearing there where it seemed absent, when we think of the marginality as of retreat of the social public life and the space.

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