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The relationship between the newcomers in the Cévennes and schooling

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Soon after the events of 1968, the migrant population increased in the Gardoise and the Lozerian Cévennes and in other rural enclaves¹. That population was mainly composed of former city dwellers. They have settled in hamlets deserted by their owners who preferred more dynamic regions². Although the waves of migration waxed or waned depending on the time period, it has never stopped. As regards demographics, it turned out to be a positive evolution after decades of flight from the area³. As regards sociology, it resulted in an energization of those rural areas. Stigmatized and deserted for a long time, rural areas now attract people looking for a better way of life even though the “better way of life” may have a very different meaning depending on people’s profiles. The results of our survey⁴ show that the question of education was a major factor in motivating people with children to settle in the Cévennes.

¹ The villages of the area of enquiry are classified in the “isolated rural «category by the French National Institute of Economic and Statistical Information (INSEE).cf the rural typology of the INSEE in: Champsaur P.(dir.) *Les campagnes et leurs villes*, 1998, INSEE-INRA.

² For example, as P.Revol underlines about the French –Valley: “*The French Valley lost three quarters of its population between 1946 and 1968.*” (2002, p 14)

³ Cf *INSEE Premiere*, nb 726, july 2000 ; Kayser B,(1996) *ils ont choisis la campagne*, La Tour d’aigues, Aubes Editions. B.Hervieu and J.Viard noted that one third of the countries not only suffers a population decrease but mainly an aging population when another third of the rural cantons has been recording the highest increase rates in population for twenty years (2001 : 61)

⁴ My ethnological enquiry, in collaboration with F .Clavairolle is based on several stays in the area since 2002, partly among the families studied. We observed and collected more than eighty qualitative interviews from different local stakeholders (former and new inhabitants, natives of the Cevennes, leaders of the community life, teachers, pupils...).

Therefore, choosing to settle in the country is linked to the desire to, on the one hand, bring up children in an environment which is seen as encouraging their blossoming and, on the other hand, send them to smaller schools.

This paper deals with the analysis of the relationship between the families and schooling and, on a wider scale, between the families and the area, in relationship to schooling. The five primary schools studied are organized either around a decentralized intervillage educational grouping (*regroupement pédagogique intercommunaux* : RPI)⁵ or in a one-class school or one with several classes. The pupils come from several villages situated in three valleys of the Cévennes : the Borgne valley, the French valley and the Salendrique . There are between 240 and 260 children depending on the year. The disparity in the number of pupils is not only due to the demographics but also to the people's frequent moving from residence to residence - because of the difficulty of finding lodging - as well as to the popularity of a particular school. As in every small isolated rural school, that disparity has consequences on the maintaining or the closing of classes, even of the school itself. The future of the schools is of great interest to a number of key players, such as the elected representatives, the mayor, the elected parents in school parents organization, the teachers and the inhabitants as a whole, taking action all together when their village is threatened. Nevertheless, despite this consensus to protect their school, tensions and disagreements exist between the parents and the elected representatives, between the teachers and the parents and between the parents themselves. Furthermore, the consensus doesn't mean that the families unreservedly support their schools.

Before studying the parents' expectations towards schools and then the educational methods themselves, let's look at the different waves of settlers in the Cévennes to show the different profiles of people involved in this study. Although the different periods of settlement are not completely discrete, they represent different settling archetypes ; the migratory process, the motivations and the forms of integration into the welcoming society reveal the socioeconomical and ideological context in which the reasons for leaving appeared.

⁵ There are two forms of Intervillage Educational Grouping: the centralized IEG gathering the children of many villages in one school and the decentralized IEG based on the grouping of the different primary school levels in several local schools.

I - Successive steps of settlement

From 1968 to the 1975 : “the utopian immigrants”

From the end of the 1960s to the middle of the 1970s, the people settling in rural areas were mainly people D.Hervieu and B.Leger called “utopian immigrants “(1978) .They wanted to protest against society and to avoid the abuses of the so-called consumer society.

Rejection being more important than planning, they had to try ways of life opposing - in their definition - the way of life offered by the prevailing society and aiming at promoting a real counter-society. Hence, the life in community countered the normalcy of the conjugal life with children, the strength of the social link within the network of the community countered the selfishness of social relationships in urban areas, and the rarity of goods imposed in the “wilderness” countered the rampant consumerism, and so on. Driven by an anti-institutional ideology and often because they had been disappointed in their former militant experiences, the first dwellers didn't get involved in the local life. Many of them neither attempted to become integrated into the villages nor to take the political power over, because they no longer believed in that way of changing the world. If not systematically rejected, the children's education in the village school was not a priority for those first newcomers who, in any event, only had a few children.

The arrival of those who had plans for the future

From the middle of the seventies to the end of the eighties, the change both in the profile and in the way of life of the Cévennes migrants was very clear. Although the ideal of a community life was still present, housing became more individual, focused on the family once again. Still seeking a break with their former life and, for most of them, with city life in general, they now arrived with much more thought-out plans. There was a change in the relationship to the region, no longer considered by the majority as an empty space but as a rural area that needed protection and support. Those people with future plans for their life and their work in the country really intended to integrate into the local society. Their integration took place in several ways, not mutually exclusive, such as taking part in the council, in the associations, in the local economic activities or such as taking action to defend the patrimony, the schools or other public services. Contrary to the former period when the children were ideally socialized through the group, the family unit now represented the privileged setting for the children's education. As a pluriactive woman farmer who had been renovating a house for

some years said: *“we had solid plans for our children. We wanted them to do something with us. We wanted to build something with them [...] to bring life back to a deserted place and that is what happened. We have built things with them. They have taken part in all the stages of construction because we wanted them to know how to do it”*.

Since the nineties : a multiform migration

Though the settlers of the earlier period never formed homogeneous groups, the variety of their profiles has been even more accentuated since the nineties. This last wave of migration, going on today, has been reflecting the deep changes in the French society for about fifteen years and, more precisely, the social and economical crisis that has reinforced the inequalities. Besides, because there are very few rundown houses to buy and to do up, because there isn't a lot of rental housing and because of the huge increase in the price of land and housing, getting housing is now the stumbling block of settling in the Cévennes, hence the growing phenomenon of “hutting”(living in primitive dwellings). The Cévennes migrants of this period can be divided in three main categories. First, the people with low incomes who sometimes endure great hardships, both material and even psychological. They are nomads, avoiding towns or urban exclusion and they arrive in the Cévennes mainly as a result of their chance meetings and travels⁶. Second, the better-off families for whom moving to the Cévennes and changing their lifestyle has been a long-considered plan, mainly financially speaking, so they are more likely to succeed. The third category combines on the one hand the people who have chosen to move to the country to find a better quality of life but who haven't changed their activity and, on the other hand, retired people who came back to live in the family house, in what used to be their secondary house or who bought a house there⁷.

The newcomers' profile also changes according to the places where they settle and to the social networks. Some of the villages with a strong 68 tradition, that is to say that most of their inhabitants arrived in the seventies and are now well established in the councils and in

⁶ As N. Mathieu stresses :*“The unemployment crisis, the fear of social decline and of exclusion encourage people to prefer the country because that represents, imaginatively or really ,a place where people can live modestly thanks to a low rent, a vegetable garden, free nature practices, interrelationships , but also to anonymity”* (1997, p 25).

⁷ That category of new country residents, including the second home owners, form what Y. Jean calls *“the quality of life practitioners”* (2007, p 18).

the associations, appeal to members of different networks members (altermondialist, ecologists, trade-unionists, travelers...) because they offer an environment supportive of the expression of the way of life or of the values they uphold. The situation is different in other valleys where people settle in a more individual way, which doesn't prevent local social networks to develop and spread, mainly around schools.

However, in spite of the heterogeneousness (social, economical, geographical origin, age average) of the people who have been settling in the Cévennes for forty years, they all correspond to a binary diagram rejecting urban life and all its nuisances, whether experienced or feared (air and noise pollution, insecurity, bad working or living conditions, dilution of social links, etc...) to the country, seen as the antithesis of the city (quality of the environment, good living conditions, strong solidarity etc.) Nevertheless, how people explain or justify their departure towards isolated areas and their new choice of life is that, more than the related quality of life, their desire was to lead a life corresponding to their new values, through a new relationship with the environment, with other people, with consumerism and with their children's education.

II- Settled parents request education...

School is not an exception to this rural/urban dichotomy. Therefore, the analysis of the practices linked to schooling reveals the weight of the imaginary ideas of rural and urban living, the image of the school which is itself very tied to the image of its physical environment. The education of the children here is seen as opposed to the dominant values of competition, often associated with urban life, symbolizing individualization for those who fled it, and perceived to be less in rural areas. The positive images of rural life that have been partly responsible for encouraging settlement in this area also include schools which were sometimes idealized before people left. They are described as being of "human size", hence favoring the human interaction, rooted in the area (in people's mind) and open on to the village and the surrounding nature. Moreover, despite the variety of the newcomers' profiles and of the conditions of their moving in, they all expect common things from education : the children's blossoming, their freedom and their self-sufficiency, very often considered essential goals of education. Nevertheless, the idealization of rural schools and the precise direction of the parents' requirements concerning education sometimes provoke a deep disillusion and even conflicts with the teachers themselves.

During the period of communal living and within the communes, the desire to break both with the education example focused on the nuclear family and the school system preparing the young to integrate into the consumer society as well as the paucity of educational options led to more frequent “alternative” collective educational experiences than today. Nevertheless, questioning the system would not necessarily lead to a total rejection of school if the differences between the school’s philosophy and the parents’ demands was not too great. Also, that hostility towards school still exists in a limited way. Some parents, with the help of other parents who have the same point of view, organize to educate nursery or primary school aged children, at home. But here again, these educational practices can be reversed since some families keep children out of school for only a few years and sometimes families may finally find a school corresponding to what they are looking for, such as C.’s story about her daughter attending the village school : *“I intended not to send my daughter to school with the help of an association called “children first» or with the parents’ organizations. I had friends in S. whose children didn’t go to school. I had taken a stand against state education. If I had stayed in S., my daughter wouldn’t have gone to school. We wanted to find a house near a small one-class school⁸. I didn’t want my daughter to be in a class with only children of her age, that because she was 6 she couldn’t be with 9 year olds ».*

Attending the village public school remains the norm for the majority of the settled families. The pupils’ parents argue that sending their children to school allowed it to be maintained in the village as it is seen as a prime place for the children’s socialization and for the parents meeting, as well, as a way of integration and of action upon the local environment⁹. Mother of two children, S. speaks about the importance of the school as far as people’s relationships are concerned: *“In my opinion, the school helps people to meet each other, all the more so with the IEG, as the children come from different villages to attend the same class. The children want to see their friends, you go with them, you speak a little with the parents and then you meet them on other occasions; therefore , I think school is also important for that”.*

⁸ Even if it concerns only a few people, some teachers speak about what they call a chaotic schooling of some children whose parents are in extreme precarious situations, isolated or with personal difficulties (drug addiction, alcoholism).

⁹ At the end of the seventies, D. Hervieu and B. Léger noted *“when their children attended the village school, the former fringe showed they were giving up their own rebellion against the school system whereas the today newcomers thus give proof of their commitment within a local community defending its past and its identity”* (1979 : 108)

As far as the relationship with the institution itself is concerned, rather than creating alternative educational structures, the parents have invested in the public school through the school parents' associations in which most of them closely collaborate with the schoolteachers. Hence they work together to model it on their expectations. In the three valleys, the festive activities, the school outings and trips, (more expensive, as far as the transportation is concerned, in those mountain areas) initiated by the teachers and carried out by the parents, are largely financed by fundraising activities (lotto, tombola, village meals, refreshment stalls, shows...) organized by the School Parents' Association. However, it involves many other people from the village.

Therefore " *the small leafy setting country school*" is appreciated by the parents who settle in the countryside. Experiencing the seasons, knowing the names of trees, being close to the animals, respecting and living in the middle of Nature are described as important parameters of family and school education. The opening up of the school onto the natural environment and onto the village (the exploration of different jobs, carnivals etc.) is appreciated by all the school parents when they think it is real. It thus corresponds to a lot of parents' desire to root their children's education in the land they have chosen as well as in the practice. Out of the school itself, the teaching staff and its relationship with the children, through the proposed educational activities, are important factors in the school's reputation¹⁰. Although it is less possible in those isolated areas than in other areas, the parents may decide to change schools and even to withdraw their children from school when the school doesn't live up to their expectations. This negative relationship is more frequent in secondary schools where the educational methods are considered more traditional and the relationship between teachers and pupils less good.

III- ... For a school open on the outside

Undoubtedly, the newcomers have contributed to the increase in the number of pupils in schools and to evolve the demand for education. However, the school teachers have also worked to make schools attractive and thus have contributed to maintaining or increasing the number of pupils. Ideas about "alternative" educational methods which started long before the

¹⁰ The people interviewed didn't say a lot about their expectation of their children's school's standards. When they did, it concerned, most of the time, secondary schools.

events of May 1968, saw a new expansion and were applied much more frequently after the seventies.

The desire of the newcomers of the seventies to break with the school-centered education sometimes coincided with the teachers', as a teacher in a Salendrinque village attests : *"In 1974, the parents mobilized heavily to prevent the closing of a class in the school and after a hard fight, we won... My colleague and I have developed a Freinet educational method, very open on the outside. By word of mouth, couples with children settled in and around the village so that their children could attend our school, said to be "alternative" when it was in fact a public school. Then, in the eighties, the village bought a school bus; children attending another school for practical reasons were attracted. There was the opening of a third class, then a fourth one. They were 16 children 10 years ago ; they are almost one hundred today"*.

Although the educational methods and the good relationships with the teachers favored the setting in one place rather than in another, a school's reputation is no longer enough to keep classes in areas where the housing possibilities are, as seen before, limited. The council can encourage people to settle by increasing the number of rental accommodations and by developing, most often together with the parents, some facilities around school (school meals, after-school clubs.)

In the two IEGs studied, the teachers insist on the necessity but also the development of team work in these multi-setting schools where decompartmentalization is also practiced. In one of them, the primary and the intermediate classes are thus put together and twice a week, several groups are formed to attend classes in the fine arts, sports, music, science and the Occitan language. According to the teachers, that fusion of levels (permanent in one-class schools and limited in IEGs,) helps the children to become independent, both in and out of school. Generally speaking, parents like this independence. Yet, it seems to be less appreciated in secondary schools where children are asked to do the same things at the same time. To enlighten the fact that the child's independence was not valued in the secondary school of the area as it is by herself and her colleagues, one of the IEG schoolmistress quotes what she describes as being *"an anecdote showing that the culture between the primary and the secondary school teachers is different" : " once, one of the teachers said to my colleague that the children coming from our school were not even able to write down what was on the board... and that's true. The children here never write down something the schoolteacher may have written on the board. Indeed, whether they take down his dictation, whether they*

have to copy out from a book, but they don't develop the visual skill needed to look at the board and copy out a passage in a limited time."

Schools have also gone into partnerships, more or less regularly as the case may be, with some associations (rural community homes, Cineco¹¹, the traveling playroom, musical and sport associations). A lot of schoolmasters are keen on taking their pupils out of school and opening their mind to the outside world because they think that it is not only a way to compensate for the enclosing of the area, but mainly because it is, according to them, a necessity as far as education is concerned. Indeed, although parents and teachers mention the isolation of their village, it doesn't appear to be the main reason for making the school opened on the outside. It is more a question of educational advantage, of a source of development for the children, whatever the context may be, isolated or not. On this account, the participation of the pupils in the village activities is as much appreciated by one and all as the school outings, or the school bilateral exchanges, offering the children a change.

Those extra-curricular activities are also opportunities for social interaction. That was clear enough when, on a schoolmistress's initiative and with the help of a colleague from Lyon, the IEG of the French Valley and a school in the Long Valley (Lozère) set up an exchange with the Ladakh and Mongolia : The inhabitants of the French villages (pupils' parents or not) put up eighty adults and/or children from those foreign countries. The next year, it was the young Cévennes inhabitants' turn to go there.

IV- The social interaction around school.

In the area where there were and there still are many new inhabitants, the community life shows a great vitality. P. Revol (2002) about the French Valley and A. Rivière-Honneger (1998) about the Lasalle district demonstrate that the proportion of membership and of participation from the new inhabitants in the associations is very high, mainly in the associations linked to schools¹². The associative participation reveals the population's desire

¹¹ Travelling projections of films in the Gard and Lozère Valleys in the Cévennes.

¹² *"The involvement in the local associative life is very important : For more than one out of two new families ,one member at least joins one or several associations"* (P.Revol 2002,

to invest in the local area on a cultural basis (associations dealing with festivities, arts music and sports), a political one (national associative movements) and on an economical one (grouping of producers, of organic food, collective vegetable gardens ...). This investment doesn't appear to be a withdrawal, on the contrary, it is often thought of as being linked to the "global" mentality, thus fitting the motto "think globally, act locally", a motto widely claimed by the newcomers. That abundance of associations not only helps integration but also expresses the different points of view and the conflicts between the inhabitants at every level. On the other hand, the consensus often concerns school because, at least in the polled area, it represents both a place to socialize and a place of collaboration where people can meet who normally would not interact with one another¹³.

As B.Kayser notices "*the country school shoulders a much more important role than that of mere educative duty. It is at the heart of socialization (both for parents and for children), of sociability and of cultural life*". (Kayser,1993, p18). A schoolmaster working in one of the schools visited mentions that federative role of schools: "*The conflicts between people often come from the fact they don't speak to each other. Therefore, they imagine what the other is or might be and when they meet at school or in associations, they get to know each other and they see people in a different way, that's obvious. Then, the school, also through the pupils' parents association, is, in my opinion, the best place of integration for the children*". If divisions emerge among the different groups of inhabitants from time to time, people seem to be reconciled at the school gate".

Nevertheless, school can also be a source of tensions. That was the case in 1990 when a school from another community wanted to become part of an educational grouping that had been in existence for ten years. The education authority threatened to close the school and proposed uniting it with the existing IEG. The inhabitants were divided. So as to reject the proposal some inhabitants argued that the distance to school would be increased. Other parents agreed with the authority either because they considered that closing a school with not

p33). In the Lasalle district, 55% of the new dwellers belong to one or several associations, usually created by the eldest (Rivière-Honneger, 1998, p59).

¹³ For example, all the people we've met, with or without children provided with schooling, have mentioned the preparation of the bilateral exchange and the welcome of foreign children and adults as intense moments of sociability and collaboration.

enough children was the only solution or because they wanted to integrate the grouping. There were several things at stake and the interests were different according to people's status (Elected people, parents, and teachers,) where they lived, the bonds between the villages, the attitude towards the part of the village population to be integrated, how much the parents appreciate the teachers work etc. In periods of crisis, the school can also create or revive tensions among the inhabitants as much as it can unite them against a common adversary.

Conclusion

The families didn't choose to move to an isolated rural setting solely for reasons having to do with schooling. However, it was one of the strongest arguments. Many parents who have a negative picture of urban schools, for one reason or another, think they will find or already have found an educational environment more linked to their expectations in small country schools. The setting of primary schools, their small size and the union of the different grade levels appear to be positive conditions, but alone are not enough to ensure a good schooling to their children ; their demands concerning "open" educational methods and good relationships between the children and their teachers also guide their relationship with schools. The parents and their children's relationship with school evolve along with the years of schooling, introducing new educational issues in secondary schools. Some people think that the small size of the primary and secondary schools is an advantage, while other people think that in secondary school it is a disadvantage when, far from enhancing the opening with the outside and the intimacy with the teachers, it seems to confine the children in a narrow environment and in distant relationships with their teachers. Although the long daily commutes by bus or living at boarding schools are often borne as heavy constraints for secondary school pupils, these considerations about relationships or education (tensions between the children and their teachers, bad relationships between the children, depreciation of the educational methods etc.) would somewhat explain the choice of home schooling for some children. Generally speaking, the gap between the educational expectations of the newcomers to Cévennes and the school situation tends to become deeper in secondary schools, hence contrasting with the subjective satisfaction of the parents concerning the village primary school. Their involvement in the school is not as strong, neither is the bond between the school and the area.

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