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Spatial Patterns of Transformative Social Innovation: The example of alternative initiatives in Ardèche, France

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Spatial Patterns of Transformative Social Innovation.

The example of alternative initiatives in Ardèche, France

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Abstract

*This paper discusses spatial patterns of transformative social innovation (TSI), based on an empirical case study of alternative initiatives in Ardèche, France. It notes that the spatiality of social innovations has been neglected in contemporary social innovation studies and argues that operating with geographical concepts can be particularly instructive when analysing the transformative potential of social innovations. The first section describes TSI in Ardèche as the spatial enactment of alternative values and principles, resulting in the emergence of **places of difference**. The second part of the paper explores then two distinct dynamics of **scaling up** that are stimulated by the actors of these places. The first is the dissemination of TSI-related knowledge within transnational alternative networks, encouraging the replication of such alternative initiatives elsewhere in the country and around the world. TSI places act here as nodal points in multi-scale networks. The second dynamic is the spreading of alternative principles into the immediate geographical environment. This happens by directly interacting with the local population and public authorities, but also in an indirect manner: Ardèche has acquired the image of an alternative territory, and public authorities started to act in favour of this image. It is argued that further research on scaling up (or rather **scaling deep**) of TSI should gain in analyzing such processes of **territorialisation** of ‘alternative’ values – in the sense of the spreading of principles with transformative potential in space.*

Introduction

The literature on social innovation rarely discusses its spatial patterns. This is not really surprising, as it is an interdisciplinary research field largely dominated by business management and social and economic studies rather than geography (Longhurst, 2015). Analyzing how social innovation shapes space and is disseminated through it, however, is instructive when addressing social innovation that contributes to societal transformation, i.e. transformative social innovation (TSI) (Avelino et al. 2015). TSI actors share principles and values that differ from those of conventional authority. Many TSIs aim at a more balanced articulation between the economy, nature and society, and are part of social economies, transition movements and other initiatives that are often classed as alternative or grassroots. We hypothesize here that such initiatives actually function as pioneers of *alter-modernity*, indicating ‘a decisive break with modernity and the power relations that define it’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009, 103) and are ‘significant guidelines to potential for future (societal) transformations’ (Giddens, 1990) p. 158). Such initiatives shape space differently by doing things differently. Analyzing the dynamics of place-making and -shaping is instructive about the ‘otherness’ of underlying intentions, modes of doing and being, and the ‘alternative habitus’ (Vasudevan, 2014) of TSI actors. It thus allows such intended otherness to be explored as the driver of potential societal transformation.

A second argument in favor of exploring spatial patterns of TSI is its usefulness when analyzing TSI’s potential for systemic change. Literature on social innovation has generally addressed its growth and dissemination as *scaling up* (Murray et al., 2010; Mulgan, 2007) – thus mobilizing a geographical concept designating the scalar. Here again, we note that the small amount of literature addressing scaling-up processes uses the concept more as a metaphor for the proliferation of social innovation than for spatial analysis (see Dees et al. 2004, Davies and Simon 2013; Westley et al., 2014). Analyzing the scales and spatial patterns of organizational growth, networking, multiplication and other forms of scaling up, and focusing on the spread of alternative norms and principles in space can provide insights into the transformational dynamics induced by social innovations.

This paper aims to help initiate discussion on the spatial patterns of transformative social innovation by describing a concrete case study on alternative initiatives in Ardèche, a rural region in southeast France. This study is part of a four-year program of the French Research Agency (ANR) on innovation in marginalized regions around the Mediterranean (ANR Med-Inn-Local) and is based on 26 qualitative interviews with actors of 15 alternative initiatives on their values and views, work- and lifestyles, and their innovations and innovation-related knowledge transfer.

Since the 1970s, Ardèche has been attracting communities that question capitalist society and endeavour to live outside the dominant system. There are currently more than 30 initiatives sharing similar visions of economic, social and energy transition. Many of these communities have created place-based life projects combining accommodation, work and leisure. The first section of this paper analyses how these communities produce places of ‘alternativity’. Taking their alternative values and principles as a starting point, we describe their activities as the spatial enactment of these values. Their concretization and materialization is here understood as a process of creative (re)appropriation of space. This has resulted in the emergence of more or less confined

'places of difference' in the Ardèche region, characterized by modes of doing and being and normative views that these communities consider as differing from the dominant conventional system².

The second part of the paper discusses two distinct dynamics of 'scaling up'. First, it describes the transfer of specific knowledge about innovative and transformative practices towards like-minded individuals and communities from outside Ardèche. Places here act as nodal points within transnational alternative networks, stimulating the replication of such alternative initiatives elsewhere in the country and around the world. Links with the immediate environment are not relevant here. The spatial pattern taken by this type of 'scaling up' informs about a distinct process of societal transformation, resulting in the multiplication of widely-scattered alternative places, while transformative processes in the immediate geographical environment are less stimulated. Alongside this, we observed direct and indirect impacts on local Ardèche communities and public authorities. Actions intending to integrate the local community as well as the local authorities' growing interest in innovative techniques and principles indicate that transformative dynamics affect/ing the dominant conventional regime are at work in Ardèche.

1. The enactment of *places of difference* within the dominant conventional system

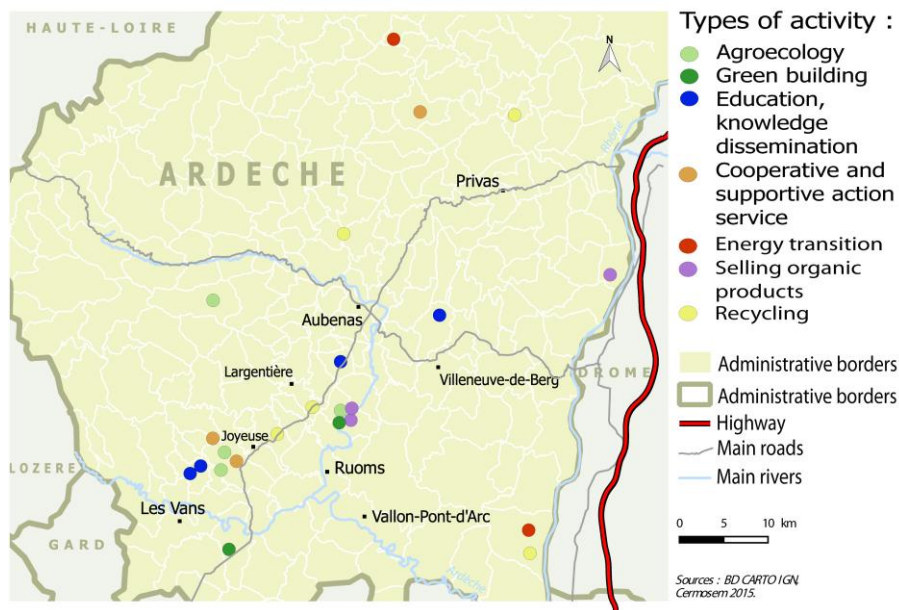
Alternative initiatives engaging in agroecology, eco-construction, renewable energy, recycling and the social economy have been mushrooming in Ardèche, especially since 2000 (see Figure 1). While the first generation of alternative 'settlements' in the 1970s aimed more at retreating from the mainstream system than transforming it, more recent ones explicitly express their vision of contributing to the transition of Ardèche, as testified by the adherence of most of them to the *oui-transition07* regional community comprising around 30 member organizations. We address them as transformative social innovations here.

1.1 TSI drivers: *Resistance to fundamental characteristics of modernity*

The analysis of the interviewees' discourse reveals that these initiatives are based on values that challenge not only neoliberal capitalism, a current narrative, but also other fundamental characteristics of (high-)modern society. As shown below (Figure 2), living with nature, sharing, conviviality, frugality and autonomy are central issues for Ardèche's alternativity actors. In this way they question progress, accumulation, overuse of natural resources, the division of labor and other key features of modernity, as described by Durkheim, Weber, Giddens and other scholars.

² 'Conventional regime' is here defined and the societal system were individuals behave « according to a certain number of principles, which orient individual's behaviours within that society. These principles, of a conventional nature, rest upon common values shared by the individuals of that society » (Buclet N and Lazarevic D. (2014) Principles for sustainability: the need to shift to a sustainable conventional regime. *Environment, Development and Sustainability Science* Online first: 20.

Figure 1: Types of transformative social innovations in Ardèche



Source: (Koop and Senil, 2016)

Figure 2: Alternative values challenging fundamental principles of (high-)modern society

Alternative values*	Characteristics of modern societies**
1 Living with nature, preservation of natural resources	Transformation of nature, overuse of natural resources
2 Sharing, caring, conviviality, inter-generational living, becoming independent of money	Individualism, competition
3 Local economy	Globalized economy
4 Autonomy, independence, self-sufficiency, creativity, community, pooling of resources and collective action	Division of labor, industrialism, trust in abstract systems
5 Self-fulfilment, learning by doing	Expert knowledge – expert systems
6 Frugality	Growth – accumulation – consumerism
7 Deceleration	Most effective use of time
8 More circular thinking, personal journey	Rationality – linearity – progress
9 Diversity	Standardization, homogenization
10 Horizontal trans-local exchange networks	Hierarchic structure, control, order, regulation
11 Partial local re-embedding	Dis-embedding of social relations from local context
12 Reflexivity	Reflexive ordering and reordering of social relations
13 Humanized technology	Technology

* 1-9: mentioned by the interviewees; 10-13: as analyzed by the research team

** According to (Durkheim, 2014; Giddens, 1990; Scott, 1998; Weber, 2003 [1921]); (Werlen, 1995)

Source: (Koop and Senil, 2016)

It should be noted that the interviewees emphasize that they do not want to be considered as returning to the past. In fact, the analysis of their modes of doing shows that they do not refuse high technology or global networking, as they also are reflexive and apply linear thinking. They consider their principles as guidelines for a necessary transition towards enhanced individual wellbeing and a collective sustainable future. We propose here to consider these principles as an overall framework shaping the *intention* behind the action (Giddens, 1987) or, with reference to improvisation in music, as a *collectively shared code* (Koop and Senil, 2016). There are more or less concrete ideas about housing, farming and producing goods and services, there is motivation and enthusiasm, but no master plan exists for such transformative dynamics. Improvisation and experimentation are thus essential characteristics of the way ideas are put into practice, as will be illustrated below.

1.2 Filling space with new sense: the emergence of places of difference

We will describe here the emergence of places of diverseness by analyzing three dimensions: the acquisition of space, its modes of appropriation and the creation of collective identity. The first step by communities who have decided to set up an alternative project is the acquisition of a convenient place to settle. Having space is an essential precondition for putting their value system into practice and living their *heterotopia*. Many of the communities said they had chosen the ruins of an abandoned hamlet and tried to acquire the land legally. Unlike actors of Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ), official recognition is a crucial issue for them, as it gives the right to exist within the dominant system. However, it is also the first conflict with the conventional regime: how to set up a framework that is legally recognized by a societal system based on individual property rights but is compatible with the idea of collective use? Some groups took several years to reach a financial and legal arrangement in line with both their principles and the official norms. A frequent solution is acquisition of property through the Civil Real Estate Company scheme admitting plural ownership. In most cases, up to three or four people acquired the collective property rights. In order to avoid unequal power relations caused by ownership, the formal owners then granted heritable building right to the other project members - who specifically adopted an official status (e.g., association or cooperative). Another interesting example of reconciling alternative values with the formal system is the detection and reactivation of an old existing law: shares are distributed to the members, not according to their financial input but to the work time invested by each. In-depth knowledge of formal regulations is thus necessary to combine or bypass them.

The second step is then the appropriation of the acquired space, i.e. actions to fill it with the intended meaning. Our case study revealed life worlds characterized by improvisation: shared motivation, creativity, flexibility, learning by doing, assembling known elements to create something new, mixing intuition and inspiration and spontaneous coordinating with the other members – the same as in musical improvisation (Soubeyran, 2014).

Nature preservation and frugality clearly appear as major guiding principles. They are specifically tangible when analyzing the construction of dwellings. The greatest possible use of local resources, adaptation to the landscape and preservation of the environment lead the communities to assemble and hybridize local or external vernacular knowledge with modern technologies. Inspiration comes from contacting local craftsmen as well as from information exchanges with other social movements at local and global scales. The buildings thus have an amazing mix of styles and materials: a timber house might be inspired by Canadian techniques, but only locally available resources are used (such as caissons filled with crushed recycled cork to isolate walls). Houses might

have green roofs of lichen and glass-bottle floors (a technique dating back to ancient Rome and very fashionable in contemporary ecological housing). Mongolian yurts are sometimes taken as source of inspiration and adapted to local climate conditions, using wood instead of felt. The (re)construction of traditional stone houses might be inspired by a Japanese style and built in a round form for maximum light; insulation techniques are improved by putting movable glass panes in front of a wall to maximize heat, the so called 'captive wall' - a local innovation at *Hameau des Bois*. The principle of frugality is also present in the construction of machines and infrastructure for everyday life: homemade solar water heaters, washing machines powered by human energy (by pedaling a bicycle connected to the machine), toothpaste produced with local plants, the examples are numerous.

The **principles of solidarity and cooperation** are also fundamental for all activities, including economic ones. These values are always prioritized over efficiency, productivity and profit. They even influence the choice of techniques and production material. At *Viel Audan*, for instance, the community intentionally chose not to purchase a modern oven for bread production because their traditional oven obliges them to work collaboratively. At *Hameau des Buis*, intergenerational activities are a guiding principle. Production that exceeds the needs of the community is always a relevant issue, and its market use is discussed collectively.

The **principle of autonomy** leads to self-production and construction, using local resources as much as possible. It is also a means for responding to the community's own ecological and esthetic values that break with conventional standards. The search for **personal fulfillment** and the control of one's own life, linked to the idea of autonomy, opens ways to dispense with the division of labor, felt as being alienating. The labor force is activated collectively according to the desires and skills of each member. The goal of work is not efficiency, but self-fulfillment. Most of the interviewees said they had chosen various jobs and tasks from the beginning of their project according to their evolving personal interests. It is clear that such a mode of living together requires adequate forms of governance. Such communities are characterized by horizontal organization, participatory democracy or, sometimes, anarchic principles (the community trusts people who propose a project and gives them the responsibility for implementing it).

These examples should have given some insight into how alternative principles are enacted in space. The collective organization of alternative living based on improvisation leads to what some interviewees called a particular '*esprit de lieu*' (spirit of place). Sites are imbued with a specific meaning, with culture and materiality that differ from the dominant conventional system. We call this the *enactment of places of difference*. They might also be called 'alternative life worlds' or, in line with Arturo Escobar, as 'territories of difference' - in the sense that they are appropriated, shaped and governed in a different way, with different means, giving them a different meaning (Escobar, 2008). Following John Law, we could assert that they are 'different realities being done in different practices' (Law, 2011) (p. 2). If these spaces of difference are to be understood from an epistemological or ontological standpoint, this could be a future field for research.³

³ In his article "What's Wrong with a One-World", John Law states that postcolonial studies have the potential to help Western scholars to distance themselves from "One World" thinking and understand that different realities exist. Concerning the Global North, he further states that '*it becomes urgent, too, to pick through the practices within the north that multiply realities, even as they insist on a universe rather than a fractiverse*' (Law, 2011, p. 3). Further research in this direction could be fruitful for transformative social innovation studies.

Concerning their ‘otherness’, such initiatives have similarities with indigenous movements claiming their right to live according to their values, with *Temporary Autonomous Zones* and other (spatial) forms of what is often called ‘resistance’ or counter-culture in the globalized world - not as the negation of modernity as such, but as other, alternative modernities (Hardt and Negri, 2009).

2. Spatial patterns of scaling up

At first sight, social innovation and transformation in Ardèche seem to concern only the alternative communities and ‘their’ places. We might therefore be tempted to consider these places as confined, with an inside (the places) and an outside (the environment embodying the dominant conventional regime). However, other dynamics clearly document that interactions with the ‘outside’ are at work, thus indicating the dissemination of these social innovations. The processes can best be analyzed with the conceptual tool of *scaling up*. The scaling up of social innovation has many forms, such as organizational growth, increased target group reach, replication, differentiation and/or institutional change. Undertaking a comprehensive discussion of its types and taxonomies (Dees et al., 2004; Westley et al., 2014; Uvin, 1995; Moore et al., 2015; Davies and Simon, 2013) would go beyond the scope of this paper. What is of interest in our research on social innovation considered as *transformative* is the question of what scaling-up processes reveal about its potential to contribute to wider social transformation (Avelino et al., 2014). Attention should therefore not only be paid to the multiplication of such ‘places of difference’, but above all to the processes whereby alternative principles and norms are disseminated into the dominant conventional regime.

2.1 Scaling out: Dissemination and multiplication processes within alternative networks

When asked what they are doing in favor of dissemination, the majority of Ardèche’s TSI actors state that they are engaged in knowledge transmission. Many of the communities regularly organize workshops and periodic training sessions, and they host volunteers, trainees and visitors throughout the year. Some are part of a nationwide alternative and solidarity economy apprenticeship network (*Réseau d'Echanges et de Pratiques Alternatives et Solidaires* – REPAS). The *Terre et Humanisme* and *Viel Audan* communities have even established training centers for school classes, university students and team leaders, using education on sustainable development, on social economy and on agroecology as a source of income.

All initiatives have a website and are part of translocal national and international networks. Some actively coordinate national or international programs, internet sites and/or newsletters. A case study on the modes and contents of knowledge transfer at *Terre et Humanisme*, an association engaged in agroecology, revealed that the individuals they attract are mostly young people sharing the communities’ principles and searching for in-depth knowledge on how to put their ideas into practice. Most declared they were ‘in a transition stage in their lives’, and were ‘interested in alternative ways of doing things’, considering ‘the current dominant system as incoherent and unsustainable’ (Lopez, 2015, 85). It is worth examining exactly what is being transmitted here. Much of it is practical and technical knowledge, but as such activities rely heavily on the local context (soil, climate, available resources), practical knowledge is considered less relevant than *savoir-être* (literally, knowing how to be). In fact,

visitors, trainees and trainers all agree that the dissemination of the place's philosophy, its principles and ethics is of primary importance (Lopez, 2015).

Here scaling up means disseminating techniques and core values within the alternative global network community and outside the dominant conventional regime. This leads to the replication of similar projects – and thus places – at all scales, from regional to international, including the Global South⁴, leaving learners to adapt principles to local conditions when trying to replicate them elsewhere. This type of scaling up is often referred to as *scaling out* (Moore et al., 2015; Westley et al., 2014), in the sense of impacting greater numbers and covering a larger geographical area through replication and disseminating principles (Moore et al. 2015, p. 77) – thus circumventing direct confrontation with the dominant conventional system.

2.2. Scaling up and deep: Towards an alternative territory?

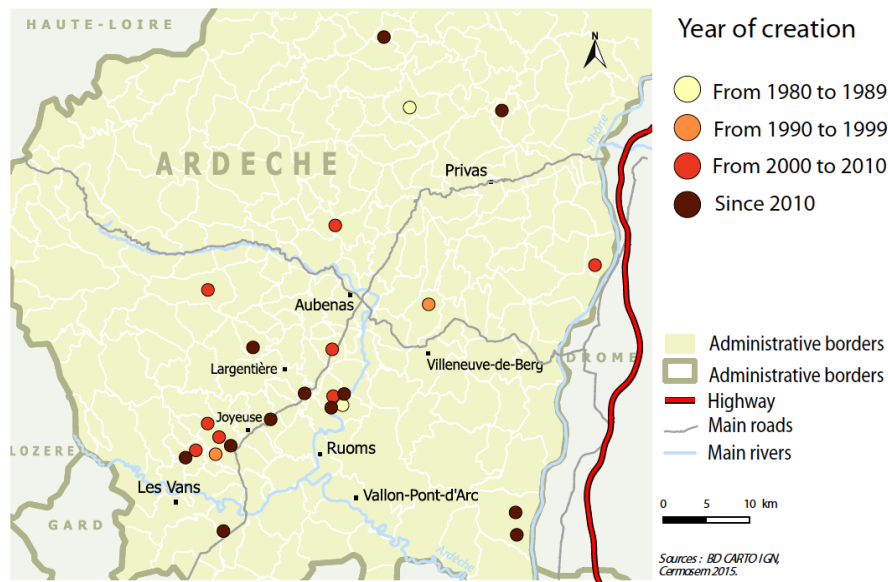
Two distinct dynamics reveal the beginning of more profound changes in the immediate geographical environment of Ardèche's alternative places. The first one is closely linked to changes in vision and attitudes between the first and the second generation of initiators. Whereas the generation of the 1968 era aimed more at autonomous living outside the consumer society (Hervieu-Léger and Hervieu, 1979; Pruvost, 2013) and created isolated, insular places, the younger one seeks to make its alternative projects visible and spread its ideas among the Ardèche population.

Several examples illustrate the initiators' determination to interact with the local population and public authorities, to make their values known and thus act in favor of social transformation. The association *Changement de Cap* rented a plot of land near a roundabout on a main thoroughfare in front of the local supermarket, and created types of open spaces: a 'material area' (selling secondhand clothes and furniture), a 'plant area', based on the agroecology model, a 'reading area', a 'catering area' and so on. These spaces evolve according to the desire and wishes of new adherents and partners. *Recycl'Art* made contract with the local waste management authority in order to recover useful waste, repair, transform and resell it. *Autopia*, a solidarity garage, offers training for autonomous car repairing, supplying tools and knowhow, as well as public debates and concerts in order to spread ideas into the immediate vicinity.

This search for contact with the local population is clearly seen in the new geographical patterns of recently emerged 'alternative' sites: they are located along the main road which crosses Ardèche from north to south, and are close to central villages and towns (Figure 2), thus showing a geographical shift from the Ardèche margins to the center. Intended to activate system change, these projects seek geographical and social proximity, with the boundaries between the places of difference and the 'outside' becoming more porous.

A second dynamic that indicates that alternative values are beginning to spread into the dominant regime is the changing attitude of local authorities. Due to its long history of alternative places and their spatial distribution,

⁴ *Terre et Humanisme*, for instance, has a specific training program for actors in the Global South.

Figure 2. Location and year of creation of alternative projects in Ardèche

Source: Koop and Senil (2016)

Ardèche has acquired a reputation of divergence or ‘alternativity’. The region is actually referenced as a hotspot in alternative networks and is known as an attractive space for experimentation, thus attracting like-minded visitors as well as people from outside willing to settle there (Koop and Senil, 2016). Public authorities have started to become aware of the alternative image ‘their’ territory has acquired and seem to be opening their minds to the idea.⁵ In the last few years, town councils and other public institutions have begun supporting alternative projects actively by co-financing the local social economy network (*Initiatives Territoriales de l’Economie Sociale et Solidaire – ITESS*), and creating a network of actors operating in favor of eco-housing and other actions. Ardèche department has even dedicated a specific budget to the social economy since 2012. Some town councils seek concrete inspirations and contact associations in order to obtain technical knowhow on frugal and sustainable solutions (such as dry toilets for public spaces) and even to associate them in collective thinking on future territorial development.

Such dynamics can be interpreted as signs for ongoing transformational processes in Ardèche, stimulated by the places of difference. The growing geographical proximity with the local population and the efforts to involve citizens in alternative actions, recognition by official institutions and changing local policies do in fact indicate *scaling-up* processes (Westley et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2015). However, transformation in the sense of systemic change is a more profound process than the fields generally covered by the literature via the concept of scaling up. Moore et al. (2015) argue that achieving systemic impacts also involves processes of *scaling deep*, defined as

⁵ Even statistical data are beginning to show the importance of the regional social economy: in 2014, the social economy (SE) employed 15% of the Ardèche active population (12,850 people in employment), thus making Ardèche the leading SE employer of the 13 departments of the Rhône-Alpes-Auvergne region.

(<http://www.ardeche.fr/162-economie-sociale-et-solidaire.htm>)

changes in 'social relationships, cultural values and beliefs' and 'impacting cultural roots' (Moore et al. 2015, 75). Our examples are not sufficient to confirm systemic change in Ardèche, and further research needs to be carried out on how and how far new principles and values are spreading and transforming the region.

Dynamics of scaling up and scaling deep in the immediate vicinity of place-based social innovations should be paid further attention in studies on the transformative potential of social innovation for system change. The concept of *territorialisation* for the spatial analysis of such processes appears to be an appropriate conceptual tool for this. *Territorialisation* signifies socio-symbolic construction of territory (Debarbieux, 1999), embracing socio-cultural, economic, political and spatial dimensions equally. It produces collective identity and common references. This actor-oriented concept allows the spatial spread of a specific set of alternative ideas, beliefs and habitus, to be analyzed, focusing on its modes of appropriation – or not – by the actors of the dominant conventional system. It can provide information on the modalities of appropriation, as well as on the limits to dissemination (refusal, denial, repression or mainstreaming while changing the original meaning).

Conclusion

We have argued in this paper that the analysis of spatial patterns of transformative social innovations helps reveal major characteristics of social innovation and patterns of transformative processes. By drawing attention to the intentions behind action, we have taken the specific set of values and principles of Ardèche actors of alternative initiatives as a starting point and interpreted it as the driver for action. The spatial enactment of these principles presupposes the acquisition of suitable spaces that are then appropriated according to the alternative values. As no master plan exists for putting their views into practice, experimentation and improvisation are major features of the way the actors fill these places with the intended meaning. The outcome is places with a specific 'esprit de lieu' (spirit of place), differing from the dominant conventional system. Such 'places of difference' have been multiplying all over Ardèche in recent decades.

They are boosting transformative processes in two distinct manners. Some communities are actively involved in transferring their norms and skills within alternative national and international networks. Such dynamics of scaling out have a reticular pattern – the places function as nodal points within wider networks at different scales. Benefitting from the alternative image of Ardèche in the world of alternative movements, they attract the like-minded and impel such networks. Actor-network theory, most frequently used in the social movement literature, is suitable for analyzing such processes.

Other places aim more at system transformation through impacting their direct geographical environment, disseminating their values by proposing alternative services and goods to the local population and involving them in their activities. These initiatives have also induced policy changes, even without directly interacting with public institutions. In fact, the alternative image acquired by Ardèche territory has made public authorities start to act in favor of alternative ideas and actions. Such dynamics in the immediate vicinity of place-based social innovations can be interpreted as transformative. Further spatial analysis of such dynamics, focusing on the territorialisation of alternative norms, could be instructive as to the potentials and limits of social innovation for system change.

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