



**HAL**  
open science

# The Wool-Processing Industry in an Era of Social Innovation. How Has the Situation Changed in the Massif Central (France)?

Jean-Baptiste Grison, Pierre-Antoine Landel

► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Baptiste Grison, Pierre-Antoine Landel. The Wool-Processing Industry in an Era of Social Innovation. How Has the Situation Changed in the Massif Central (France)?. *Revue de Géographie Alpine / Journal of Alpine Research*, 2019, 107 (2), 10.4000/rga.5982 . halshs-02305190

**HAL Id: halshs-02305190**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02305190v1>**

Submitted on 8 Feb 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



---

## The Wool-Processing Industry in an Era of Social Innovation. How Has the Situation Changed in the Massif Central (France)?

Jean-Baptiste Grison and Pierre-Antoine Landel

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/rga/5982>

DOI: 10.4000/rga.5982

ISSN: 1760-7426

**This article is a translation of:**

La filière laine à l'heure de l'innovation sociale. Quelles transformations dans le Massif central (France)? - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/rga/5957> [fr]

**Publisher:**

Association pour la diffusion de la recherche alpine, UGA Éditions/Université Grenoble Alpes

**Electronic reference**

Jean-Baptiste Grison and Pierre-Antoine Landel, "The Wool-Processing Industry in an Era of Social Innovation. How Has the Situation Changed in the Massif Central (France)?", *Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine* [Online], 107-2 | 2019, Online since 26 September 2019, connection on 08 December 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rga/5982> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/rga.5982>

---

This text was automatically generated on 8 December 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

---

# The Wool-Processing Industry in an Era of Social Innovation. How Has the Situation Changed in the Massif Central (France)?

Jean-Baptiste Grison and Pierre-Antoine Landel

---

- 1 In the mountains of the Massif Central, the concept of marginalisation is frequently put forward as evidence of the rural crisis that persists within the regions concerned. This is why, in the south of the former Auvergne region, there are mountainous rural areas which, at a domestic level, have suffered the greatest demographic losses since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Although within certain sectors the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterised by demographic recovery, these regions are frequently identifiable as regions in crisis: demographic crisis, economic crisis, industrial crisis and identity crisis. As in many other regions, there is also a “dispossession” crisis (Tremblay-Pépin, 2015), characterised by the displacement of resources, activities and businesses.
- 2 Nonetheless, within these marginalised areas, socially innovative dynamics were evolving; these were described as “*originating in civil society, and aimed at developing new responses to new social needs (...), within an economic and institutional environment which no longer meets its needs*” (Klein and Harrisson, 2007). The aim here is to examine the innovative capacity of these marginal areas, within which “deviation from the norm facilitates the exploration of new forms of governance and allows minority stakeholders, and their collective capacity for invention, to be given greater consideration” (Depraz, 2017, p.37). What impact do these innovations have on the existing system? Which courses of action are available? How can these initiatives help to define the links between social innovation and a region?
- 3 We propose to focus on the wool-processing industry, historically present throughout the Massif, but which has been experiencing a profound crisis since the 1980s. The last large-scale French factory concerned with the initial processing of sheep’s wool, at Mazamet, shut down around 2010. Virtually none of the wool used by the major wool

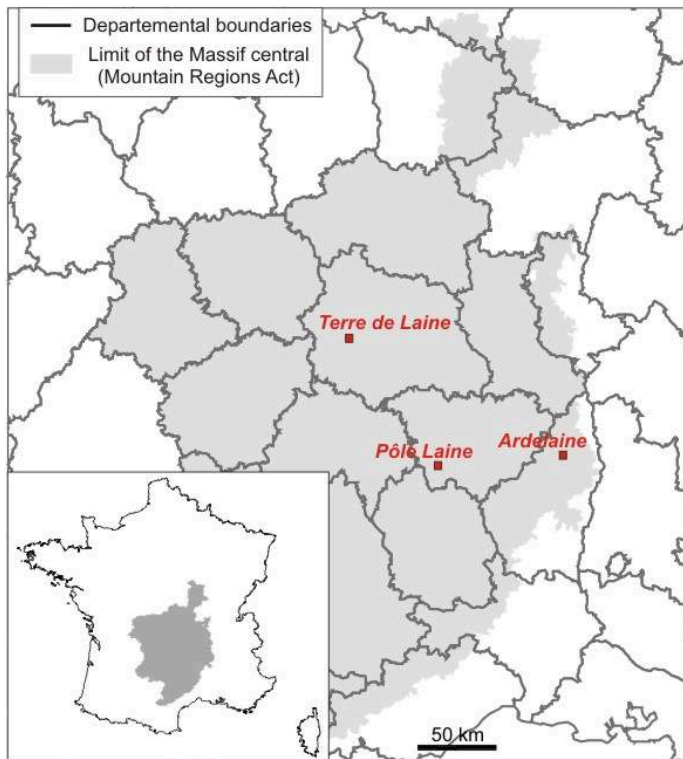
processing factories to produce yarn, cloth and knitwear comes from France, and synthetic products are increasingly used instead (mainly located at Roubaix, Troyes, Bar-le-Duc and Roanne). To some extent, the crisis persisting within the industry is also characterised by a *deterritorialisation* of manufacturing activities, where location is no longer linked to local resources.

- 4 We have identified three initiatives from mountain regions across the Massif Central which involve both social innovation and the woollen industry: *Pôle Laine* in the area around Saugues in the west of the *département* of Haute Loire, *Ardelaine* in the upper reaches of the *département* of Ardèche and *Terre de Laine* in the Sancy mountains. Should social innovation be considered as an emerging solution to continued production in France? Can conclusions be drawn regarding industries experiencing crisis in France and in Europe? In particular, where the textile industry is concerned?
- 5 We are suggesting that the extent to which social innovation can provide a response to these economic and regional challenges depends on two key points. Firstly, that initiatives being implemented should form part of a triple anchoring: within the industry, within the region and within the networks specific to social innovation. Secondly, that these initiatives should provide continuity with a region's past, and form part of its history. They should contribute to some form of *reterritorialisation* regarding the activities and skills associated with it, by revitalizing their heritage aspect and their links with local resources. As a result, they will strengthen the capacity of stakeholders to develop their own unique projects and increase their autonomy within sectors characterised by general losses in competitiveness.
- 6 We have been following the evolution of the three projects under analysis for several years. Our approach has consisted in exploring the development process for each of the three initiatives (*Pôle Laine*, *Ardelaine* and *Terre de Laine*) in the light of three pillars, namely the woollen industry, the region in which they are located, and social innovation. The first section of this article supplies the context; the following sections position these initiatives within pre-existing grids used to evaluate social innovations. Lastly, and based on these factors, an analysis of the findings will help to identify the extent to which social innovation can both provide a response during crisis situations and serve to re-anchor newly-mobile businesses by means of "attachment" processes, the nature and intensity of which has yet to be defined (Debarbieux, 2014, p.71).

## A framework for analysis and three of the Massif Central wool-processing industry's key sites

- 7 The three selected initiatives are located within the mountain regions of the Massif Central (figure 1); they are perfectly integrated into the landscape of the French woollen industry and they are involved in the dynamics of social innovation. Document 1 gives an indication of their respective locations.

Figure 1 – Location of the sites studied



Produced by the authors, 2018.

## Document 1 – Presentation of the three social innovations under observation

### a/ *Pôle Laine*

In Saugues, an area in the *département* of the Haute-Loire which has suffered a marked demographic decline, a study has been carried out since the beginning of the 2000s regarding the development of new economic activities. The wool-processing industry, which was then greatly reduced but had not entirely disappeared from the area, emerged as a potential vector for the introduction of alternative activities. In the decade beginning in 2010, a network was established between the various stakeholders involved: a reintegration association which was producing felt (*les Ateliers de la Bruyère*), a mattress manufacturer that had developed a customised wool-scouring service (Laurent Laine), farmers, local authority representatives, and government and consular agencies.

Today, *Pôle Laine*, which has the structure of an association, has managed to find a sustainable model for the social and economic development of a resource with a seemingly uncertain future at the beginning of the new millennium, through the hybridisation of reintegration activities, the traditional skills of the wool-processing industry and the promotion of tourism and the local heritage.

### b/ *Ardelaine*

In 1975, a young couple bought an abandoned former textile mill in Saint-Pierreville (500 habitants), in an isolated mountain region in the *département* of

Ardèche. By setting up a collective which subsequently acquired SCoP (co-operative society) status, they were able to re-establish the activity of collecting and processing wool. Today, the organisation employs over 60 people and its activities are continuing to expand into increasingly diversified sectors. Initially, these involved tourism, via 2 museums, catering services, and the publication and distribution of literature (Barras, 2014). A workshop specialising in the manufacture of food products is available to a number of local producers. Today its founders claim responsibility for the concept of the “regional cooperative”.

### c/ *Terre de Laine*

A sheepshearer who had settled in the foothills of the Sancy mountains near Rochefort-Montagne decided to start a business first distributing, and then processing, wool. In the 2000s he began producing and selling insulating materials made from wool, with the aim of promoting the use of local wool which was unsuitable for textile production. Using a socially innovative approach, this one-person operation obtained SCoP status in 2016. Its founder acquired a former industrial poultry house in which to set up his business, part of which was converted into a shop selling traditional products made using wool from the Massif Central. Another section of the premises was rented out to various alternative businesses, including a community cabaret, an artisan brewery, artisans involved in eco-construction, a vegetarian catering service, etc.

- 8 We can use this information to identify the links between each of these initiatives and the three pillars featuring in our framework for analysis (table 1).

**Table 1 – Framework for the analysis of the three initiatives under observation**

	<b>Pôle Laine</b>	<b>Ardelaine</b>	<b>Terre de Laine</b>
<b>Wool-processing industry</b>	<p>This centre has revived:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- local wool felt production;</li> <li>- a business providing customised wool-scouring services, currently the only one in France.</li> </ul> <p><i>Pôle Laine</i> is part of the <i>Atelier-Laines d'Europe</i> (“European Wool association”).</p>	<p>Working with wool was the project’s initial objective. This SCoP has developed numerous activities with links to the industry, in which it plays a full part, and it currently contributes to the <i>Atelier-Laines d'Europe</i> network.</p>	<p>The founder had links to the wool-processing industry, having previously worked as a shearer.</p> <p>He has contributed to the development of insulating materials made from wool.</p> <p>The company is a member of the <i>Atelier-Laines d'Europe</i> network.</p>

<b>Region</b>	<p>Regional considerations are the basis of Pôle Laine's approach to their project.</p> <p>Although they do not play a leading role, local authorities are involved and lend their support to this approach.</p>	<p>Its original stakeholders have gradually introduced a regional development approach to their activities and currently speak in terms of a "regional cooperative".</p>	<p>The creation of a community café associated with the <i>Terre de Laine</i> premises has laid the foundations for a centre for alternative businesses, which may increasingly impact on the region.</p>
<b>Social innovation</b>	<p>Social reintegration is at the heart of their approach; its stakeholders are closely involved with the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) networks.</p> <p>This is characterised by a process that gradually hybridises stakeholders involved in reintegration and private companies; currently grouped within a <i>SCoP</i>, they work together on certain activities.</p>	<p>From the outset, its original stakeholders adopted an alternative community-based approach, for which the SSE provides the driving force. They form part of the new networks, which include the development of a knitting workshop in Valence.</p>	<p>The founder has transformed his one-person operation into a <i>SCoP</i>, and allocated part of his premises to activities that foster social contact and that have links with the Ecological and Inclusive Transition.</p>

- 9 In short, it should be pointed out that although membership of the wool-processing industry's networks is relatively homogenous across projects (these three centres belong to the *Atelier-Laines d'Europe* network, which brings together many of the stakeholders involved in the industry), attention should be drawn to differences in approach regarding social innovation and regional integration.
- 10 Regarding social innovation, *Pôle Laine's* approach is characterised by its close links with the social and inclusive economy networks, in particular via reintegration associations which, from the outset, have constituted an important pillar of local action. At *Ardelaine*, social innovation responds more directly to the utopian ideas shared by the project's original leaders, which include visions of communal life and the pooling of resources. In the case of *Terre de Laine*, social innovation occurs further down the line, as a result of opportunities encountered by the original entrepreneur. All three cases share cooperative status. This clearly constitutes one of the characteristics of the dynamics of social innovation.
- 11 Regarding the region, from the outset *Pôle Laine* attracted a fairly large number of stakeholders from a variety of different backgrounds, who shared similar views in terms of regional development. As regards *Ardelaine*, regional reintegration has been more gradual and was not its original purpose, even though its founders took care to integrate locally at a fairly early stage. Today, however, this *SCoP* is of considerable importance to the local economy, and the recent diversification of its activities has

served to increase its status as a centre for regional resources. Concerning *Terre de Laine*, its regional links have been established more recently, but here too they have resulted in a diversification of activities, notably the establishment of a community *café* on the premises.

- 12 This differentiated positioning can be viewed as differences in the form and strength of the anchoring, within the constituent pillars of the initiatives under observation. The description and interpretation of the various forms of anchoring leads us to emphasise the idea that the chronology of the events that resulted in these projects' current configurations has some significance. Consequently, in the next section we aim to decipher the processes involved and the resulting *anchoring timeline*.

## Processes and anchoring: differentiated timelines

- 13 In our description of the processes involved in the implementation of the three initiatives that form the subject of our study, we have used the grid designed by R. Murray *et al.* (2010) for the purpose of defining the different stages in the development of social innovations (table 2).

**Table 2 – An interpretation of the processes involved in social innovation**

Innovation stage	<i>Pôle Laine</i>	<i>Ardelaine</i>	<i>Terre de Laine</i>
1- Revelation (catalyst)	As a result of a regional survey, the processing of local wool was identified as a possible solution to a social need.	A couple bought an abandoned former textile mill and gradually restored the machinery.	The identification of a market for converting local wool into insulating materials.
2- Proposals (idea generation)	Re-establishing a local wool processing circuit by working with a reintegration association which will enable new skills to be developed.	Developing an economically viable wool-processing business.	The development of a product and of a marketing structure.
3- Experimentation (project development)	Workshops for producing objects made of wool felt were developed through the reintegration association; joint arrangements were made for scouring and local collection circuits.	Setting up a SCoP, product development (mattresses, textiles and clothing) and the development of a client base via a local and distance sales network (markets).	Installing the business in a former industrial poultry house. Insulating materials made from wool were sold, mainly at markets. It was coupled with a collection and distribution operation.

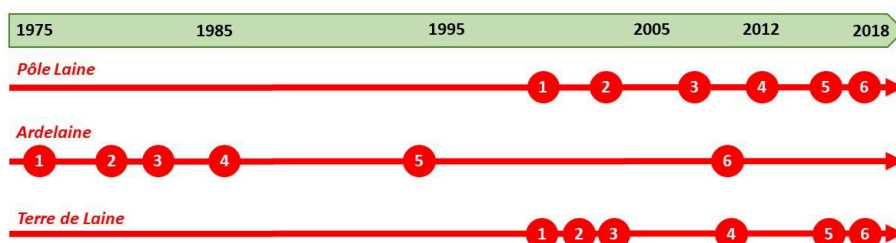


4- Stabilisation	<p>Interaction was established between the association, the farmers, and local intermediaries.</p> <p>Funding was obtained and production increased.</p> <p>The reintegration association relocated to larger premises.</p> <p>The association joined the <i>Atelier- Laines d'Europe</i> network.</p>	<p>Securing support, joining and developing networks, and promoting heritage and tourism aspects.</p>	<p>Developing the business;</p> <p>Opening a retail outlet selling local products made from French wool.</p> <p>Premises suitable for hosting training courses related to wool.</p>
5- Dissemination	<p>Growing interest demonstrated by public authorities.</p> <p>Promotion of cultural and heritage aspects.</p> <p>Significant expansion of the network of stakeholders involved.</p> <p>A new association, <i>Pôle Laine</i>, was set up.</p> <p>The wool-scouring activity relocated and obtained <i>SCoP</i> status.</p>	<p>Gaining a reputation and recognition for the founders' work.</p> <p>A substantial increase in the workforce.</p>	<p>Conversion to <i>SCoP</i> status.</p> <p>Part of the premises were leased to other artisans working mainly in the field of eco-construction.</p>
6- Systemic change	<p>Giving the Saugues area a new image.</p> <p>The organisation is moving to meet new social needs (labelling for local products; reintegration through market gardening)</p>	<p>Integrating new activities.</p> <p>Developing the concept of a "regional cooperative" (catering services, the manufacture of jars and a bookshop).</p>	<p>Establishing a community cabaret on the premises;</p> <p>Setting up other alternative businesses (artisan beers and an organic catering service)</p> <p>Gradual emergence as a centre for social innovation.</p>

- 14 We observe that the time-scales are not the same across projects (figure 2). *Ardelaine* has already been in operation for over forty years; its "revelatory" phase can be traced back to the mid-1970s, before milestones were achieved progressively; and evidence of systemic change only emerged during the 2000s. In terms of *Pôle Laine*, the process was much more rapid and all the milestones were achieved within a few years, before the year 2010. Regarding *Terre de Laine*, the initiative's initial milestones may be considered to have been achieved without its actually having adopted a socially innovative

approach; however its approach has been more in line with the latter during the last decade, once it began the process of converting to *SCoP* status. Concerning the latter company, we can talk in terms of a delayed anchoring in social innovation by a business which was already well anchored in the wool-processing industry beforehand.

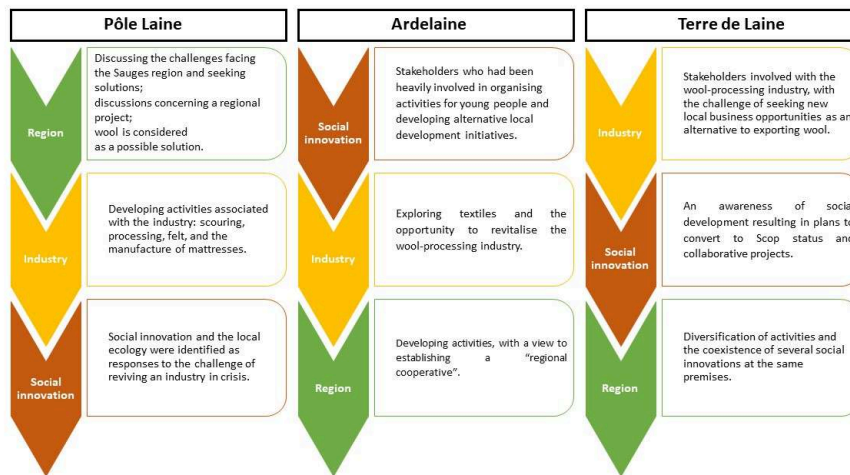
Figure 2 – Differences in timing in the processes of social innovation



The numbers refer to the stages featured in Table 2.

Source: the authors' personal surveys.

- 15 By cross-referencing tables 1 and 2, it is possible to identify the “anchoring timeline” which characterises each of the projects under analysis.
- From its initial stages, *Pôle Laine*, which was developed relatively rapidly, based itself on the three pillars (the region, the woollen industry and social innovation); its original idea was the result of regional analysis, however it quickly latched onto the shared potential offered by social innovation (through reintegration) and working with wool.
  - *Ardelaine* was primarily the result of its founders' socially innovative experiences (its stakeholders had previously been heavily involved in organising activities for young people and developing alternative initiatives); its integration within the woollen industry was rapidly dictated by the activity chosen by its new proprietors. However, its regional links and resultant anchoring were subsequent developments which occurred during the dissemination and systemic change phases.
  - *Terre de Laine* was originally a traditional wool-processing company; it became aware of the issues of social innovation and regional development only once business had achieved stability. Its regional and social anchoring is therefore associated with the dissemination phase, and at the present time its systemic change phase remains more cautious than those of the two other initiatives under observation.
- 16 These three initiatives have each undergone quite different development processes. Table 3 attempts to establish a relationship between the respective timelines we have observed in the three fundamental anchorings associated with these processes.

Table 3 – Comparative anchoring timelines for *Pôle Laine*, *Ardelaine* and *Terre de Laine*

- 17 The differences in the trajectories of these three initiatives involved in generating social innovation within mountain regions via the wool processing industry are also due to the different processes involved in the emergence of the networks of stakeholders that have lent them their support.

## Networking, an integral part of the anchoring process

- 18 *Pôle Laine* in Saugues was created within the context of the close links that existed between a number of well-anchored regional stakeholders (Grison and Rieutort, 2017), although neo-rurals were also involved. On the other hand, *Ardelaine* is the result of an initiative created by newcomers (Barras, 2014), (more or less) independently of the local population. Lastly, the activities of the one-person operation *Terre de Laine* have acquired a socially innovative character as the project has evolved.
- 19 Membership of networks is clearly a key element in the process of social innovation as observed within the three cases under observation. However the role of these networks varies from one initiative to another.
- 20 In the case of *Ardelaine*, it was the social innovation network itself that proposed the creation of the project; along the lines of "an oasis in any places"<sup>1</sup>, its activities originated in links with other projects already under development in the south of the *département*. In reality, various interconnected networks are involved. At a local level, this comprises the "Le Mat" association, present at 3 locations: *Le Viel Audon*, through environmental education; *Ardelaine*; and the community gardens in Valence. The project's founders were responsible for the creation of the REPAS (Exchange and Alternative and Solidarity Practices) network, which has its own publishing company dedicated to the social and solidarity economy, as well as a local network.
- 21 In the case of *Pôle Laine*, its development initially relied on the more conventional networks that were associated with the social and solidarity economy; overall, however, regional issues dictated its choices in terms of business development. What is more, the involvement of a number of institutional bodies (communities, the sub-prefecture and the regional *départemental* directorate), shortly after the project's

start-up phase, helped strengthen regional links. The wool-processing industry's networks became involved at the second stage, and social innovation networks still further down the line.

- 22 Lastly, *Terre de Laine* was created within the wool-processing industry, the business having grown up around an established collector and distributor of sheep's wool products. Its links to the region and to social innovation were established later on, when the business and the site started to cater for the region's other social needs (including an alternative *café*) and during the company's conversion to *SCoP* status as it was handed over.
- 23 It should be noted, however, that cooperation between the three centres under analysis remains tenuous, despite their all being members of the same network (*Atelier-Laines d'Europe*, the European wool-processors' network). This fact suggests that competition between regions producing and processing wool remains permanent.
- 24 These three examples reveal the processes which involve various networks at different stages of social innovation. Here, too, we find variations in the links between social innovation and the regions. However in all these cases, for the initiatives to be fully implemented as social innovations with the ability to transform regions, all three anchorings needed to have been achieved.

## The regional anchoring of social innovations: a solution to the crisis in the mountains?

- 25 The differing timelines for anchoring and for the subsequent integration into the networks resulted in the design of different processes for responding to local social challenges and for transforming their environment. Moreover, although the transformations referred to are to a certain extent linked to the ecological and social transition, the levels of this alignment vary between initiatives.

### Social innovation, a lever for regional change: location, timing, needs and skills

- 26 We must now address the issue of the correlation between the socially-innovative processes behind the initiatives under observation and their ability to bring about change within the regions in which they are introduced. We propose to base our evaluation of this capacity for change on the various factors which may characterise the relationship between social innovations and the regions in which they are being developed. The first of these involves the capacity to mobilise local resources, based on a region's specific characteristics and on the coordination of its associated stakeholders. The second examines an innovation's integration into a region's history, and looks at its resources, innovations, stages of development, crises and advances, and at subsequent new resources resulting in new cycles. The third involves an innovation's capacity to respond to local issues, in particular to issues associated with economic and social crisis. Finally, the last of these involves an innovation's capacity to develop new skills based on locally generated cumulative skills (Crevoisier and Jeannerat, 2009, p. 6).
- 27 By strengthening its links with the place in which it is located, the mobilisation of local resources helps a business to achieve long-term stability within a region. Its integration

into a region's history invests it with a sense of collective ownership and leads to the mobilisation of marketable heritage aspects (Aderghal *et al.*, 2017). Responding to a region's existing social needs is a precondition for a social innovation's stability and capacity to achieve change. Lastly, the creation of new skills is integral to innovation and serves, *in fine*, to strengthen local capacities. This relies on the mobilisation of a region's traditional skills and imported skills, and also on the constant creation of new skills gained from its activities as part of an ongoing collective learning process.

- 28 Table 4 groups the factors, evident within the social innovations under analysis, which serve to validate their integration into the territorial dynamics in which they are involved, according to the four points outlined earlier.

Table 4 – Factors in the relationship between social innovations and regions

	<i>Pôle Laine</i>	<i>Ardelaine</i>	<i>Terre de laine</i>
The mobilisation of local resources	<p>The collection of wool from local breeds of sheep</p> <p>Taking over existing, derelict buildings (a former food processing plant; a former textile mill)</p> <p>The mobilisation of regional engineering potential (a new felting machine; the on-site testing of insulation)</p> <p>An approach based on the regional ecology</p>	<p>The collection of wool from local breeds of sheep</p> <p>The mobilisation of <i>savoir faire</i> and of the available workforce</p>	<p>The collection of wool from local breeds of sheep</p> <p>Taking over existing, derelict buildings (a former industrial poultry house)</p> <p>Providing premises for new businesses with links to local resources (a brewery; eco-construction, etc.)</p>
The integration of tangible or intangible heritage aspects	<p>The re-use and upgrading of old machinery (used for carding, scouring, knitting, etc.)</p> <p>The perpetuation of local <i>savoir faire</i></p> <p>Promoting of the heritage aspect of collective memory (museum space)</p>	<p>The restoration and upgrading of traditional buildings (a former textile mill)</p> <p>Opening a bookshop/<i>café</i></p> <p>Heritage tours</p>	<p>The community <i>café</i> chose to call itself <i>Le Poulailler</i> (The Henhouse) to indicate its connection to the history of the premises</p>

<p>Responding to local issues</p>	<p>Job creation Developing the collection of wool from the Massif Central The regeneration of brownfield sites Responding to the challenge of social reintegration The diversification of activities: distribution of local products; market gardening.</p>	<p>Job creation Developing the collection of wool from the Massif Central Establishing secondary premises in a priority district in Valence</p>	<p>Maintaining employment Developing the collection of wool from the Massif Central Involving the local community (by opening a community café)</p>
<p>Creating skills and establishing collective learning processes</p>	<p>Working on new felting techniques and tools Trialling insulation using wool Establishing contact and new relationships between the reintegration sector, private companies and farmers</p>	<p>The permanent mobilisation of outside knowledge, reintroduced into traditional production processes. Working on establishing contact and new relationships between farmers and processors Working on the concept of a “regional cooperative”</p>	<p>Promoting skills relating to wool (providing training courses and workshops on the premises)</p>

29 As mentioned above, *Pôle Laine* included a regional dimension earlier on in its innovation process compared to *Ardelaine* and *Terre de Laine*. As one might expect, a greater number of relationship factors figure in table 4.

30 Conversely, *Terre de Laine* has a lower profile, in terms of its transformative capacity. The following explanations can be supplied:

- Fewer of its stakeholders work in the local area;
- Links have been established with the regional wool-processing industry, however there has been virtually no integration of specific local heritage aspects;
- The initiative has been established in an increasingly suburban area which is experiencing significant population growth, after achieving minimum growth by the turn of the twenty-first century (at least 30 % since 1999); the issue of re-establishing links is therefore less pressing;
- Its anchoring in the industry is genuine and long-established, however in terms of social innovation and the region, this is very recent;
- It has fewer links to the networks.

### From anchoring to leading the way: how does a social innovation become a regional project?

31 The stabilisation phase for social innovations is based on a strong anchoring to an industry’s dynamic. The French wool-processing industry is in serious crisis: all the

large companies involved in developing French woollen textiles have closed or, less commonly, have reoriented their sourcing and their product lines towards other resources or other provenances. The remaining businesses tend to be related to various types of social innovations; they are increasingly interconnected and able to defend their mutual interests. Clearly, in the cases under analysis, the only solution to the crisis in the wool-processing industry lies in strengthening regional links, through hybridisation with imported skills and social innovation practices.

- 32 But above and beyond this initial link to the industry, the factors relating to diversification are both integral to the regional anchoring of social innovation, and also evidence of its transformative capacity. Its capacity for regional anchoring is thus superseded by its capacity to provide leadership. In the case of *Ardelaine*, this has been demonstrated by the opening of a bookshop/café, and more recently by the establishment of an alternative food production chain on the premises (canning local produce). Meanwhile, *Pôle Laine* has launched the development of a label and facilities for selling local produce by mail order (“*Made in Gévaudan*”) including logistics coordinated by an association for reintegration. Most recently, it has developed an organic market gardening business within the same organisation. Lastly, *Terre de Laine* has helped set up a community cultural café at its premises.
- 33 Our observations have thus led us to highlight the fact that the transformative capacities of the social innovations under analysis have a knock-on effect within the region: currently all three have successfully extended themselves beyond the narrow definition of the wool-processing industry to penetrate other sectors that are providing solutions to other local issues.

## Conclusion: when margins lead to more margins...

- 34 Despite their modest dimensions, *Pôle Laine* in Saugues, *Ardelaine* and *Terre de Laine* are progressively becoming emblematic centres for the French wool-processing industry, or rather for what remains of it. At these three sites, social innovation has taken the form of the productive recovery of a traditional industry, with a strong dynamic approach based on new solutions which addresses present-day needs and aspirations. It seems clear, *a fortiori* in these mountain regions, that the wool-processing industry can only find a market through the process of social innovation. The latter is thus becoming a key factor in the maintenance and dynamism of a system which is vital to the survival of marginalised regions. In this sense social innovation, in the forms that we have observed, is fulfilling its potential in terms of its possible aspects and uses: social, societal and corporate (Richez-Battesti *et al.*, 2012).
- 35 In a globalised economy where trade is based on externally imposed regulations, inclusion in a marginal sub-system justifies a certain relaxation of these standards. Coordination between local stakeholders facilitates the establishment of guidelines and regulations that incorporate and promote their particular characteristics. Cooperative status serves to intensify these relationships, mobilising them within a deliberative framework and providing a link between debate, decision and action. A regional anchoring process ensues, which has two dimensions. The first of these facilitates the development of links between social innovations and their regions, both upstream and downstream of the industry. By continuously mobilising its assets, the second of these incorporates these social innovations into the history of these regions, which in some

cases are former centres. Thus, within the context of marginalisation, social innovation strengthens the autonomy of the stakeholders who are involved in it. Through an ongoing learning process, it enhances their human capacity. By assisting in the development of regional resources, it improves their financial capacities. By facilitating debate, it assists in the development of their individual organisational capacities.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aderghal M., Casabianca F., Landel P.A., Michon G., Senil N., 2017.- « L'ancrage territorial des spécificités : regards croisés sur les arrière-pays méditerranéens », in *Le Maroc et les changements climatiques : adaptation et résilience des sociétés*. Hespéris-Tamuda, 52 (1), n° spécial, 357-381.
- Barras B., 2014.- *Moutons rebelles : Ardelaine, la fibre développement local : vers une coopérative de territoire*. Valence, ed. Repas, 241 p.
- Caulier-Grice *et al.*, 2012.- *Defining Social Innovation*. A deliverable of the project : The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe (TEPSIE), European Commission, 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme. Brussels : European Commission, DG Research, 43 p.
- Crevoisier, O. et Jeannerat H., 2009.- « Les dynamiques territoriales de connaissance : relations multilocales et ancrage régional. » *Revue d'économie industrielle* (2009). [En ligne], consulté le 04 juin 2015. URL : <http://rei.revues.org/4072>
- Debarbieux B., 2014.- « Enracinement-ancrage-amarrage ? raviver les métaphores ». *L'Espace géographique*, tome 43, n° 1, p. 68-80.
- Depraz S., 2017.- *La France des marges. Géographie des espaces « autres »*, Paris : Armand Colin, Collection U, Géographie
- Grisson J.-B. et Rieutort, L., 2017.- « La laine entre ressource territoriale et enjeux de gouvernance : du Pays de Saugues à la Provence », in Grisson J.-B. et Rieutort L. (dir.), *Valorisation des savoir-faire productifs et stratégies de développement territorial : patrimoine, mise en tourisme et innovation sociale*, Clermont-Ferrand, PUBP (coll. CERAMAC, n° 36, p. 131-150).
- Howaldt J. *et al.*, 2017.- *Towards a general theory and typology of social innovation*. A deliverable of the project : Social Innovation : Driving Force of Social Change (SI-drive), European Commission – 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme, Brussels : European Commission, 153 p.
- Klein J.-L. et Harrisson D. (dir.), 2007.- *L'innovation sociale : émergence et effets sur la transformation des sociétés*, Québec : Presses de l'Université du Québec, 465 p.
- Landel.P.-A., Koop, K., Senil. N., 2018.- « Quand l'innovation sociale change la dynamique des territoires de montagne », in Fourny, M.C. (coord.) *Montagnes en mouvements, Dynamiques territoriales et innovation sociale*, PUG : Grenoble.
- Murray R., Caulier-Grice J., Mulgan G., 2010.- *The Open Book of Social Innovation*, London : The Young Foundation and Nesta, 220 p.



Richez-Battesti, N., Petrella, F. & Vallade, D., 2012.– « L'innovation sociale, une notion aux usages pluriels : Quels enjeux et défis pour l'analyse ? », in *Innovations*, 38(2), 15-36. <https://doi.org/10.3917/inno.038.0015>.

Tremblay-Pepin S., 2015.– *Depossession, une histoire économique du Québec contemporain*, Québec, Lux éditeur, 323 p.

## NOTES

1. "Oasis in any places" is an association inspired by Pierre Rabhi, which networks places for the development of alternatives on an international scale, particularly in the field of agro-ecology.

---

## ABSTRACTS

This article offers a comparative analysis of three socially innovative initiatives within the sheep's wool processing sector in the Massif Central: *Pôle Laine* (département of Haute-Loire), *Ardelaine* (département of Ardèche) and *Terre de Laine* (département of Puy-de-Dôme). All three of these entities have successfully achieved a three-fold anchoring: anchoring within a region, anchoring within the wool processing industry and anchoring within social innovation networks. However they differ from each other in terms of the chronology of their subsequent implementation of these anchorings; being linked to the process of constructing innovative approaches, this was achieved at different stages and in a different order. But for all three centres, introducing systemic change was only possible after anchoring in all three areas had been achieved. Consequently, there is evidence that social innovation in the wool-processing industry is a response to the crisis within this weakened sector of the economy; it also serves to boost regional dynamism in struggling and land-locked mountainous areas. Lastly, we found that these three initiatives have resulted in a diversification that is not limited to the woollen industry alone; sectoral innovation has thus resulted in the emergence of full-blown regional projects.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Local development, wool-processing industry, social innovation, regional anchoring

## AUTHORS

**JEAN-BAPTISTE GRISON**

UMR Pacte, Université Grenoble Alpes.

[jbgrison1@gmail.com](mailto:jbgrison1@gmail.com)

**PIERRE-ANTOINE LANDEL**

UMR Pacte, Université Grenoble Alpes.

[pierre-antoine.landel@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr](mailto:pierre-antoine.landel@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr)