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**EXILES AND "NEOS". When migrations meet and recompose local sociabilities**

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Photograph of a CADA resident being hosted by a volunteer beekeeper. Taken in September 2019, copyright Céline Gaille

## **EXILES AND "NEOS". When migrations meet and recompose local sociabilities<sup>1</sup>**

### **William Berthomière,**

Géographe, Directeur de recherche CNRS, Laboratoire Passages (UMR 5319)

Adresse : UMR Passages

Maison des Suds

12 Esplanade des Antilles

33607 Pessac Cedex

Courriel : [william.berthomiere@cnrs.fr](mailto:william.berthomiere@cnrs.fr)

### **Christophe Imbert,**

Géographe, Professeur, Laboratoire Identité et Différenciation de l'Espace, de l'Environnement et des Sociétés (UMR 6266).

Adresse : UMR IDEES - Université de Rouen

Bâtiment 7

17 rue Lavoisier

76130 MONT-SAINT-AIGNAN CEDEX

Courriel : [christophe.imbert@univ-rouen.fr](mailto:christophe.imbert@univ-rouen.fr)

### **Bénédicte Michalon,**

Géographe, Directrice de recherche CNRS, Laboratoire Passages (UMR 5319)

Adresse : Passages

Maison des Suds

12 Esplanade des Antilles

33607 Pessac Cedex

Courriel: [benedicte.michalon@cnrs.fr](mailto:benedicte.michalon@cnrs.fr)

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to present the system put in place nationally to process migrants and its role in the revitalisation of rural spaces, taking the rural Ariège department as a case study. The system is based on a number of institutional and non-institutional stakeholders and, in the case under study, a reception centre for asylum seekers. Social workers use the establishment as a base for a series of projects to provide migrants with administrative, material and linguistic support. The active participation of neo-rural collectives plays a fundamental role in a context where the local population is increasingly called on to provide support following the introduction of tougher policies on migrants.

### **Index by keyword :**

Ariège, activism, association, volunteers, asylum seekers, reception centre, migration, neo-rural

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In some rural areas, encounters take place between migrations with different impulses and logics. Our article documents and analyses one such encounter. It looks at the settlement of exiles by the state<sup>2</sup> in the rural department of Ariège, when applying for asylum within the national reception system (DNA) developed to accommodate asylum seekers and beneficiaries of French state protection. It also looks at the migration of "neos" (neo-rurals), who have come to live in this department voluntarily and outside any institutional framework, sometimes with ideological motivations ("return" to the land, "downshifting" or even libertarian experiments)<sup>1</sup>.

During our survey, we found that exile accommodation centres located in rural areas can facilitate the meeting of these two types of pathways. These centres are, in fact, places where social workers, exiles and volunteers meet. The latter are mostly "newcomers" who help exiles who have not chosen to live there.

Our reflections are based on the evolution of the national reception system in recent years. Although its primary purpose is to provide accommodation and legal and social support, since housing for exiles became a state prerogative in 1975 [Masse 2001], it has had to allow for a territorial distribution of centres. Rural areas were therefore included from the outset in this process of distributing reception centres for exiles [Bonerandi 2008; Simon-Barouh 1989]. A number of European and non-European countries have been implementing a similar policy for several decades [Dwyer and Brown; 2008 Robinson *et al*; 2003 Schech 2014]. In France, this has led - since 2015 and the growing number of people forced into exile - to an increase in settlements outside the major metropolitan areas. The result is a strengthening of foreign presence in the countryside and a diversification of nationalities [Fromentin and Pistre 2021]. Although this type of structure is just one among others within the DNA, one fifth of the reception centres for asylum seekers (Cada) are located in densely populated areas. A significant proportion is located in the suburban areas of large cities (Paris and Lyon), followed by small towns in central France. Finally, a few are located in sparsely populated rural areas (including Lagrasse in the Aude or Montclar-de-Quercy in the Tarn-et-Garonne) [Berthomière *et al*. 2020]. Despite the increased installation of accommodation structures outside large metropolitan areas, the presence of Cadas in rural municipalities of less than 2,000 inhabitants is rare and transforms the sociological composition of the population. We are interested in the impact of this socio-demographic transformation on social links and territorial organisations.

The Ariège is particularly emblematic of this process. The department has four Cadas, three of which have been located since 2016 in the small and medium-sized towns of Foix, Pamiers and Saverdun. The establishment we are studying was opened in 1998, one of the few to be located in a village, Carla-Bayle. This is a small commune of about 700 inhabitants (including about 100 residents of the Cada), distant from the urban centres of the department and from public transport networks. It is one of the bastions of local Protestantism and is known for promoting values of tolerance, as the mayor reminded us

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the population of 'neos' concerned by our survey includes a significant number of people of foreign origin. Our survey department is one of those that have seen the number of foreign nationalities on their territory increase significantly in recent years. In the 1999 general population census, just under 50 nationalities were counted, in the 2015 census, there were more than 84 nationalities, i.e. 1,903 inhabitants, representing almost 5% of the population of the district surveyed.

when the centre<sup>3</sup> was created. Beyond the reference to the native philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), it is worth underlining the predominant place occupied by the rural territories of Protestantism in the geography of the reception of exiles, as Élise Martin has underlined in her work on the Cévennes [2020].

Our questioning concerns the role of the mechanisms of care for exiles, and the role of the exiles themselves, in the social transformations of rural areas. Situated at the interface between rural studies and migration studies, our analysis is based on a double thematic: public policies for exiles and the territorial and social recomposition of the countryside. On the latter point, this article aims to make an original contribution to a current of rural geography that seeks to shed light on forms of renewal of rural spaces beyond an urban-centric vision [Mathieu 1974; Kayser 1989; Pistre 2011]. Our hypothesis is that the meeting of two differentiated demographic dynamics - the presence of asylum seekers and 'neos' - contributes to revitalising the social fabric of rural areas. The creation of a Cada specialising in the reception of families in a village area enables the preservation or even the reopening of school classes. Furthermore, the solidarity expressed by the inhabitants reveals a network of efficient social links within a neo-rural population which, despite its diversity, is characterised by a significant cultural capital [Berthomière and Imbert 2019, 2020].

Through the Ariège case study, we will thus show that the social ties forged between exiles and "neos" around the Cada structure the rural space through their dispersion throughout the department. The social accompaniment of the most precarious leads to a dynamic of connections that shapes a particular geography, with the most rural areas being closely linked to small towns. We will therefore defend the idea that rural areas are spaces marked by the strong presence and visibility of these 'weak links', which are not concentrated in a single place, and show, on the contrary, all the complexity of the interlockings, proximities, and locations of competences, and the role of indirect sociabilities [Granovetter 1973; Gefen and Laugier 2020]. We will analyse how migrations, initially inscribed in totally separate systems and initiatives, meet and lead to a particular organisation of the territory.

Based on the temporalities of the recomposition of the institutional and associative space of care for asylum seekers, our article is structured in two parts defining the singular character of the social dynamics within this rural space. In the first part, we will show how a space of sociability develops around the Cada and define its main characteristics. In the second part, we will show that, under the effect of tightening migration policies, the reception system has been recomposed by new links of solidarity between inhabitants (individual initiatives, creation of collectives and associations).

This analysis is based on longitudinal monitoring of several categories of actors in the social dynamics generated by the growing inclusion of the French countryside in the national reception system. Since the autumn of 2016, interviews<sup>4</sup> have been conducted

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<sup>3</sup> On the occasion of the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Cada, the mayor's speech clearly highlighted the way in which he had been able to own this decision by inscribing it in the cultural heritage of his municipality, thus making it a stronghold of tolerance. He mentioned that during the meeting he had with the prefect in December 1997, he had reacted to the announcement of this decision by recalling: 'that this is the birthplace of a philosopher called Pierre Bayle, that he is the precursor of the ideas of the Enlightenment, [...] and that like many of those we welcome today, he too had been driven into exile for his religious and philosophical ideas' [transcript of the speech of 27<sup>th</sup> September 2018].

<sup>4</sup> The interviews used for this article were conducted with three state representatives, four local elected officials, four social action professionals, eleven people in exile and twenty-eight volunteers and community activists.

on a regular basis with people in exile, social workers, volunteers and association activists, as well as with the management of establishments and representatives of the State. The interviews followed a double framework, designed to collect biographical information (*Table 1*) on the one hand, and way of life, work and voluntary action on the other.

Table 1. Biographical information of respondents (extracts from interviews quoted in the text).

| Survey participants  | Life course highlights  | Professional activity   | Commitment and participation in associations  |
|--|---|---|---|
| <b>Amélie</b><br>Born in 1977 (Lyon region). In Ariège since 2012. Lives in the Lèze valley. | She worked in a detention centre, then in a CADA in central France. At the beginning of 2019, she will divide her time between the CADA in Carla-Bayle and a Prahda in the Hautes-Pyrénées.                                   | Lawyer  | She supports the relationship between the CADA and the volunteers, but with certain limitations.  |
| <b>Anne</b><br>Born in 1950 (Paris). Lives in the Arac valley.                               | Granddaughter of a farmer from the Arac valley who migrated to Paris, mother of Alsatian origin, parents in the civil service. Activist in the PCF in the Paris region. She left to live in her family home when she retired. | Retired teacher   | Pillar of the support committee for a rejected asylum seeker in the village. Since her "return", she has been very involved in political life. She does not want to "personalise" the action in favour of exiles. She prefers to place it at a more "political" level.                      |
| <b>Caroline</b><br>Born in the 1980s. In Ariège since 2017.                                  |   | Social worker   | She supports the relationship between the CADA and the volunteers, but with certain limitations.  |
| <b>Corine</b><br>Born in the 1970s (Ariège). Lives in Ariège since 1998.                     |   | Social worker   | She supports the relationship between the CADA and the volunteers, but with certain limitations.  |
| <b>Diane</b><br>Born in 1940 (Haute Garonne). In Ariège since 1989. Lives in Pamiers.        | Practising Catholic family. She worked on the family farm and then obtained a scholarship to study social work in Toulouse.   | Social worker then departmental delegate for Secours Catholique     | Involved in various charities. She is very involved in Emmaüs Pamiers.  |
| <b>Francis</b><br>Born in 1950 (Paris). In Ariège since 2019.                                | Working class background, he had a bohemian youth, trade union and political involvement (Larzac, volunteer for delivery of medical supplies to Bosnia during the war).   | Trained as a carpenter, career as a TV studio decorator in Toulouse | He has always been committed. A former trade unionist, he is an activist in a collective for migrants (stand in a village market). He gives French lessons in CADA. He is marked by the memory of the burning of the housing of Algerian families near his childhood home by OAS militants. |



| Survey participants   | Life course highlights   | Professional activity   | Commitment and participation in associations   |
|---|--|---|--|
| <b>Gilles</b><br>Born in 1948 (Normandy). In Ariège since 1995. Lives in Foix.  | Rural origins, his parents were farm workers, and then the family moved to Évreux, where their parents worked in a factory. He is marked by the commitment of his grandparents who hid people during the Second World War.                     | Teacher in various professional institutions  | Numerous trade union responsibilities within the national education system, and strong investment in SOS Racism and the LDH. In Ariège, he continues his commitment to the LDH and chairs an association for the defence of refugees.  |
| <b>Hawa</b><br>Born in 1980 (sub-Saharan Africa). In Ariège since 2018. Lives in Foix.  | She arrived in France with her four children after travelling through Libya, the Mediterranean sea and Italy. She was sent to the Carla-Bayle CADA by OFII from Paris. Obtained subsidiary protection 6 months later and moved to Foix.        | Retraining for a new career   | She became close friends with a French family who volunteered at the CADA, where she would spend one day a week. This family continues to follow her after she leaves the CADA   |
| <b>Irene</b><br>Born in 1978 (Bordeaux region). In Ariège since 2011. Lives in the Arize valley.                                | She arrived in Occitania in the early 2000s to work in the child protection sector and then got a job in the CADA from 2012.   | Social worker   | She supports the relationship between the CADA and the volunteers. At the origin of the Association Partage.   |
| <b>Luc</b><br>Born in 1985 (Pays de la Loire). In Ariège since 2016 (before in the Aude department). Lives in the Arize valley. | Parents civil servants, suburban childhood, Baccalauréat S. After his studies, he went to Australia, then visited Asia (medical repatriation). Then, he worked as a roadie, travelled in Europe, in couple with a Spanish student in Toulouse. | Beekeeper   | Very left-wing political consciousness (residential choice in connection with the electoral results in favour of the LFI party). He is an activist in a collective of aid to migrants, hosting families from a CADA to learn agriculture.  |
| <b>Paul</b><br>Born in 1947. Lives in the Arac valley.  | He is a figure of the "neo" movement in the Arac valley. He is originally from the Paris region. He arrived in the first "hippy" waves of the 1970s. He currently has a farm-gîte in a mountain hamlet (goat breeding).                        | Farmer  | He is the pillar of the support committee for a rejected asylum seeker in the village. He acts out of humanism, and he does not define himself by a political label but as a resident in solidarity.   |
| <b>Sophie</b><br>Born in 1949 (Paris). In Ariège since 2008 (second home). Lives in Castillonais.                               | She studied languages in Paris and then in Angers.   | In the early 1970s, she taught English in Saint Nazaire. In 1977, she changed careers and passed the nursing exam and devoted herself to psychoanalysis | Involvement in educational activities: she created a "wild kindergarten" (not declared) in Saint Nazaire in the 1970s. She campaigned for the reception of migrants in Loire Atlantique. She quickly joined the associations in Ariège and became involved during her stays there. |

It should be noted that the backgrounds of the social workers were not collected and the first names are pseudonyms.

## 1. The Cada, a space of sociability between exiles and "neos".

Although it primarily makes provision for the care of exiles, the national policy for the reception of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection also includes a regional planning aspect with the distribution of accommodation structures. The Ministry of the Interior instructed, for example in 2016 that criteria such as the "revitalisation of rural areas (shops, schools, etc.)", "accessibility of accommodation facilities, particularly in terms of public transport networks" and "real estate opportunities" be taken into account in the choice of locations for new accommodation<sup>5</sup> facilities. The configuration created around the Carla-Bayle Cada responds indirectly to this preoccupation with revitalising a rural area, with the social relations that it brings about between asylum seekers and "newcomers" settled in the department. This space of sociability between migrant

<sup>5</sup> See Instruction on regional reception schemes for asylum seekers, 25 January 2016, Ministry of the Interior (<<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/download/pdf/circ?id=40532>>).

populations is paradoxically marked by antagonistic characteristics. Indeed, while the presence of asylum seekers in this village is most often the result of an orientation by the state and not of their wish, that of the "neos" is deliberate and marked by a desire to offer hospitality. Their encounter owes much to the Cada team, which is responsible for the social and legal support of asylum seekers.

### 1.1. Asylum seekers 'directed' to the countryside by the state and its agents

The unwanted, or even forced, nature of the presence of asylum seekers in Ariège is the initial element that marks the social dynamics emerging around the Cada. The accommodation system for exiles has been in chronic shortage since it was taken over by the French state in the 1970s, despite a growing number of structures and therefore places [Masse *op. cit.*; Frigoli 2004; Ribémont 2018]. In addition to the policy of dispersing centres throughout the country which had been in place since the early 1990s, the idea of the state distributing the asylum seekers themselves was introduced during the 2010s<sup>6</sup>. This practice, which has long prevailed in other European countries such as Germany and Great Britain [Boswell 2003], was introduced in France under the term "orientation directive" by the law of 29<sup>th</sup> July 2015 pertaining to the reform of the right of to asylum. Access to accommodation and the granting of the asylum seeker's allowance thus became conditional on the applicant's acceptance of the place allocated to him/her by the French Office for Immigration and Integration (Ofii). The Asylum and Immigration Act of 10<sup>th</sup> September 2018 reinforces this mechanism by planning for the monthly distribution of 2500 asylum seekers from Île-de-France to other regions and by preventing asylum seekers from moving outside the region of their accommodation without prior agreement from Ofii.

In fact, the majority of asylum seekers accommodated in the Cada of Carla-Bayle have chosen neither to live in this village nor even in Ariège. They have been "oriented" there by the French authorities, sometimes from other departments in the region - according to the principle of "regional orientation" - and more often from other regions, far from this territory, according to the principle of "national orientation".

This "orientation" is not an easy one because it adds another stage to already complex migratory pathways. It requires persuasion by the part of the Ofii agents responsible for informing asylum seekers of their allocated place of accommodation. They have to develop a convincing argument about the location of the Cada and its advantages in order to make it acceptable.

Most of the exiles interviewed who had resided in this Cada reported that they had clearly expressed to Ofii officials their desire not to live in a rural area - or far from Paris. These agents can use restrictive measures, such as the threat of withdrawal of "material reception conditions" (right to accommodation and benefits). The interviews conducted indicate that the use of rhetoric aimed at obtaining the approval of asylum seekers is more common. While for other types of centres the question is how to build "attractiveness" for people in exile [Bouagga 2020], the challenge for Cada centres located outside major cities is to make them acceptable. The practices of state agents are thus in line with a set of

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<sup>6</sup>See the report *L'hébergement et la prise en charge financière des demandeurs d'asile*, Inspection générale des finances, Inspection générale de l'administration and Inspection générale des affaires sociales, Paris 2013, (<<https://www.vie-publique.fr/rapport/33467-lhebergement-et-la-prise-en-charge-financiere-des-demandeurs-dasile>>).



measures relating to migration policies designed to intervene directly on the reflexivity and capacity for action of people in exile, such as so-called "voluntary return", promoted since the mid-2000s based on "specific methods of coercion" [Chappart 2009:19], or the oral persuasion techniques used by certain professionals in detention centres to obtain the consent of the people confined within to their own deportation [Khosravi 2009].

However, the people in exile interviewed said that they had been kept uniformed about their exact destination, especially when they had been moved from a distant region in France. The metropolis of Toulouse was presented to them by Ofii agents to obtain their agreement on the place allocated. The qualities of this metropolis were praised, and Ofii agents gave them a reassuring speech, especially when people in need of accommodation said they did not want to live in small towns or villages. Hawa, sent by Ofii from Paris, who came alone with four small children from her country in sub-Saharan Africa, described it this way:

At the Ofii in Paris, I was told that I was being sent to Toulouse, that I would have accommodation for my children. The most shocking part of the story is that when we arrived in Toulouse we were told that we were going to Ariège. [...] We came by train, alone. For me, Toulouse was the end point. They tried to confuse us. The Cada sent a social worker to pick us up. We drove for an hour, but she knew how to calm us down, the children were crying, I was afraid. Leaving everyone in Paris was really scary. The social worker was able to calm me down, to make me forget what I was seeing left and right out of the window, she said I was going to meet other Africans at the Cada. When I saw the house, I said to myself: I can't do that to the children, I can't stay here. But the social workers helped me a lot.

[March 2020]

Her story relates the fear she felt during the transfer to Ariège to what she had experienced during her migration. The fragility resulting from her experiences in Libya and the Mediterranean Sea was reactivated on this occasion.

It is generally on arrival in Toulouse that asylum seekers discover that their accommodation is actually located elsewhere, more than an hour's drive from the metropolis. Arrival at the Carla-Bayle Cada is often marked by ignorance and even constraint. A significant part of the social support work then consists of getting the exiles to accept this place to live.

## **1.2. Making rurality acceptable**

The duties of social workers in the Cada are laid out in a set of specifications that are identical for all establishments<sup>7</sup>. However, the location of the accommodation structure has a significant impact on the way in which social support is provided and therefore on the relationship between professionals and people in exile.

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<sup>7</sup>Order of 19<sup>th</sup> June 2019 relating to the specifications of reception centres for asylum seekers.

The social workers interviewed were aware of the difficulty of accepting the location of the accommodation, which is usually synonymous with social isolation. They generally pick up the new residents at the train station in Toulouse and have to be sensitive in explaining to them that they are taking them to a village far away. One of them, Irene, summed it up this way:

The centre in the village is [seen as] a punishment. It's a punishment for everyone, but for those who are referred from Toulouse, it's too close to Toulouse for them to be forced to come. They come to have a look and then they refuse the place. Coming here is totally forced.

[Irene, social worker, February 2019]

These professionals therefore engage in reflection and strategies to make the new residents accept the location of the Cada. Thus, when the new residents are single women or women with children, it is never the only male member of the professional team who collects them. On arrival at the centre, the presentation of the team and the interview with the director are key moments for presenting the Cada in a positive way. They talk about the advantages of the centre, particularly for the children, and the quality of the personal accompaniment. It is necessary to compensate for objective difficulties in terms of the absence of public transport and shops, which seriously hamper the arrival in the village. The professionals do not hide these obstacles:

Being here is very isolated, you become very isolated, you can't move. [...]  
The big problem with rural Cadas is that they [asylum seekers] lose their capacity to move, to take action, and this has psychological effects.

[Amélie, February 2019]

The social work consists of putting people at ease and enhancing the value of the reception structure. The proximity of the school and the qualities of village life for children are the main arguments on which the team relies:

The residents cry when they come here, they don't want to stay, they are afraid of isolation. Then they see the children happy, they see that they are well accompanied, that they are well supported.

[Corinne, social worker, February 2019]

Another of the assets on which the Cada team relies is the strong investment of volunteers.

### **1.3 Supporting relationships between asylum seekers and volunteers**

The successive directors of the Cada have all supported its opening up to the outside world. Although this was long organised by the professionals, who had specific resources, since the mid-2010s it has largely been based on the initiatives of volunteers. Groups emerged in response to the so-called "migration crisis" of 2015 and contacted the centre's management to express their desire to participate in the implementation of activities for

asylum seekers.

This assistance is recognised at the highest level of State, as shown by the words of the sub-prefect, in charge of the Foix district, on 27 September 2018, at the opening of the festivities organised for the centre's twentieth anniversary:

Asylum and subsidiary protection respond to very specific issues which are only found in a third of cases. This raises the complex issue of what happens to those who have been refused asylum. The complexity is also financial and logistical, because receiving 100,000 asylum applications in France, as was the case in 2017, which is three times more than ten years ago, requires financial and human resources. The State services and their partners in emergency accommodation in Ariège, it must be emphasised, have made a substantial effort by increasing the number of places by 80%. In this difficult context, the success of the Cada is all the more deserving. I would like to take advantage of this opportunity to congratulate all the Adoma<sup>8</sup> teams and the artisans of this collective work. Firstly, the commitment and professionalism of the Adoma teams, to whom I would like to pay tribute. In particular, I must emphasise the work you are doing to prepare for integration, notably through a certain number of actions [...] by relying on the support of a large number of associations in this undertaking. In twenty years, your work has given hope and security to more than 1,000 people from 40 countries, including a large number of women with children.

With these words, the sub-prefect mobilises an argument shared by a large proportion of our respondents. He emphasised the difficulties inherent in the asylum procedure, suggesting that these can be more pronounced in the countryside, from a logistical point of view, due to the distance from the decision-making centres, but that they are more easily overcome thanks to the relationships of proximity and solidarity that are specific to the rural world. The scale of the associative movement mobilised around the Cada would undoubtedly illustrate these values.

If the collaboration involves a clear sharing of missions between professionals and volunteers, it is very much supported by the Cada team, which sees it as a real added value to its own actions:

This favours a better integration of the Cada in its environment. It also makes the inhabitants more aware of who these people are.

[Irene, February 2019]

The activities organised by these volunteers figure prominently in the weekly activity schedule for asylum seekers. They intervene three days a week (*Table 2*) and also organise many of the activities at weekends (e.g. organising walks and picnics).

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<sup>8</sup>Adoma is one of the national operators for the accommodation and support of asylum seekers in France.

**Table 2. Weekly schedule of activities of the residents of the Carla-Bayle Cada (February 2019).**

|           | Morning  | Afternoon   |
|-----------|--|---|
| Monday    | Socio-linguistic workshops by the "association Partage"  | Socio-linguistic workshops by the "association Partage"                                     |
| Tuesday   | Shuttle organised by the town hall for shopping in a medium-sized town in the department               | Shuttle organised by the CADA for the Red Cross in a neighbouring town                      |
| Wednesday | Conversation in French by volunteers   | Homework help for children by volunteers  |
| Thursday  | French classes in a neighbouring town by the "Union départementale des associations familiales" (Udaf) | Shuttle organised by CADA for the "Restos du Cœur" in a medium-sized town in the department |
| Friday    | Socio-linguistic workshops by the "association Partage"  | Socio-linguistic workshops by the "association Partage"                                     |

The links forged during these meetings strengthen the social work and enable asylum seekers to "find their place" in their new living space.

However, the investment of the volunteers, which is widely supported by the team, leads to discussions between the professionals on the limits to be placed on this collaboration. The key idea in these discussions is that "the state relies on civil society, which is not expensive. But it's a mistake", explained Irène in February 2019. Thus, while some of the women tried to convince the volunteers to transport the asylum seekers and make up for the lack of public transport in the area, others, like Irène, were opposed to this because "it's part of the Cada's work, and Adoma must be aware of this because it tends to make increasing demands on us...".

Beyond the debates raised by the mobilisation of local solidarity as a palliative to the lack of human and logistical resources enabling social workers to fully take charge of the movements linked to the administration of asylum [Berthomière *et al.* 2020], the nature of these relations remains above all configured by the envisaged and actual outcome of the asylum procedure. When professionals foresee a negative response to the asylum application, they turn to volunteer networks. They thus prepare for the exit from the Cada by defending the idea that the refusal of refugee status should in no way mean the end of social support.

## **2. The emergence under constraint of a plural solidarity**

Longitudinal monitoring of the social dynamics carried out by those involved in supporting asylum seekers at the Cada, whose intensity and diversity increased after 2015, shows the singularity of the sociabilities at work between the different groups in the surrounding population. The forms of commitment and the methods of action differ from the situations observed in large cities, particularly because many volunteers consider that they have a specific relationship with migration [Berthomière and Imbert 2019, 2020]. They share with the people they help the fact that they have a particular relationship with

their place of living. If, unlike exiles, this is mostly through choice, they are part of a reflexive dynamic linked to the idea of rootedness [Martiniello *et al* 2009]. Even after several decades of settling in the village, they too are presented with the image of a foreign population, that of the 'neos'. Over the course of the interviews, the social commitment of the respondents in favour of the exiles underlined the predominant place that the feeling of a difficult social integration could occupy, because they are distant from the 'local culture'. The exchanges between old and new rural dwellers overlap with situations observed in other research fields or highlighted in the analysis of rural gentrification processes [Richard 2021; Roy *et al.* 2013].

In this respect, the analysis of the introductions organised by the Cada makes it possible to reveal both the links maintained with migration and the sources of an autochthony [Berthomière and Imbert 2020]. However, it remains difficult to undertake a decentralised reading of the social geography of this rural area, by taking advantage of the mirror function organised by the analysis of the socio-spatial dynamics at work around the Cada. Indeed, it is important to avoid placing the "native" populations in a distant relationship to the issue of exile and uprooting, due to their lesser presence within associations and other migrant support groups. Furthermore, it is necessary to take additional precaution by recalling that the social dynamics that we observed are the result of the action of all the actors and that they all have their share of autonomy. Irène, one of the social workers and founders of the Partage association, who participates in the centre's activities, talks about her own commitment, the singularity of the place and the risks to which the "new" volunteers may be exposed:

With colleagues, we wanted to create the association Partage because we wanted to deconstruct preconceived ideas: that this is the Eldorado. We wanted [asylum seekers] to see local people who were not too rich. [...]. [Volunteer] commitment is not a pull factor, [it] is a response. [...] But if there's a problem, as we're here in a rural community, we all know each other, that makes it easier to solve problems [...]. Emotional distance is more difficult to find for volunteers. They may take offence at the fact that they leave after obtaining the status, but for us, as professionals, it's different.

[May 2018]

Although solidarity in favour of exiles in the rural world seems to benefit from modes of regulation linked to geographical proximity and the acquaintanceship between actors, this does not mean that the rural area is naturalized in the sense that it is preserved from the political tensions that structure the national debate on international migration and asylum.

### **2.1. Solidarity for exiles in a context far from decision-making centres**

The work of associations is increasingly recognised as an integral part of the reception system for asylum seekers. However, recent changes in the regulatory framework have destabilised the relationship built up over the years between the local representatives of the State - primarily the departmental prefecture -, Cada professionals and the associations or support groups. For example, the regionalisation of "Dublin" procedures, which began in 2017, consisted of (re)centralising competences in a small number of "10 specialised

centres known as "regional Dublin centres" (PRD)"<sup>9</sup>. This feeling of distance from the decision-making centres was all the more keenly felt as it was accompanied by an acceleration of the actions undertaken in the framework of the "Dublin" procedure (time limits for referral, response, transfer) and more frequent recourse to house arrest during the State determination, which is supposed to examine the asylum application and transfer decisions organised with the border police (PAF) in order to speed up deportation<sup>10</sup> procedures.

By disrupting the momentum of dialogue, which had prevailed and found stability in the methods and know-how of those involved in supporting exiles, this repositioning of the decision-making levels of public authority, further away from the "field", has led to arbitrations that are less concerned with individual cases. While a former departmental prefect had made it a principle never to expel families with children from the national territory during the school year, this did take place after her departure. In February 2020, by decision of the regional prefecture, a number of Albanians were sent back to Tirana. The figure corresponded to a precise numerical objective, that of available places on a plane chartered for the purpose. At the same time, an expulsion order was issued for an inhabitant of a mountain village, who was finally able to stay, thanks to the legal, media and material support of the population. Finally, in spring 2021, an Albanian, father of a family that had been looked after by an association for three years, received an OQTF<sup>11</sup> after a roadside check and a stay in the Perpignan detention centre. These three events seriously undermined the relationship of trust that had been built up since 2015 between the public authorities, social workers and associations. The feeling of incomprehension among the volunteers is all the stronger because it brutally undermines the consensus found by the "neos" and some of the "natives" on the issue of exiles: their reception contributes to a demographic renewal that benefits the maintenance of schools, shops and services.

## 2.2. The motives of solidarity in action

Following the dismantling of the Calais camps from 2016 onwards and the concomitant media coverage of the Syrian crisis, citizen mobilisations have multiplied [Agier *et al.* 2018]. In our field, they emerged in two different ways. In the first case, the mobilisation originated from a network of activists who arrived from Île-de-France during the 2000s to settle in villages where they developed different activities (crafts, agriculture/market gardening or publishing). These "neos", with a student background marked by urban struggles, including support for undocumented migrants and, for some, stints in urban and rural squats, were the first to commit themselves to helping exiles when the reception and orientation centres (CAO) were set up to receive people expelled from the camps in Calais and Paris. Their action focused on denouncing the living and transport conditions in these centres (transport of exiles, accommodation, food) and the ambiguous role of the institutions involved in reception, particularly certain associations. This mobilisation, carried out by word of mouth, often through the distribution of leaflets at markets, resulted in demonstrations involving the exiles themselves, with the aim of making them

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<sup>9</sup>See in particular the information provided by the Gisti (Groupe d'information et de soutien aux immigrés) on the "Dublin" procedure (< <http://www.gisti.org/spip.php?article5153>>).

<sup>10</sup> See the article "Regionalisation of Dublin procedures", dated 30<sup>th</sup> June 2018, the Cimade website (<<https://www.lacimade.org/dublin-generalisation-de-la-regionalisation-des-procedures-dublin/>>).

<sup>11</sup>Acronym for: obligation to leave French territory.



actors for their own cause. Such action, modelled on the struggles of undocumented migrants, also relied on a network of activists including lawyers based in the regional metropolis.

Although based on well-developed know-how, this mobilisation ran out of steam after a year, while other forms of action, less head-on and less overtly political, were being put in place since 2017 [Berthomière and Imbert 2019]. Despite the media impact that the violence of the images of the dismantling of the Calais camps had on the inhabitants of the department, this overly radical form of action proved to be unsuitable for the local context. While some of the "newcomers" were able to join in the process, this was not the case for local actors who had been involved in helping the most disadvantaged for a long time:

You won't find me at the demonstrations. [...] I come from a farming background, we plant, we sow, it grows... A show of force for the migrants didn't give me much satisfaction. I work so that as many people as possible decide to help. That's my thing. The people [migrants] that I know, others can [get to] know. That's the reason I'm involved in this cause, it's my way of doing.

[Diane, member of Secours catholique, May 2019]

From a morphological point of view, it is notable that this structuring is characterised by a gradation of levels of institutionalisation and forms of commitment of the individuals who make up these collectives. The central and original pillar of the mobilisations comes from groups of former militants of the Human Rights League (LDH), often retired and not native to the department, who have been in contact with public actors, and more particularly with the prefecture, for many years. One figure emerges, that of Gilles, a former vocational teacher who worked in working-class urban neighbourhoods. With a great deal of experience in trade union involvement, this native of Normandy has perfect knowledge of the legal workings of the decision to deport people and is kept informed about deportation cases. Since 2017, he has guided and advised local mobilisations in the department [Berthomière and Imbert 2019] and has been an essential resource for the associative network. The latter is made up of: charitable associations (traditional support for migrants in urban areas), which have joined forces, often on the initiative of Emmaus, with the A Hundred for a Roof<sup>12</sup> collectives; local residents' associations, some of which come from the field of international solidarity; collectives with no associative status and individuals who have provided logistical support to house exiles on their release from the Cada, often under threat of expulsion.

Regular monitoring of these collectives shows us that at the level of the villages and valleys, where the commitment and skills of volunteers vary considerably, the effectiveness of the system relies on personalities who work as intermediaries between Gilles, who knows and follows up on the files, the administrations to house and care for the exiles or to provide schooling for their children, and the people who are ready to lend a hand occasionally.

The action of these collectives today consists essentially of helping those expelled from the Cada, following a refusal to grant them refugee status, or of welcoming other exiles

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<sup>12</sup>The "Cent pour un toit" scheme, created in Touraine by Emmaus, is based on the principle of a monthly contribution from a hundred individuals to finance housing for people in precarious situations.

who have been issued with an OQTF and have come to take refuge far from the regional metropolis where they used to live. This turning point, which we situate in 2015, leads to a change of scale; it is no longer the institution that takes precedence, but networks of supportive inhabitants, revealing the strength of weak links and a combination of skills. We then switch to a logic of protection of undocumented migrants, some of whom are moved with the help of volunteers.

Structured on a totally different basis from that previously mentioned with the setting up of the CAO, where the watchword mixed solidarity and denunciation of a political<sup>13</sup> system, the solidarity movement observed relies on relay spaces allowing the dissemination of information and recommendations received from key players such as Gilles. Alongside the choirs and the solidarity grocery shops, the market became, without question, the social space of engagement. The proximity of the inhabitants of the department, many of whom organise their travel around market days in the surrounding villages, has made it possible to mobilise resources to respond to the expectations of exiles facing possible expulsion. Thus, young "neos" who had arrived in Ariège to develop an agricultural activity were able to learn about the support sought and to help the exiles thanks to the information stands at the markets.

The great strength of the links that have been forged lies, in part, in the absence of any real political markers for the organisers of this mobilisation. Most of the "neos" choose to commit themselves to the cause of the exiles and their motivation is part of a personal approach where the search for well-being, which drives their life choices, can only be fully expressed by helping to reduce the suffering of the most disadvantaged. This positioning is very clearly summarised by Francis, a long-time "neo", who sets up his collective's stand on the market every week: "What interests me is the strength of the links, the universalism, the experience of the relationship". Nevertheless, his analysis of commitment sometimes comes up against generational preconceptions:

It is essential to work in a reflective way. There are younger generations that pass like shooting stars.

[Francis, November 2018]

The links that take shape through chance encounters at the markets all contain their share of complexity based on common references that enable shared commitment. While we have previously insisted on the fact that the forming of relationship between the 'neos' is emancipated - at a primary level - from political markers, a set of common references nevertheless connects them in their mobilisation:

My trauma was the Algerian war, which had a big impact on me, and when I understood what the Shoah was. I was overwhelmed, it's a question that accompanies me every day. I tell myself that nothing can be taken for granted.

[Sophie, septuagenarian, psychologist, January 2019]

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<sup>13</sup>The leaflet distributed by the activists supporting these demonstrations had the slogan: "Solidarity without borders. Refugees welcome, politicians out. Papers for all or no papers at all".

Here, the Ariège is militant country. When I go to the Centre-Ouest, I feel I am in a different country. I don't talk about it with everyone [about my involvement]. My grandfather, he was in Algeria. He has a radical point of view. [...] I don't dare talk to him about it. Maybe it's a mistake. My parents and my sisters are involved in A Hundred for a Roof here.

[Luc, 30 years old, beekeeper, May 2018]

Although supported by networks of associations based in sub-prefectures or medium-sized towns in the department and collectives scattered throughout the network of villages, in the most remote reception areas, the mobilisation in favour of rejected asylum seekers takes place first of all amongst the inhabitants themselves, forcing them to work on "collective introspection". The actors of the mobilisation in favour of an asylum seeker living in the village reintegrate this event in the social history of the place:

André has brought people together, but there are still two clans in the village. The "neos" of the 1970s and the others. Fifty years ago, André would not have been welcomed in the same way. In 1970, I arrived with my husband. He was the first black man in the village. One day the postman came and said to me: "I have a letter for Mr. Negro".

[Anne, November 2019]

Paul points out that in this context, he chose to respond to a request to be part of the next list for the municipal elections by making his agreement conditional on the commitment to request the integration of the village into the Anvita<sup>14</sup> network.

## Conclusion

Our analyses have shown the local translation of the implementation of the DNA and its effects on the population, which has organised itself to help the exiles. We insist on the territorial dimension generated by the mobilisation of the helpers. Within this constellation, some are settled in isolated, more protective spaces. Others, on the other hand, move to small towns in the department, where they become involved in the charity sector. Acts of solidarity are therefore not purely local; they also need to be linked to small towns in order to be included in the space of political representation. They take place within mobility systems that are those typically used by villagers for their daily life. Their territoriality reflects that of a large part of the daily activities of the inhabitants of these sparsely populated and relatively isolated rural areas. These actions combine local relationships at the village or valley level with intermediaries who extend them to the departmental level. They reveal all the complexity of what is called "local" in rural areas, a tangle of local connections and links polarised by small towns where skilled jobs and certain decision-making bodies are concentrated. This fluidity of circulation on the scale

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<sup>14</sup>National Association of Welcoming Cities and Territories.

of the department does not apply to all the actors. It is more a question of "mobility by delegation", in which people with a wider range of action are involved, which benefits the whole group through feedback and the circulation of information. Beyond local life, some even have the capacity to deploy their action at regional and national levels thanks to their involvement in activist networks. Conversely, the isolation, or even invisibility, of certain inhabitants living in a remote hamlet at the bottom of a valley is an asset for collectives that wish to hide a family threatened with eviction.

There is thus a labile social morphology that is both the strength - by giving 'flexibility' to the actions undertaken - and the fragility - by making the actors dependent on each other, especially those who have central positions in the system - of the collectives involved in helping the exiles.

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