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Participatory, Self-Managed, Collective Building Projects: When Every Act Is Politicised[☆]

Geneviève Pruvost

Centre d'étude des mouvements sociaux (CEMS), Institut Marcel Mauss, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 190, avenue de France, 75013 Paris, France

Abstract

Advocates of a practical utopia, committed to the search for consistency between ecological theories and practices, explore the notions of “participation” and of “work” from a critical perspective on industrial development. Work is then understood as the adoption of a political stance (ecological, libertarian). In the world of militant eco-construction, we study variations in the organisation of tasks in participatory, self-managed and collective building projects, whether in legal frameworks such as worker cooperatives (SCOP), or in the conflicting setting of a new airport in Notre-Dame-des-Landes.

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Whether work is an obligation or a choice, alienating or fulfilling, productive or reproductive, and whether one is an employee or self-employed, the same notion of “work” applies, in as much as it is distinct from family time, leisure or political action – i.e. from “non-work”. Since the industrial revolution we have seen the gradual development of a standard spatio-temporal scission between work and other human activities, both private and public (Abbott, 1988). This division is nevertheless a matter of considerable philosophical and political debates. Social groups that follow the work carried out by Ivan Illich and André Gorz advocate other dividing lines that they test out in practical utopias. The reduction of work to a wage-earning activity and to a commodity, along with the hierarchy between manual “labour” dedicated to self-subsistence on

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E-mail address: genevievepruvost2@gmail.com

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the one hand, and the creativity of artistic work and political action (Arendt, 1993) on the other, are the object of active critical analysis (Pruvost, 2013): why can work not be an autonomous, cooperative and inventive activity?

As this re-evaluation of the place occupied by work is mainly driven by political ecology and libertarian movements, I conducted a study on the everyday correlation between ecological theories and practices, essentially in three rural regions (Aveyron, Cévennes, Brittany), based on ninety-five life stories and approximately twenty ethnographical visits between 2010 and 2014. For this population of craftsmen, farmers, low-ranking civil servants and artists, who combine part-time domestic, professional and associative activities, and for whom living in a given place means engaging in local affairs, what does “working” mean? In order to compare peaceable alternative lifestyles with combative lifestyles, I continued the study in Notre-Dame-des-Landes between 2012 and 2014. In this article I will confine my analysis to a form of action that was present in all of the areas studied: self-managed collective projects in the eco-construction sector.

Self-managed collective construction projects reactivate the principle of militant solidarity and mutual aid at village level and undoubtedly stem from the success enjoyed by participatory democracy. The level of formalisation is nevertheless different. Against the protocols of public consultation of users, is set the self-organisation of civil society. In certain militant spaces, because the term “participatory” is linked to the style of management of the same name and thus has such negative connotations, the name “collective construction project” is preferred. In order to bring to light the wide range of alternatives to a wage-earning activity, we will examine three cases which have in common the fact that they are not based on community utopia (Lacroix, 1981) but on networking initiatives: firstly, self-managed collective construction projects which bring together volunteers, self-builders and professionals to build private homes; secondly, building projects which are self-managed by the members of a worker cooperative (SCOP¹) specialising in eco-construction and founded on a principle of equal pay and the rotation of tasks; finally, collective building projects which are deployed as part of the fight to occupy the site of the future Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport, where there is radical criticism of market labour and of the professionalization of the workforce. For clarity of analysis, for each type of building project we will highlight the conditions for taking part in the construction work, on the understanding that all of these masons, volunteers and activists appear on the same electronic mailing lists and that some of them move on from one project to another. The social world of militant eco-construction belongs to a single “constellation” (Collectif Mauvaise Troupe, 2014) which includes all of these associated registers of action.

From one end of this spectrum to the other, the notion of “taking part in the work” takes on a singular meaning: it is eminently voluntary and does not relate to any socioeconomic necessity or to any hierarchical imposition. Because the idea is to stand apart in all respects from the pyramid organisation of the building and public works sector, the criteria for taking part in a building project are extremely well thought out. Right down to the very last detail, the choice of building materials, tools and work organisation are part of a political stance. Eco-builders are thus “inquirers” in the sense used by John Dewey. Even if they share the same extensive conception of work that dissolves all differences between labour and political action, participatory, self-managed and collective building projects are nevertheless characterised by the status of the workers who are mobilised, by the skills required, the forms of remuneration, the distribution of tasks and the final ownership of the building produced.

¹ A SCOP, in french “*société coopérative et participative*”, is a cooperative and participatory company.

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