Emmaüs: On peut refaire le monde?

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In early November 2007, I found myself with a friend, walking along a stretch of unfinished motorway in the West of France. We had not expected the motorway, and would have been lost had it not been for a road worker who spotted us, and gave us a lift to the community. I had been on the road for half a year, and was getting tired of not having a permanent place to live; my friend, who was trying to break her addiction, had asked to come with me for a while. I had heard about Emmaüs and been given some addresses by a 'wise old woman' friend, who herself had stayed there 15 years earlier. We could not verify the old address and found no phone numbers, but the old woman assured me that if we could not find one, or if the one we found had no space, we would be sent to another – all we had to do was go there and knock on the door, and we would be let in, given work and a place to stay.

Neither of us spoke a word of French, and the role of the newcomer is not the easiest in Emmaüs. For the first few months newcomers are generally given the undesirable tasks, or made to fill in at odd jobs wherever they're needed. Some tasks are more specialised than others, and even though most people do take on a variety of roles, the more specialised ones are usually taken up by the senior residents of the community. For my friend, the stay became a short one, whereas I set to the task of settling in, adapting, learning new skills and leaving behind the status of the newcomer. Isolated by language and social barriers, and forced to learn by doing and watching, having to make sense of relations through interpretations, I was – as many others who arrive in a community – forced to do 'fieldwork', and in a sense, the present work had already begun then. After half a year at the community I left to go to Siberia, but would return seven months later, and it was during this second stay that I started to develop an interest in anthropology. Naturally, this is a return to some of the questions that concerned me then.

Emmaüs had its near mythical beginning in the winter of 1949, when a priest with the nickname l'Abbé Pierre met a man named Georges Legay, an ex-military on the verge of suicide. Abbé Pierre told him something to the effect that if he had nothing to live for himself, he might as well use his life to help those who did. Legay became the first

compagnon[1], and Abbé Pierre's house turned into a shelter. As I have had the story told by another one of those first *compagnons*, Abbé Pierre was almost bankrupt, and had turned to begging on the streets himself, when those around him decided to work for the self-sufficiency of the community, roaming the streets for things that could be resold – they became *chiffonniers*, and self-sufficiency and work without the purpose of getting richer became the codex of the community. The housing crisis that followed in the wake of WWII, and peaked in the ice winter of 1954, saw Abbé Pierre propelled to fame for his involvement in what was called 'the uprising of kindness'. Emmaüs turned into a movement, with communities shooting up all over France and abroad. Today there are 117 communities in France, and a somewhat smaller number spread over the world (19 in the UK). By and large, they all rely on the same subsistence as the original community, recycling and reselling, although some communities have had to take on seasonal labour in addition. There has been some academic writing produced about Emmaüs, mostly in French. Much of it however, is written from a sociological standpoint, looking at communities either in terms of their use to society, or their internal economy (Lovatt et al. 2004, cf. Ambroisine 2009), and I have found nothing by former *compagnons*.

On the 4th of July 2010, a forgotten candle started a fire, and the entire main building of the community burned down. It evoked a multitude of feelings in me, and I decided to use the 'Encounters Project' as a chance to go back, reconnect with the place, and, ultimately, clarify my own relation to it. I was preparing for a shock. Every time I have called back to ask about the community I have been given similar answers, '*things are going so-so*', '*it's the same as always here*', '*there are ups and downs'*, and I have tended to think of the place as existing in something of a bubble outside time, a world cohabited by orange plastic gramophones, Louis XV-style furniture, Pokemon games and gangster rap. And yet, when I called to announce that I was coming back, the answer was: *'You will be shocked, things have really changed here.'* I was indeed shocked upon my arrival. The white outer walls that had once given the large farm house its name, Le Blanc, stood charred and menacing, supported temporarily by wooden beams (awaiting money from the insurance, it hadn't yet been decided whether to keep the outer walls or tear them down completely). People themselves had been deferred to a camp of caravans and campers among the trees

[1] In order to preserve the dual meaning of 'companion' and 'partner in a company', I will preserve the French word. See appendix for a short summary of the most important roles or statuses in the community.

of the backyard, centred around a single, glum light, hoisted up in an old maypole, waking up every morning in the shade of the ruins. The winter had been cold, with little heating in the caravans. In my absence someone had died of internal bleeding (resulting from alcoholism), another person had suffered from cancer, and more recently, a young woman had left the community to get married, only to be murdered shortly after. Only two days after my arrival, a woman associated with the man who had been put in charge of our 'annex'[2] had an argument and drew her car twice through the façade of the shop there. All of these things made a strong impression on me, and I expected to be writing about them here. However, I left the community with an odd feeling of optimism, and the more I have been reflecting on my two weeks there, the more I see the crisis, and the community's response to it, in perspective of its everyday life — and Emmaüs itself as a system of handling crises.

« Il n'y a plus de déserts. Il n'y a plus d'îles. Le besoin pourtant s'en fait sentir. Pour comprendre le monde, il faut parfois se détourner; pour mieux servir les hommes, les tenir un moment à distance. »[3]

G makes me read Camus. She is one of the volunteers who spends the most time at the community, sorting and pricing books. She describes herself as addicted to Emmaüs. G was diagnosed with cancer during my second stay at the community, and with few people having the skill to replace her she started teaching me her *métier*. She never seemed to let herself be affected much by her illness, responding to words of concern from others with a shrug and a smile, or a cynical remark delivered with a surprising nonchalance and a wink. Confused by the combination of her genuinely carefree attitude and her cynical view of life, I would quiz her about it. In response, she started making me read Camus: '*Here, this is my philosophy. I read this when I was young, and I have always felt this is how I should live.*' Quotes like the one above could apply to plenty others apart from her. Even though homelessness was what started the movement, people come to Emmaüs for a multitude of reasons: some are paperless immigrants, refugees, some want to start over after a life in

[2] A shop and warehouse in a different village, with room to house four 'compagnons', run by an 'adjoint'.
[3] 'There are no more deserts. There are no more islands. But the need is felt nonetheless. To understand the world, one sometimes have to turn away; to better serve people — keep them at a distance for a while.' — Albert Camus. From the opening of *Le Minotaure ou La Halte d'Oran*, own translation.

prison or in the military, some are escaping domestic abuse, some see it as a lifestyle. But there is something everyone, from 'passager' to 'responsable', have in common. People are drawn to Emmaüs for much the same reasons that anthropologists used to flock to small scale societies: the need for a world which is isolated, complete in itself, comprehensible. It is almost an unspoken rule not to ask others about their past or life outside the community, unless they bring up the topic themselves.

Victor Buchli's suggestion that *'the processes of materialization are more important than the material itself'* (Buchli 2002) might prove particularly fitting in the case of Emmaüs: the material and economic activity of the community is entirely centred around recycling. *Poubelle* (rubbish/wastebin) was the very first word I learned in French. Everyone in the community, including the 'responsables', is involved in several of the following tasks to various extents:

- Lorry drivers and movers collect larger items (or large quantities of items) that people want to get rid of, as well as deliver furniture, beds, pianos etc. that have been sold.
- Everything that arrives has to be sorted, through separate processes, for: clothing, books, music, toys, antiques/trinkets/art, electrical equipment.
- Broken electrical equipment and other waste items with constituent parts that can be recycled or recuperated for profit are dealt with separately: wood, metal, cardboard, washing machines, fridges, etc. One of the most undesirable tasks consists of taking apart anything, from parasols and sofas to industrial printers, with sledgehammer and crowbar for this purpose.
- Dresses and shirts may be ironed before being sold, and leathers, furs, dolls and similar items are sometimes repaired.
- A good few people are occupied with selling things, each primarily with experience and responsibility in one area: furniture, trinkets, clothing, toys, books, antiques and 'brick-a-brack', the last category being sold unsorted under open sky, and including anything from window frames and cutlery to caravans.
- Textiles that have been rejected for sale are generally put into sacks and stored, if they are not too soiled or damaged, and every few weeks, a lorry arrives from TRIO (the 'western textile recycling initiative') to collect these. This usually happens before breakfast, and every able-bodied man who is not absolutely necessary

elsewhere is needed to form a human chain, catching and throwing ~10kg bags of clothes. Usually, between 4 and 6 tonnes of textiles are handled in this way, making this by far the most exerting task. Even the management joins in this task, and P, the female 'responsable', told me that she used to as well when she was younger.

The following is a more focused description of the sorting of clothes. Not only is it the task that seems most illustrative, it is also the original work taken on by Emmaüs – giving rise to the nickname *chiffonniers*, 'rag gatherers', and most people in the community are involved in some stage of the processing of clothes.

The first time I sorted clothes was in our community's 'annex'. Here I was put to the task along with A, a refugee from Dagestan. He and I, having arrived most recently, were at the bottom rung of the ladder, and the four others there had perhaps grown a bit complacent in their roles. I remained there for two months, almost exclusively spending my time sorting clothes, and doing other of the less desirable tasks. It should be mentioned that sorting clothes is perhaps the most gendered work in the community; almost exclusively women do it. But there were no women at the annex when A and I were there.

Sorting is a task that seems much simpler than it is to the onlooker, and people seemed to not like explaining it. The people who do it rapidly grab an item, sometimes barely looking at it, then expediting it on to a box, crate or sac according to what type it is, or into the bin for TRIO, or the garbage. Only later would I find out that this was an ease that came with routine, and I too would be annoyed with other people or beginners, carelessly flinging clothing here and there in imitation of what appears to be a simple and logical system. In reality, the process is a bit more variable. It is a task that it takes experience rather than instruction to learn. You take a sack. Open it. Already now half the judgement has been made: How does it smell? Is the clothing moist or dry? What kind of sac is it, what types of clothes are there? Are they folded neatly or thrown in haphazardly? Items are rapidly classified in terms of type, style, gender, age, material, season, mark, wear. The decision of whether to quickly accept an item, or carefully examine it for sweat marks, stains, loose seams, dropped stitches etc., becomes an entirely visceral decision. After two months of sorting, I was starting to mentally sort clothes in my sleep.

In spite of the monotonous nature of the process, each sac has a personality, tells a story about where it came from and under what circumstances. After a while you begin to

recognise these, and comments are often made regarding the people from whom this or that sac originated. There are the charitable old ladies that give well preserved garments, usually completely out of style, but clean and perfumed like their owners. There are the families with children. One grows up, all the baby clothes go at the same time. One leaves home, all their old t-shirts, jeans full of holes and similar artefacts of teenage life are let go of. There are the sacks collected after people have died. No one usually likes to sort through the clothes of the dead, particularly close relatives, and these sacs usually contain a wide range of clothing, from the brand new to the completely worn out or dirty. People will leave the strangest things in the sacs, and I have found everything from soiled nappies to broken glass and dirt, but also jewellery, money, sex toys.

It is interesting to note how those who donate goods are often extremely intent upon keeping the container, the demand seemingly far beyond the use-value of jars, cardboard boxes, plastic bags and even rubber bands. In spite of the disposability of consumer culture, and regardless of whether they arrive carefully wrapped and packaged, or haphazardly thrown in a bag, objects tend to be strongly bound to their owner; throwing something away might well be said to involve a process of 're-alienation' (Lucas 2002: 5), and in a sense the job of Emmaüs is to break those bonds and re-contextualise the objects. Sorting things can be a very intimate and voyeuristic experience. Old pictures of a national champion runner turn up along with his clothes, letters to him as a prisoner of war in Germany, the last letter from his beloved. It can evoke feelings of both intruding and being intruded upon, as well as sensations of familiarity, diversity, and kinship.

Upon my return after the fire, C tells me repeatedly as we are sorting, and after work when people ask to her day: *'There's really a lot of rubbish.' 'Most of these sacks are rubbish.' 'People don't give nice things these days.' 'It's the crisis'*, she says. People were already interpreting some things in terms of the financial crisis before I left for university. The first to do so were those who occupied with the sale of furniture – the items with the greatest variation in price, from a few Euros to 7-800 Euros. After the fire, however, many people were talking about it. The lorry drivers had noticed that they had less to pick up at each address, and fewer items of any real value. Those occupied with sales said that people had less to spend, more customers coming to Emmaüs out of need than to scout out valuable second-hand items. While it might be tempting to see this as reflecting the crisis in

the community, the movement as a whole has started to see falling income across all communities.

The economic life of the community has some very important implications for how people form relationships. Reciprocity has been proposed as a human universal, but comes in a variety of forms, from gifts to exchange, from barter to demand sharing, and Emmaüs provides for a very special case, whereby relations made outwith the community differ in quality and content from those between people within.

A wealth of goods of every conceivable nature constantly passes through the community, and *compagnons* have almost direct access to them. This has been handled in slightly different ways in different communities[4]; in this community however, most things could simply be taken, at least with the permission of someone relevant (i.e. in case of books, those sorting books, in case of electronics, those sorting electronics and so on), and larger things with the permission of the 'responsables'. Since almost anything is available right at hand, or bound to turn up if you wait a while, many *compagnons* do describe Emmaüs in terms of affluence, such as: *'We don't miss anything here. It's the good life!', 'It's luxury.'* I have never seen anyone be rejected anything, though the 'responsables' have been talking about putting limits to things such as TVs and bicycles, to avoid people constantly swapping when a new or better model turns up. Clothing then becomes a signifier of effort and image, rather than wealth, and having a cell phone, TV set, DVD player, bicycle, even though it might not be the latest model, is taken for granted. To some extent this creates a 'use and discard' culture, a few *compagnons* sometimes preferring to get new clothes rather than do the laundry. Some people, on the other hand, start little collections. The practice of finding things for each other becomes one of the primary ways of establishing relations. Things can be found both on demand or spontaneously. If one has a need or a desire for a something specific, it is very common to ask the person most likely to find it, and while this does not in itself initiate any reciprocity, it can be a useful way to get to know other people's needs and interests. Reciprocity however, is created by remembering these interests, and being able to find things to give unexpectedly. No gifts are given in the community on Christmas and birthdays, I have never heard of any big exchanges of money between *compagnons*, and objects tend to be free or at least common

[4] For instance, the woman who told me about the place, said that in the community where she had stayed the longest, a symbolic amount of one franc was paid for every item a *compagnon* wanted to take.

property. It is easy to see relationships within Emmaüs in the same terms that one is engaged with the organisation, as temporary, conditional, and somewhat separate from the context of one's own life and history. It might be argued that since there is no stable way to assess the value of any given 'prestation', this inhibits '*the build-up and embeddedness of wealth and values in others*' as Annette B. Weiner (1980) argues. As one *compagnon* expressed just before leaving the community: 'Sure, I make friends in Emmaüs, lots of friends. But no real friends. I only make real friends outside of Emmaüs, it is not possible here.'

The first attempts to classify societies and order them on a ladder of evolution were made with reference to their mode of production, based on the supposition of a linear positive relation between technology and social forms. Whereas the speculative history of linear progress has faded from view, the notion of a close relationship between social practice and mode of production remains strong, not least through the continuing influence of Marxism. A particularly interesting formulation of this relationship is made by Alan (1983) who proposes that each mode of production is related to a 'mode of thought'. Barnard's theory is meant to give an explanation of why hunter/gatherers tend to end up in extremely marginalised positions when being integrated into the capitalist economy, and his crucial point is therefore that the mode of thought seems to be more persistent than the mode of production itself. So can Emmaüs be said to have a mode of production, and thereby a mode of thought of its own? After all, no one, bar a tiny minority, grow up and die in the communities. Thus, it might be argued that Emmaüs forms an integrated, albeit specialised, part of the capitalist economy, and therefore cannot be thought of in distinct terms. While this is true, it does provide for another interesting parallel with Barnard's model, for many hunter/gatherer societies, far from being pockets of unchanged stone-age culture, have indeed historically been closely integrated with surrounding economies — as exemplified by the relations of power and dependency that exist, for instance between, Aka pygmies and agricultural Bantu tribes (Bahuchet and Guillaume 1982). This is a question that has puzzled me from early on in my own involvement with Emmaüs, and part of what initially led me to the study of anthropology.

Emmaüs is driven by an ideology of resistance, official communication tending to be ripe with slogans like '*on peut refaire le monde*', '*ne pas subir, toujour agir*', presenting Emmaüs as involved in a struggle against poverty, homelessness, social exclusion etc.; a

struggle that can be won or lost. Yet within the communities, ideology is often faced with a much more dim and pragmatic view of Emmaüs. One in which Emmaüs is an instrumental part of capitalism, it is where all the 'trash' ends up, all the '*shit of the world*' (in FD's words); a place that simply mitigates the effects of capitalism by providing a subsistence (at below minimum wages) for those who would otherwise be on the streets, and providing opportunity of consumption for the most exploited. Indeed, this is the impression I get when Lovatt et al. (2006) conclude that Emmaüs Cambridge 'saves' society at least £613.000 per year. In my experience, *compagnons* tend to talk about Emmaüs through one or the other of these discourses, or switch between them. Regardless of the validity of either, they are interpretations that can be used to position the speaker in relation to the world and to Emmaüs. The community provides an illusion, albeit a fragile one, of an island complete in itself. A place where people can be freed from past and future, and an affluence that to some extent breaks the connection between wealth and status. But more importantly, the process of recycling, of separating waste from treasure and separating objects from their former context, is itself a model: it provides a constant contact with imaginary pasts and identities of others — an opportunity to reintegrate one's own past, to reinvent identity. As an old *compagnon* stated in the community newsletter once: *'Here we recycle everything, even people*!'

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Appendix A

Passagers: *Passager*, or 'guest' is a term that applies to anyone who arrives at a community, asking for shelter and work. Upon arrival they are given basic necessities, such as toothbrush, soap, towel etcetera, and put up in a guest room. As a rule they can take one day of rest when they arrive, but after that they are expected to work. Quite a few people do only stay for a few days or weeks, and some, particularly those who have been involved with Emmaüs for long, use it as a way of travelling.

Compagnons and compagnes: After a few weeks as a *passager*, it is usually possible to get a permanent room if one is free, and become a *compagnon* or a *compagne*. These are the mainstay and workforce of the community. They are paid a modest amount of money, from which healthcare, pension and other expenses have to be detracted, since Emmaüs had no legal status until recently – this amounts to a net sum of 50€ a week. For some it is possible to live outside of the community and still come to work, in particular families with children.

Amis and amies / volontaires: 'Friends' of the community are people who are not *compagnons*, but pay to be members of the organisation that runs the community anyway. In most cases these are people who have some connection to Emmaüs, and many of them help out as volunteers. At least in our community, the volunteers form a relatively stable group. In all of the time I spent there, I have only witnessed one person going through an interview to become a volunteer (in the week I spent there for this project).

Responsables and adjoints: *Responsables* are the directors of the community, as the word suggests, they are responsible for all day to day activities, and have influence over virtually all aspects of the management of the community. They are, however, in an effort to keep their power in check, hired by the community council, which in turn is elected by the community at large, *ami/-es* and *compagnons/-es*. Here they may sit in on meetings, but are not allowed to vote. In our community, the responsables where also the founders. Adjoints are hired to help with day to day management, and generally play a more important role in bigger communities.