



# Glimpses of embodied utopias, why Moroccan and Swiss farmers engage in alternative agricultures

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## Abstract

Geographies of food are not only shaped by political economic forces but also by individuals who resist dominant ways of subjectivation. Based on ethnographic research on forty-seven agroecological farms in Switzerland and Morocco, this article proposes a philosophical reconsideration of the role of utopia, hope and enchantment in shaping people's actions. It contributes to the understanding of the emotional, spiritual and embodied experiences that lead farmers to engage in alternative agricultures at the margins of state planning and agro-industry. The adoption of an etic research approach to 'alternativity' allows me to capture 'quiet alternativities', or farming experiences with beneficial socio-ecological outcomes but which are not represented as alternative or disruptive by the farmers themselves. This is especially important for Swiss and Moroccan farmers who do not always identify with a social movement or express any explicit opposition to agricultural policies and the dominant agri-food system, although their practices may effectively incorporate an alternative experience from where to envision different agri-cultures. Drawing from diverse conceptions of utopia, hope and enchantment, I unravel different manifestations of utopia as mental creations of 'no-where' and as embodied experiences of 'no-when'. This enables me to attend to 'quiet expressions' of hope manifested not in speech but in daily practices and to discuss farmers' motives to engage in alternative agricultures, despite a sometimes bleak outlook. I theorise these multiple experiences as 'glimpses of utopias' to explore the embodied and embedded dimensions of utopia to broaden what utopia can mean beyond purely speculative thinking.

**Keywords** Utopia · Hope · Enchantment · Alternative agricultures · Quiet alternativity · Latent commons

The view from somewhere, from a specific place in the world, with a specific path to utopia, is necessary, indeed, urgent, even desperate, if we are to indeed begin to 'make room in the world for many rooms and many worlds'.

Max Ajl 2021

## Introduction

Some Swiss and Moroccan farmers engage in alternative agricultures. Their everyday practices and agroecological decisions can lead to beneficial socio-ecological outcomes at the margins of the agri-industrial food system. In this article, I seek to explore the motives of these farmers. In doing so, I wish to contribute to the understanding of some of the emotional, spiritual, and embodied dimensions of engagement that lead farmers to opt for alternative agricultures, thereby resisting dominant ways of subjectivation and reshaping local food geographies. I do so through a reflexive, philosophical approach. In my research with forty-seven farms across Morocco and Switzerland, stories kept coming up in which farmers' choices of how to farm were seemingly not motivated by a clear ideology of ecological farming nor by a lure of profits but rather by seemingly mundane bodily experiences. For instance:

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I was at an event called “A taste of tomorrow’s agriculture” on a farm in the Canton de Vaud, in Switzerland, co-organised by the Swiss Protestant Church Aid in the context of their ecumenical Lenten campaign articulated around the theme of agroecology. During a general discussion, a farmer spoke up and told the public that he had rediscovered what farming meant two years before his retirement, when he changed from conventional to organic farming. He said he has started again to walk through his fields instead of only driving through them on his tractor, thereby observing the insects and studying the weed growing on different patches on the soil to understand the material characteristics of his soil and accordingly the different “needs” and possibilities of each patch. All of which, made farming for him suddenly more interesting and therefore also more satisfying. Curious to know what had provoked this abrupt change, I asked him later whether economic incentives played a role in his change of farming practices. He explained: “economically speaking this was an absolute non-sense. But one day, I was sitting on my tractor, I had almost finished applying an herbicide when I suddenly realised that this made no sense. I just knew that I would not continue.”

I first did not know what to do with these stories and anecdotes farmers told me and which I now frame in terms of ‘glimpses of utopias’. They just continued popping up in our conversations and I felt they were important to the people who shared them with me. I started to draw on different theorisation of hope and utopia to bring them into dialogue with my empirical findings in order to make sense of what were, in the beginning, puzzling experiences for me of hearing from farmers who engage in alternative agricultures despite often physically, materially and structurally difficult circumstances. This pushed me to explore what utopia can mean as an embodied experience beyond speculative thinking (Debaise and Stengers 2015) – an abstract mental creation. Foucault (1966) already argued that there is always a relation between utopia and the body. In order to take this argument further, I draw upon Bloch (1959:204) who considers hope, utopia’s counterpart, as an “Agens”, an embodied driving force pushing us forward. Accordingly, I found that hope is more often a feeling manifested ‘quietly’ in daily practices and ways of being than in ‘loud’ speech and political agendas.

While utopianism, or “social dreaming” projecting the idea of a better world either in the past or the future (Sargent 2014:14), has always existed, Bloch’s idea of hope is not merely a projection of reason or mental creation but an expression of what is really possible outside of our mental

conditioning (Bronner 1997). “Feeling that the world is wrong does not necessarily mean that we have a picture of a utopia to put in its place. We need no promise of a happy ending to justify our rejection of a world we feel to be wrong” (Holloway 2005:3). *Feeling* that the world is wrong is an embodied, practice-based experience (Carolan 2011) which is not always easily translated into a coherent discourse and vision. This feeling of hope, the manifestation of Bloch’s ‘Agens’, leading farmers to engage in alternative agricultures is what I capture as ‘glimpses of utopias’ – the glimpses I get of the different experiences of farmers’ utopias.

‘Glimpses of utopias’ transcend ‘loud’ and ‘quiet’ forms of alternative agricultures. I call ‘loud alternativity’ farmers who identify and position themselves in line with specific movements and/or forms of agriculture, such as agroecology, permaculture, natural farming, regenerative agriculture, as an explicit alternative to the dominant agricultural paradigm. With ‘quiet alternativity’ I refer to concrete agroecological and everyday practices with potentially beneficial socio-ecological outcomes, which are however not promoted, experienced or described as ‘alternative’ or ‘disruptive’ by the people who practise them – be it for motives of discretion or unawareness. This means imposing the concept of ‘alternativity’ on a set of agricultural forms, even if they are not identified as such by the people who live them. As ‘loud’ articulations of agricultural alternatives predominate current thinking about farming futures, research on alternative agri-food systems mostly adopt emic<sup>1</sup> research approaches (Le Velly 2017), in which ‘alternativity’ is bound to a certain auto-proclamation of its difference. An emic definition of alternative agricultures allows to capture the political message of utopia and thus the potential power of transformation of self-proclaimed sustainable agri-food initiatives and movements (cf. Chakroun 2019). Yet, it discards ‘quiet alternativity’. Hence, I adopt an etic research approach to alternative agricultures. This was important given that my research had shown that farmers in Switzerland and Morocco not always identify with a social movement or express any explicit stance against agricultural policies and the dominant agri-food system. In my view, however, their practices may effectively incorporate an alternative from where to envision different agri-cultures by resisting dominant narratives and subjectivations.

Moreover, framing alternative agricultures as a plural, I agree with the idea that theorising food utopias must be

<sup>1</sup> The emic/etic contrast was originally formalised in linguistics and has since been incorporated into anthropology. In this discipline, emic “is centred on the collection of indigenous cultural meanings, linked to the point of view of the actors, whereas etic is based on external observations that are independent of the meanings conveyed by the actors, and involves a quasi-ethological observation of human behaviour” (Olivier de Sardan 1998:153).

embedded in specific places with specific struggles, and therefore relies on a multiplication of how we think and produce food (Carolan 2014; Dinerstein 2017; Ajl 2021). I therefore turn to the stories and places underlying alternative agricultures with the idea that they may contain within them seeds, however separated by space and context, to imagine other pathways than the ones envisioned by modernist agricultural development schemes in Switzerland and Morocco alike. Telling these stories helps us to broaden the number of places we can turn to, to imagine not just one, but several ways forward for our future agri-cultures, or as Ajl (2021:976) says “to make room in the world for many worlds”.

The continuous back and forth between my empirical findings and theory, brought me to the choice of an etic approach to ‘alternativity’, the framing of alternative agricultures as based on mixed farming (integrated poly-culture breeding systems), and the elaboration of an analytical framework to capture also ‘quiet’ expressions and motivations of alternative agricultures. While I guide the reader all the way through this reflexive journey, I more consistently take the reader into empirics in the later sections. I do so to relate in more depth farmers’ experiences I came to frame as embodied utopias and ‘quiet’ expressions of hope. As such, in the following section, I expose the methodology underlying this research. I then sketch out the Swiss and Moroccan agricultural contexts to thereafter discuss how I define alternative agricultures in relation to these. I proceed by outlining the idea of overdetermination and weak theory which I adopt to tease out a ‘spaciousness’ to rethink farmers’ motives. Following Gibson-Graham’s (2006) and Tsing’s (2015) invitation to address the imaginative challenge of living in a world without teleology, I continue by exploring how to think outside the moral obligations to aspirations underlying many conceptions of utopia. Doing so, enables me to take ‘glimpses of utopias’ as an entry point to show the motives of farmers’ engagement in alternative agricultures. Drawing from the etymology of More’s ‘(O)u-topia’ and Shoravardi’s ‘Na-koja-abad’, I unravel different manifestations of utopia, framing mental constructions as ‘no-where’ utopias and embodied experiences as ‘no-when’ utopias. I conclude discussing some of the limitations and openings of this study regarding wider debates on the transformation of our agri-food systems.

## Methodology

This article is based on multi-sited ethnography exploring the conditions of existence of alternative agricultures in Switzerland and Morocco, two countries tightly steering the development of their agricultural sector (Barjolle et al.

2008; Mathez and Loftus 2022). While a different set of research questions is often applied to agricultural development in the ‘North’ and ‘South’, authors such as Netting (1993) and Van der Ploeg (2008) have theorised commonalities of peasant-style farming across this divide. Hence, I explore the ‘quiet everyday’ of Swiss and Moroccan farmers alike to understand how food geographies are shaped at the margin of state planning.

I draw on data collected among forty-seven farms over a period of two and a half years through ethnographic research methods (2021–2024). Originally guided by the quest to explore the conditions of existence of recent as well as ‘traditional’ agroecological practices at the margin of state planning and agro-industry, I employed different strategies to select these farms I now frame as alternative agricultures. Finding and identifying the farmers who enter this conceptualisation was an important step in my etic approach to alternative agriculture. In both Switzerland and Morocco, I started my empirical research through the network and events of associations related to peasant farming, organic farming, agroecology, solidarity agriculture – expressions of ‘loud alternativity’. It was relatively easy to identify farmers who identify, and sometimes promote, but mostly rather loosely relate to these networks to benefit from shared information and trainings. Concerning the exploration of ‘quiet alternativity’, I used different starting points in Morocco and Switzerland. In Morocco, I spent a month going to various *Souqs*, traditional markets, in the region of Rabat and Marrakech. There, I asked farmers and retailers whether they know farmers who cultivate ‘*bla dua*’, with no chemical inputs – surprisingly few. I consequently met the farmers they suggested. In Switzerland, I conducted my research in the canton of Vaud, a topographically diverse but small region where farmers are rather well connected or know each other from hearsay – at least those who stick out by doing something differently. Hence the first contact with some farmers through different farming networks and recommendations helped me in a second step, to identify those who fall under my definition of ‘quiet’ alternative agricultures.

Overall, I visited twenty-seven farms in Morocco and twenty in Switzerland in a process of three consecutive steps. The visits of each of these forty-seven farms included at least one interview and visit. Secondly, out of these, I met seven farmers in Morocco and eleven in Switzerland several times in the course of different seasons at their farm or on their marketplaces, combining these visits with participant observation. Thirdly, in order to deepen my understanding of the farmers’ trade-offs, decisions, and motivations I spent between one and two weeks on three farms in both countries, participating like a farm employee in the daily activities of the farm and family. I chose these farms to represent

a diversity of agricultural practices and trajectories, among the farms where I felt I had a good-enough relationship to allow such an immersion.

## Swiss and Moroccan agricultural contexts

Switzerland and Morocco are both countries with blind spots when it comes to critical agri-food studies (Forney 2013; Ajl 2021). Ajl shows that in Morocco, much the same as in other Arabic countries, peasants and herders have been at the centre of many major anti-system struggles, yet, due to the socio-political specificities of the region, ‘loud’ La Via Campesina-style movements growing elsewhere in the world, are almost absent. Ajl therefore highlights the need for ethnographic-geographic research on enduring peasant farming. Forney highlights the Swiss characteristics in a context of profound changes within the political and economic frames of agriculture and calls for renewed social sciences research on rural and agri-food issues in Switzerland in order to understand ‘what should be done’ to shape more sustainable futures. For instance: almost every Swiss farm applies demanding agro-environmental requirements in exchange of substantial financial support – generally essential for farm survival, and Switzerland’s ‘direct democracy’ model pressures farmers to make efforts to give a good image of the national agriculture in a country where farming has a high symbolic and political importance (Forney 2013). Exploring alternative agricultures, peasant-style farming at the margin of state support and planning in Switzerland and Morocco is even more interesting, as both countries exert a strong control of their agricultural sectors, although for different reasons and by different means.

In Switzerland, agriculture accounts for less than 1% of GDP and occupies around 2% of the total work force (OFS 2022). Yet, the importance of agriculture in Switzerland is deemed beyond purely economic value (Barjolle 2010; Kroll et al. 2010). Switzerland recognised the multifunctionality of its national agriculture, its more than economic value, in the Federal Constitution in 1996 and dedicates around 6% of its annual budget in its support. Yet, reflective of the ‘eco-modernisation’ schemes of the global North (Bergius and Buseth 2019), current agricultural policies, while improving the agro-environmental performance of the industrial model, relegate alternatives proposing an agroecological transition at the systemic level to the margins (Chakroun 2020). Consequently, two interconnected processes characterise the agricultural sector in Switzerland today: the decrease of the number of farms and the increase of farm size (OFS 2022). This structural transformation is considered by the government to “take place under socially acceptable conditions” (Kleinbauern Vereinigung 2022:1).

In Morocco, agriculture accounts for 13% of GDP and occupies (at least partly) 38.8% of the total workforce (MAPMDREF 2018). Moreover, the rural sector has been traditionally considered crucial for the social stability of the kingdom (Naciri 2012; Ferlaino 2022). Morocco’s recent agricultural policies, the Green Morocco and the Green Generation Plans, are reflective of the ‘green economy’ modernisation schemes of the global South (Moseley 2017; Bergius and Buseth 2019). Accordingly, the government seeks to transform agriculture into a specialised and standardised agroindustry, producing ‘high-added-value’ goods to stimulate economic growth. They expect farmers to become ‘professionalised’ and ‘modernised’ into agro-entrepreneurs producing for the state-defined agricultural value chains (Akesbi 2012; Mathez and Loftus 2022). Agricultural production is being restructured away from national to international demand, considering food security as best attained through the international market. This notably implies producing less cereals, Morocco’s main staple food, and pressuring farmers to change from mixed farming systems to ‘high-added-value’. A structural transformation is thereby considered a necessity.

The Swiss and Moroccan contexts can be situated within a broader history of policies around the environment and development that span the global North and the global South, seeking to reconcile interests around green development practices, by promoting the private sector and integrating countries into a single market for agricultural production and consumption (Bergius and Buseth 2019). Hence, across the many contextual differences including sitting on different sides of the North/South binary, both the Swiss and Moroccan governments consider diversified peasant-style farming if not as ‘remnants of the past’ at least as increasingly marginal for food security and economic development. In Switzerland, - and animal-based production, is decreasing and makes up less than 10% of all farms (OFS 2023). In Morocco, recent policies have directed the money flow to the development of cash-crops favouring entrepreneurial over diversified peasant-style farming. Built upon financial and industrial capital (in the form of credit, industrial inputs and technologies) and ongoing expansion through scale enlargement, entrepreneurial farming actively engages in marked dependency (especially in input side of the farm) (Van der Ploeg 2008). On the contrary, peasant farming seeks to distance farming practices from such markets through a struggle for autonomy that results in the development and improvement of a self-governed resource base, in which large part of the resources employed are not mobilized in the productive process as a commodity (as capital) (ibid.). As such, peasant farming works against dominant ideologies of agricultural development and runs contrary to the processes of ‘simplification’ (Scott 1998)

and uniformisation of animal husbandry and crop production that is considered important for the state and big retailers. Consequently, diversified peasant-style farming is relegated to the margin, and not a ‘place’ from where Swiss and Moroccan government officials imagine, plan and discuss their agri-food futures.

## Alternative agricultures

Alternative agricultures in Switzerland and Morocco are shaped by and inhabit the frictions of these policies. For my definition of alternative agricultures, I build on Van der Ploeg’s distinction between peasant and entrepreneurial farming outlined above. I also draw on insights from the recent literature on agroecology, which considers ecological farming practices not as a given technology or technique, but with regard to its wider socio-economic dimensions (Wezel 2009, Calame 2016; 2020; HLPE 2019). In other words, agroecology focuses on the ends as well as the means<sup>2</sup>. I limit my focus to mixed farming<sup>3</sup>, integrated poly-culture breeding systems, characteristic of both peasant farming and agroecological principles. This allows me to make a bridge between ‘traditional’ peasantry and recent agroecological initiatives in Switzerland and Morocco. I thus frame alternative agricultures as:

- (i) small-scale, peasant-style mixed farming at the margin of state planning and agro-industry,
- (ii) by farmers depending (at least partially) on their farm for their livelihoods, growing food for local markets as well as their own subsistence,
- (iii) growing food based on ecological synergies, simple mechanical machinery, human and animal labour and in so doing, reducing their dependence on fossil biomass in its mechanical, energy and chemical forms (seeds, machinery, synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, ‘smart’ digital technologies).

<sup>2</sup> Méndez et al. (2013) argue that the persistent depiction of agroecology as unclear explicitly ignores the social concerns as part of the field’s development. Presenting the agroecological approach as confusing justifies the application of narrow, technical, and reduced definitions of agroecology, privileging positivist science and Cartesian reductionism over other ways of knowing.

<sup>3</sup> In Switzerland, my definition of ‘alternative agricultures’ bound to mixed farming, proved very useful to reduce the scope of the situations I could possibly study with an etic research approach to ‘alternative agricultures’. Namely, to exclude many ‘loud’ initiatives such as ‘solidarity agriculture’ based on contractual vegetable baskets, or urban permaculture projects – prominent objects of alternative agri-food studies (Le Velly 2017). Indeed, many recent initiatives who would fall under my concept of ‘loud alternativity’ are based on vegetable production rather than on mixed farming. This due to different reasons, notably the scarcity of accessible farming land.

Thanks to this definition, the term ‘alternative’ is not an empty signifier, only becoming meaningful in relation to its counterpart variously formulated as ‘dominant’, ‘mainstream’, ‘traditional’ or ‘conventional’ (Tregear 2011; Rissing 2021). Having defined ‘alternative’, I still build on its dialectical relation to dominant forms of agriculture, thereby referring to the power of imposing discourses, imaginaries and subjectivities. These discursive forms of power are embedded within wider processes and material forms of power, manifested in the financialization of agriculture, the oligopolistic market structure of agricultural value chains, state policy frameworks, the uniformization and homogenisation of agricultural products and the support (or lack thereof) to given farming systems and practices. Alternative agricultures are thus experiences which inhabit frictions in some of these material and discursive power structures.

While ‘loud’ articulations of alternative agricultures are more easily detectable, there are also ‘quiet’ forms inhabiting those frictions. Lucas et al. (2020) call ‘une agroécologie silencieuse’ the agroecological principles that are implemented by the members of Farm Machinery Cooperatives in France. They do not refer to or promote their practices as ‘agroecology’ they justify them with reference to the search for an increased autonomy. Similarly, Smith and Jehlička (2013) refer to ‘quiet sustainability’ to summarise widespread practices in Poland and Czechia related to food self-provisioning (growing and sharing of food) that result in socio-ecologically beneficial outcomes, but which do not directly relate to market transactions, and which are not represented by their practitioners as relating directly to environmental or sustainable goals. They show that these practices prove to be robust in face of unsettling socio-ecological changes and that people pursuing these practices are motivated by generosity, joy, care, ideas of a satisfying life and by the quality of food.

Despite their socio-ecologically beneficial outcomes, Smith and Jehlička (2013) and Lucas et al. (2020), do not (explicitly) consider these practices as bearing a potential for a transformation of our societies. Yet, Ives et al. (2020) argue that such motives and personal characteristics mark individual expressions of sustainability, and as such the condition of people’s inner worlds ought to also be considered a dimension of sustainability itself. Moreover, as Mavhunga (2017) illustrates with grassroot transformations, people change practices and spaces in ways that are often overlooked – especially when we try to capture transformation through overly rigid concepts that do not travel easily across different contexts. Building on these insights of the potentially ‘quiet’ nature of socio-ecologically beneficial practices, my etic definition of alternative agricultures encompasses both ‘quiet’ and ‘loud alternativity’. This broadens what is generally meant by ‘alternativity’ in

alternative agri-food studies (Le Velly 2017), as discussed in an earlier section.

I consider alternative agricultures as ‘latent commons’ – entanglements that might be mobilized in common cause (Tsing 2015). Tsing writes: “We need many kinds of alertness to spot potential allies. Worse yet, the hints of common agendas we detect are undeveloped, thin, spotty, and unstable. At best we are looking for a most ephemeral glimmer. But, living with indeterminacy, such glimmers are the political” (2015:255). She suggests practicing ‘arts of noticing’ (ibid.) to stretch our imaginations to detect the traces and contours of not-yet-articulated common agendas. Here, this means to recognise these ‘quiet’ and ‘loud’ experiences already there and their underlying motivations as a first step to imagine and enact more broadly diverse agri-cultures.

### Overdetermination, weak theory and experiences of utopia as an entry point

Now, having set the scene and defined alternative agricultures, we can return to the main task of this paper which is to identify why people practice such forms of agriculture – which, as the introduction noted, I do exploring ideas of hope and utopia. In this section I tease out a ‘spaciousness’ to rethink farmers’ motives in order to explain how and why I chose ‘glimpses of utopia’ as a conceptual and empirical entry point.

Contrary to neo-classic economic theory, many scholars have repeatedly shown that there are a range of social, cultural, environmental, spiritual and emotional drivers of ‘economic’ decisions (Amin and Thrift 2000; North and Nurse 2013; Grandjean 2022). Acknowledging these multiple drivers and relations at work indicates a world as being comprised of myriad coexisting determinations. This idea is at the core of ‘Community Economies’ body of research, originally developed by Gibson-Graham (2006) in their optimistic outlook toward a ‘postcapital politics’ based on the theorisation of diverse economies. Gibson-Graham’s research was inspired by the anti-essentialist analysis of Marxian political economy developed by Resnick and Wolff (1987), and notably their introduction of Althusser’s theory of overdetermination into political economy (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2022). Althusser’s (1968) theory of overdetermination frames each site and process as constituted at the intersection of all others – and thus as fundamentally an emptiness, complexly constituted by what it is not, without an enduring core or essence (Gibson-Graham 2006).

Gibson-Graham adopt overdetermination as an ontological reframing to un-think economic determinism, since it encourages us to deny economic forces as fundamental, structural, or universal realities and to instead identify them as contingent outcomes of ethical decisions,

political projects, and sedimented localized practices, continually pushed and pulled by other determinations (ibid.). They suggest “it is up to us as thinkers, writers and researchers to make decisions about how we proceed with making sense of the world” (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2022:313). Resnick and Wolff explain this in terms of choosing an entry point (1987:25–30), which itself is an overdetermined outcome of a set of given interactions. Cameron and Gibson-Graham (2022) add that an entry point is “the culmination of our pasts as well as our projections for the type of world we want to live in and that we think might be feasible. This signals the end of the authoritative all-knowing theorist who has the ‘correct’ analysis, ushering in a more pragmatic, humble, self-consciously performative and, thus, political thinker” (313). They thus reject ‘strong theory’ which is “powerful discourses that organize events into understandable and seemingly predictable practices” (Gibson-Graham 2014:147) and call for practices of ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) and ‘weak theory’. ‘Weak theory’ involves refusing to “know too much, extending explanations too widely or deeply”, and instead “welcomes surprise, entertains hope, makes connection, tolerates coexistence and offers care for the new” (Gibson-Graham 2006:8).

Embracing this line of thought, I take ‘glimpses of utopias’ as an entry point to make sense of farmers’ engagement in and struggles with alternative agricultures. This means that I consistently approach farmers and their experiences as overdetermined. As such, I do not consider manifestations of utopias as the single determinant force explaining why farmers engage in alternative agricultures. Taking ‘glimpses of utopias’ as an entry point acknowledges that farmers’ engagement in alternative agricultures are multiply determined. My entry point is itself the result of an overdetermined process – a back and forth between my empirical data and conceptual background, and the consequent decisions about how to proceed with making sense of farmers’ engagement in alternative agricultures. Yet, I consider ‘glimpses of utopias’ an important framework to shed light on the ‘inner worlds’ (Ives et al. 2020), the emotional, spiritual and embodied experiences that have been overlooked in previous research on the topic. Peasant studies have shown how peasant farming is related to the wider capitalist context, while obeying to different ‘ordering principles’ (Chayanov 1986; Van der Ploeg 2013). Yet, there is little research on the more bodily, psychological, and spiritual dimensions interacting with those distinctive ‘ordering principles’ of peasant farming (Gosnell et al. 2021). Taking ‘glimpses of utopias’ as an entry point contributes to explain why some farmers engage in alternative agricultures – which, due to being at the margins of dominant normative structures, may sometimes lead to more drudgery or even material struggles.

Embodied experiences of utopias in one form or another kept coming up in my research. Yet, it took me a while to recognise those as such. Much like ‘disgruntled political economists’ (Carolan 2016) seduced by the elegance of certain abstractions, I was trained to see an ocean of sameness: capitalist relations at work, expanding the frontier of global capitalism, producing more and more of ‘second nature’ (capitalist transformation of the environment) resulting in environmental destruction and social inequality. I felt less equipped to practise ‘arts of noticing’ and to look for ‘third nature’ (Tsing 2015) – that is, what manages to live despite capitalism. Or, as Gibson-Graham (2006) put it, to ‘un-think’ and ‘read for difference’ in order to open up spaces for aspirations of change. Hence, while I felt that the stories farmers told me – such as that of the Swiss farmer quoted right in the beginning – were important to the people who shared them with me, I was probably hesitant to theorise those moments of enchantment, as I have rather been trained to focus on ‘negative’ pressures which dismiss such moments as *secondary* to the *real material struggles* people are facing. Yet, I increasingly felt that they are *not*, that dismissing such stories reduces the multifaceted life experiences of the farmers I encountered, and thereby fails to explain why they engage in alternative agricultures. Focusing on ‘glimpses of utopias’ as an entry point accepts these experiences in their integrity and thereby tries to bring these dimensions of ‘liveliness’ back into analysis for a broader understanding of farmers’ engagement with alternative agricultures. As exposed below, it needed some further ‘un-thinking’ to make ‘glimpses of utopias’ an analytical framework able to capture utopias in their ‘quiet’ and ‘loud’ manifestations.

### From aspirations as a moral obligation to ‘quiet’ expressions of hope

Despite working explicitly on ‘quiet alternativity’ and hence with farmers who did not necessarily identify with a social movement or have a constructed and politicised discourse of change, I realised that I often felt surprised when farmers could or would not really answer my questions about their future aspirations and their opinion on how food should be grown in their places in the future, whether formulated as some years or a generation ahead. Neither in Switzerland nor in Morocco did these questions provoke extensive answers nor even interest in the way I had hoped. Of course, there are always some people who enjoy sharing their ideas, visions, and dreams very extensively – often but not exclusively, farmers of what I call ‘loud alternativity’. Facing this lack of enthusiasm to answer this type of questions, I started to think differently about inner motives and expressions of aspirations and the timelines on which they are projected.

In his seminal book “Principle of Hope” (1959), Bloch develops the idea that hope lies at the heart of ‘concrete utopia’. Concrete utopia does not mean a place far away which does not yet exist and for which we have a clear picture in mind. On the contrary, ‘concrete utopia’ is based on the idea of not-yetness<sup>4</sup>: “everything whose conditions in the sphere of the object itself are not yet fully assembled; whether because they are still maturing, or above all because new conditions [...] arise for the entry of the real” (ibid.:196-7). This means Bloch’s concept of ‘concrete utopias’ assumes that through hope we have the possibility to reshape the world we are living in, similar to Gibson-Graham’s theories of post-capitalist politics who refuse to dismiss the mundane, small, and quotidian as powerful sites of transformation, sustainability, and political action. Bloch’s ‘concrete utopia’ is a project of possibility, not an end project. Utopia as an ongoing open-ended story (Leviatas 1990), not something we believe to have found and we aim to cement, is very different from the idea inherent in ‘modernity’ that there is a linear path of ‘progress’ leading to an ‘end of history and a last man’ (Fukuyama 1992). Modernity’s end of history utopia relies on processes which try to shape a ‘collective singular’ (Koselleck 2004) aspiration for the future, related to the widely accepted moral assumptions that ‘being human’ means the capacity to look forward instead of living day by day (Tsing 2015)<sup>5</sup>. Yet, this seems increasingly disconnected from a vast majority of people’s daily experiences in which the future seems uncertain (ibid.). Indeed, many farmers expressed their concerns about changing climatic conditions and economic circumstances that were making it increasingly difficult to earn a decent living from farming.

“My idea of an ideal agriculture here? – selling my cheese at a price which allows me to live peacefully” was one answer of a Swiss farmer, or “that there is rain to see the wheat germs grow and the ears of wheat blow in the wind” that of a Moroccan farmer.<sup>6</sup>

My initial surprise that many farmers expressed their willingness to be able to continue growing food rather than any

<sup>4</sup> Wright’s (2010) ‘real utopia’, the seemingly most similar concept to ‘concrete utopia’, differs from the latter quite significantly. ‘Real utopia’ refers to realistic rather than real social formations though preferable to existing ones (Wright 2013), while ‘concrete utopia’ allows for the entry of the not-yet – the today still seemingly unrealistic. ‘Concrete utopia’, would therefore be considered by Wright as ‘just a utopia’.

<sup>5</sup> Le Corbusier emblematically once said: “Man walks straight because he has a goal: he knows where he is going, he has decided to go somewhere and he walks straight there” (1925:5).

<sup>6</sup> A special thank here to Safae Moudni who sometimes accompanied me in this fieldwork and who reformulated some of my questions to render them comprehensible to my interlocutors.

aspirations of how the world should look ideally like, was probably tainted by the ‘moral obligation’ to have a clearly articulated image projected to the future. This meant not only ignoring the privilege of some to plan ahead, while others are busy finding strategies to cope with daily life but also that hope can express itself as a feeling manifested ‘quietly’ in bodily practices and ways of being as suggested by Bloch’s ‘Agens’. Expectations of ‘progress’ might block certain insights and evading such assumptions has consequently allowed me to turn my attention to practices and experiences which I might have neglected otherwise. Trying to “look around rather than ahead” (Tsing 2015:22), I started to investigate ‘quiet expressions’ of hope; namely to explore utopia not just as something which is thought and said but as something which is embodied and embedded. This implied recognizing supposedly mundane practices and experiences as positive levers without dismissing them as secondary to ‘real material’ struggles and aspirations of ‘progress’. Some of the conversations I had with farmers started thus to resonate differently with me, opening up new meanings.

A Moroccan herder grazing his goats and sheep on a ‘Agdal’<sup>7</sup> of the Yagour plateau said: “My children have never been here with me. They tell me to stay home, I don’t need to come here. I can’t explain it to them, but sometimes I am here – of course the conditions are very harsh, you are alone, you sleep outside, it’s cold, you eat a little bit of bread – but when I am here, I feel – Look [*pointing at the landscape*]. I will come here until I am too weak for it. Then, I must sell my herd.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a farmer in the Prealps in Switzerland explained: “I have tried to work in an office, but I felt I could not breathe. When I am not here [*on his farm*], I feel like a fish out of water.”

Statements like this made me explore further what this ‘Agens’ is which leads farmers to engage in alternative agricultures if it is neither the aspiration to hand over their farm one day to their children nor a clear aspiration of what to achieve in a close future. Of course, there is a combination of factors, such as one’s love for this profession which explains why some farmers continue to farm even in economically difficult or even unfavourable conditions (Droz and Miéville-Ott 2001; Droz and Forney 2007). Indeed, many farmers talk about the economic, social, and climatic constraints that make farming extremely difficult, and that they had opportunities to do something else, which would

pay better, but they refused to do so or after experimenting it, came back to farming.

A farmer in the mountains of El Haouz of Marrakech put it this way: “Farming is a kind of addiction. I’ve had opportunities to go and work in the city on a fixed salary as a security guard. It would have meant more money, but I’ve turned it down, I can’t stop moving around, breathing pure air.”

In a similar way, a farmer and merchant of cereals in El Haouz of Marrakech, framed his ‘addiction’ of farming in a very pictorial way. He sought to express why he continues to plough and sow, even if it is the third bad year in a row due to drought, and even though it is financially not profitable as he is making financial losses. He uses these two sentences to illustrate how the call of sowing catches up with him, as he hopes to see the barley grow:

« بحال كتنوض فيك دودة ديال فلاحه » “It’s as if the worm of agriculture wakes up inside you.”

« بحال كتنوض فيك زبانية » “It’s as if hell’s creatures are waking up inside you”.

I leave the original quotes in Darija<sup>9</sup> here. They have such a nice rhythm when pronouncing them, that they had become an earworm guiding my research along these ‘glimpses of utopias’, a little bit like the worm which pushes this farmer to continue doing what he is doing. Yet, while these quotes illustrate the close attachment to farming, they do not explain why some farmers chose to grow food differently and to engage with alternative agricultures. Besides motivations such as joy, care and the quality of food underlying certain agricultural practices (Smith and Jehlička 2013), Gosnell (2020, 2021) shows in her work on regenerative agriculture that moments of crisis, be it of environmental, economic, health, or psychological order, may force farmers to reappraise themselves and their farming practises. She explains that moments of exposure to regenerative practices – be it during a public talk or during conversations with their peers – may produce a moment of epiphany, prompting radical changes in farmers’ thinking and behaviour. In line with this idea of epiphany, yet, not provoked through conversations or the exposure to different farming practices, I realised that certain types of embodied experiences contribute to a change in farming practices. Similar to the Swiss farmer’s experience related in the introduction, a Moroccan farmer told me of such a sudden change in practices.

One summer, I grew watermelons. I put them all over this part here [*indicating a plot of land with his arm*], it was in July, and you know that in July the sun beats

<sup>7</sup> Agdal refers to community-based grazing characterised by collective land management through customary institutions (IUCN et al. 2023).

<sup>8</sup> This conversation was held in Amazigh. It is my colleague Fatiha El Jazouli who translated it for me during our common field work.

<sup>9</sup> Moroccan Arabic.



down hard and on top of that it was Ramadan. I went to the market to buy the ‘medicine against insects’<sup>10</sup>, and until 6 p.m. a little before the call to prayer of Al-maghrib, I put on a bib and treated my watermelons, and I felt that it was getting in my eyes, and I had a headache. When it was time to break the fast, I couldn’t eat, I only drank water. [*Long silence*] That night there was this moment... – as if something was telling me to stay away from these treatments and not to use them anymore. And indeed, since that moment I haven’t used them again, and that was long before I heard of organic farming and long before we created the cooperative here.

These testimonials of apparently mundane experiences leading farmers to alternative agricultures, made me theorise this ‘Agens’ in relation to enchantment, enlarging my framing of utopias from cognitive ‘no-where’ to embodied ‘no-when’ experiences of utopia.

### ‘No-where’ and ‘no-when’ experiences, or utopias’ multiple appearances

Similar to the idea of epiphany (Gosnell 2020), Curry (2019) defines enchantment as the experience of wonder which gives life its meaning and which sometimes make life worth living. Enchantment only lasts for an instant, yet its effects may stay with us and can be life-changing. Enchantment, “a transitory sensuous condition dense and intense enough to stop you in your tracks and toss you onto new terrain, to move you from the actual world to its virtual possibilities” (Bennett 2011:11), can “show us profound truths, lead to deep values and deeper meaning, and be central to a life well-lived” (Curry 2019:8). Hence its poignancy. Taking seriously and theorising enchantment implies respecting its integrity. This means it should not be dissected, rationalised and explained away but instead accepted as something which is inherently a mystery. This is not an easy task for a social scientist.

One afternoon, I was standing with a farmer in the hinterland of Rabat at a point of his land where we had a good view over the surrounding environment. His farm is situated on a hillside and from where we were standing, we could see the riverbed further down leading through the hilly landscape. Being there, he told me that he used to get up at dawn every morning, when his wife and children were still asleep, and that before the morning prayer he walked through his fields up to this point. He seemed almost embarrassed,

telling me: “This might appear boring to you, but for me, even if I see it every day, it is beautiful. I don’t get tired of coming here. I get my strength from being here.” I was questioning him, trying to capture what he was experiencing in these moments, when he at one point said: “Come, sit down, see and wait”.

His point was that discourse has its limits here, reminding me of the Persian poet Hafez (1315–1390) who said:

*I have a thousand brilliant lies  
For the question: how are you?  
I have a thousand brilliant lies  
For the question: What is God?  
If you think that the Truth can be known from words,  
If you think that the Sun and the Ocean can pass through  
that tiny opening called the mouth  
O someone should start laughing!  
Someone should start wildly Laughing—Now!*

“Enchantment is wild and unbiddable [...] it can be invited but never commanded” (Curry 2019:15). It comes “in the manner of a gift or not at all” (James 1897:154). So, following the farmer’s half-hearted invitation, I sat down and waited. I looked at the truly nice landscape, but nothing more happened except that I started feeling a bit silly sitting there. Since, enchantment comes when it will, not at my demand, I had to learn to rely on farmers’ testimonials of such moments and on how I felt and perceived the importance of what they were telling me to evaluate whether they were sharing with me glimpses of their experiences of enchantment. Taking seriously enchantment does not mean to succumb to seeing enchantment everywhere and in everything. The opposite of enchantment is not its absence, but disenchantment – the experience of abstract time and space. Accordingly, enchantment is never abstract, generic or universal but an embodied encounter with a specific and unique other in a unique moment and unique place (Curry 2019). Enchantment is thus a relationship between two subjects – where the other subject can be almost anyone or anything: the first barley germs sprouting after a hot and dry summer, the silence of the Agdal in Yagour, the liveliness of a little patch of soil, or the cuddling of a goat. The latter example comes directly from a farm in Vaud.

I was crouching in a stable next to a farmer who asked me to help her feeding and training the newborn goats to drink from a bottle in exchange for a more formal interview – a rather symbolic request, since I was obviously not of huge help. Amidst the fluffy newborn goats, we were talking about her new livelihood as a farmer. She seemed tired that morning, telling me that she constantly lacks sleep but that her goats give her

<sup>10</sup> Moroccan farmers use the Arabic word “dwa” which also means medicine to refer to herbicides and pesticides.

a huge sense of satisfaction. And then she shared with me an experience which she had already described once in an interview for a podcast interrogating neo-farmers about their motivations: “I had a trainee and it had been a week since I’d been alone with the goats. I took 10 minutes just to be with them a little bit, and they queued up to be cuddled. One after the other they came in front of me to be scratched. That sums it up.”

Since enchantment is an embodied and embedded experience, it appears tiny and little from the disenchanting outside, whereas from the enchanted inside it is bigger – an encounter saturated with meaning, in which for the enchanted person, the other subject’s value (here the goats) is intrinsic (Curry 2019). Merleau-Ponty (1968) describes this as a multi-sensory and thoroughly physical experience which is transcendent, enabling to reach deeper bodily understandings of the world. This makes enchantment an experience which “opens a door on the spiritual idea of that particular person, place or thing” (Curry 2019: 18) and in which the supposedly radical differences between spiritual and physical, mental and material consequently collapse.

This theorisation of enchantment leads me to mystical theorisations of utopia, where utopia is a site or rather a moment, where the physical and spiritual realm, midway between the imagined and tangible (Corbin 1969, 1976), run into one another<sup>11</sup>. Sohravardi, a Persian philosopher and mystic, tells us that there are lands at the very limits of the tangible, which he calls Na-Koja-Abad:

“[Na-koja-Abad] does not occur in any Persian dictionary, and it was coined, as far as I know, by Sohravardi himself, from the resources of the purest Persian language. Literally it signifies the city, the country or land (abad) of No-where (Na-koja). That is why we are here in the presence of a term that, at first sight, may appear to us as the exact equivalent of the term ou-topia, which, for its part, does not occur in the classical Greek dictionaries, and was coined by Tomas More as an abstract noun to designate the absence of any localization, of any given situs in a space that is discoverable and verifiable by the experience of our senses. Etymologically and literally, it would perhaps be exact to translate Na-koja-Abad by outopia, utopia, and yet with regard to the concept, the intention, and

the true meaning, I believe that we would be guilty of mistranslation” (Corbin 1976:3).

Even though both terms refer to a *situs* that does not exist in physical place and discernible by sensory organs, Na-Koja-Abad, unlike (O)u-topia, an abstract no-place, designs a “real, objective, and concrete reality in a region of Being accessible by suprasensory organs of perception” (Mahmud 2005:14). Hence, it is an embodied experience. El Wardany (n.y.), an Egyptian novelist, nicely and effectively puts it:

“It is not a place you can inquire about by asking ‘Where?’. It is the nowhere that surrounds us everywhere, whose chasm can yawn open at any moment, whose winds may sweep suddenly through the present. [...] it is more than just a Sufi limbo, pure and removed from our profane world, or an alternative one to which we might escape, but signifies instead a place on earth, somewhere where the ‘No’ can go to work, forcing fractures in the status quo”.

El Wardany’s idea of the ‘No who can go to work’ relates to the disruptive force of enchantment. Enchantment cannot be instrumentalised, but it can create openings to see the world a bit differently, and thereby lead to another way of being in the world.

To differentiate these two conceptions of utopia, I refer to the idea of utopia derived from More as a ‘no-where utopia’ and to that derived from Sohravardi as a ‘no-when utopia’. Theorising utopia as both mental ‘(no-)where’ and embodied ‘(no-)when’ experiences allows me to get closer to the ‘Agens’ which leads farmers to engage with alternative agricultures.

## Discussion and conclusion

I consider ‘glimpses of utopias’ an important framework to shed light on some of the emotional, spiritual and embodied experiences have been overlooked in previous research on the topic. ‘Glimpses of utopias’ serves to capture multiple manifestations of utopias, both mental constructions and embodied experiences – which are not mutually exclusive, and thereby offers different glimpses of how and why farmers grapple with alternative agricultures. My etic approach and entry point to alternative agricultures has allowed me to go beyond eventually dividing categories of alternative agricultures such as permaculture (Chakroun 2019) or regenerative agriculture (Gosnell 2021). As such, ‘glimpses of utopias’ is a proposition of transversality to touch upon an experience underlying farming practises across these different categories. It contributes to the understanding of

<sup>11</sup> I participated in a workshop on the theme ‘Imagining the Future. Aspirations for Change and the Ruins of Progress’ which took place in summer 2023 at Monté Verità in Ascona Switzerland – a place where Ernst Bloch lived for a short period of his life, and which inspired him in his theorisation of ‘concrete utopia’ (Müller 2000). More humbly, this place, and more specifically our discussions with Penny Harvey and Karen Waltrop, guest speakers at this workshop, inspired me to put into dialogue these different conceptions of utopia.

the some of the factors that explain why farmers engage in alternative agricultures and thereby resist dominant ways of subjectivation while reshaping local food geographies.

Some farmers are motivated by a feeling that ‘something is wrong’ which may or may not translate into a self-proclaimed alternative or the adherence to a social movement and political agenda (‘loud alternativity’) guided by a clear vision and a speculative appeal of what agriculture to put in place (‘no-where utopia’). Many farmers however manifest what I call ‘quiet’ expressions of hope. My exploration and framing of ‘quiet’ expressions of hope takes up Bloch’s idea of the ‘Agens’, the feeling of not-yetness driving us forward without necessarily having a clear picture in mind on which to project this hope. As such, I consider farmers’ choice to engage or to stay with alternative agricultures despite drudgery, physical and structural difficulties, as itself a ‘quiet’ expression of hope. Across ‘loud’ and ‘quiet’ forms of alternative agricultures, farmers experience moments of enchantment (‘no-when utopias’), which nourish these ‘quiet’ expressions of hope. ‘No-when utopias’ are thus powerful experiences and feelings resisting dominant subjectivations, which may or may not be translated into speculative thinking and ‘loud alternativity’.

The experience of enchantment, a no-when utopia, as a trigger for a change in farming practices or as nourishing experience to stay with one’s way of farming may not be limited to alternative agricultures. Conventional agriculture seeking the rational pursuit of mastery along the whole value chain, is not altogether disenchanted. It can never be since enchantment is a potential inherent in every embodied relationship. A farmer convinced that ‘good farming’ (Burton et al. 2020) is industrial monocropping and the best way of ‘feeding the world’, might also feel a sense of wonder, driving on her tractor through her hundreds of hectares, harvesting her tons of wheat. Yet, Curry (2019) writes “since enchantment cannot be mastered and isn’t interested in being master, it just gets bored and wanders off to look for something better” (21). Hence, further research needs to show the extent to which my findings are restricted to alternative agricultures, and whether alternative agricultures and some farmers create more readily, individually or collectively, inviting conditions for enchantment to happen, “and then let it do its thing, perform its wonders if and as it will” (Curry 2019:123).

I have argued that ‘alternative agricultures’ may represent concrete experiences from where to imagine and grow other pathways than the ones envisioned by modernist agricultural development schemes. Without going into details into the theories on mainstreaming agroecology and the transition of our agri-food systems (Gliessman 2016; Mier et al. 2018; González de Molina et al. 2020; Wezel et al. 2020), I agree with Calame (2020) that a truly ecological agri-food

system is incompatible with our current non-ecological and industrial society – since changes in the agri-food system are subordinated to a larger change in society – but that agri-food systems however also constitute a powerful lever for a broader systemic change. As hegemonies necessarily are always subject to resistance and take effort to maintain, following post-capitalist and peasant theories, I consider that alternative agricultures can emerge and/or persist within the dominant system and thereby eventually deviate it and create new pathways. The daily practices of peasant-style farming underlying alternative agricultures – as insignificant as they may seem – can together constitute a resistance against agricultural ‘modernisation’ schemes (Scott 1998; Van der Ploeg 2008; Mathez and Loftus 2022). Showing that practised everyday alternativity carries seeds of transformation, I illustrated the necessity of combining ‘quiet’ and ‘loud’ expressions under my definition of alternative agricultures. As nicely expressed by Gonzales et al. (2020):

“Forces of transformation have no centre of gravity [...] they are scattered around the world, organized into structured networks at different scales, from the most hidden corners to incipient initiatives aiming at articulating global society [...] This means that the processes of change are not guided by a universal theory put into practice by avant-garde forces. Rather, processes of change are already underway, expressed through countless agroecological practices paving the way for a new regime to be built” (98).

“Just as a caterpillar that turns into a butterfly”, a metamorphosis needs both, the gradual nature of transformation and the break with the systemic order (*ibid.*). Following this sense of change as a metamorphosis, Holloway (2011) holds that the hegemonic system needs to be cracked through concrete social experiences that bring about increasing autonomy with regard to the production modes commanded by the logic of capital: “the only way to think about changing the world radically is with a multiplicity of interstitial movements flowing from the particular” (15). Lost aspirations of modernity (Tsing 2015) may create inviting conditions for converting alternative agricultures into such cracks in the system.

My research has shown that however separated by space and context, there may be shared experiences, identities and commonalities across alternative agricultures. Like ‘latent commons’ (Tsing 2015), I consider alternative agricultures as elusive but bubbling with unrealized possibilities. Alternative agricultures as a hint of a common agenda for socio-ecologically just and viable agri-cultures is certainly thin, spotty and unstable. Yet, in a context where ‘loud’ articulations of alternative agricultures prevail, current thinking

about farming futures, glimpses of utopias brought to light in this research might lever a more nuanced viewpoint on different transition and transformation discourses summing up the necessity to change – beyond the observation that alternative, minor or everyday practices carry seeds of transformation. A focus on external phenomena and collective social structures has led to neglecting people's 'inner worlds' that lie however at the heart of actions for sustainability (Ives et al. 2020). Recognising 'glimpses of utopias' as transversal experiences may contribute to build an argument against homogenizing agri-food ideologies or any deterministic, linear and externalist visions of technical and social change by showing the fragmentation and multiplication of sound socio-ecological realities.

Finally, I have discussed that research attending to 'quiet' expressions of hope and to 'quiet alternativity' more generally, requires practising 'arts of noticing' (Tsing 2015) or as Gibson-Graham (2006) put it to 'read for difference' in order to open up inviting conditions for the new. This has meant evading assumptions that the future is that singular direction ahead – whether optimistically framed as progress and 'modernity' nor pessimistically as driven by supposedly monolithic phenomena such as capitalism, neoliberalism and Big Food. Doing so, allows us to recognise that individuals and their experiences sometimes make a difference. "Like mushroom spores, they may germinate in unexpected places" (Tsing 2015:225), thereby reshaping food geographies. Considering that multiple futures may pop in and out of possibility, forces us to think outside of fixed categories and progress stories. At the very least, it offers the possibility for enchantment to happen.

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