

## **The Can Masdeu Valley: Agroecology as a Cure for the Future**

**Article by Michele Gambirasi, Roberta Cavaglià, Susanna Ruggia**

July 2, 2024

The agriculture sector is one of the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases in the EU. As the world gets hotter and droughts become more common, it is necessary to make farming practices more ecologically sustainable. In Catalonia, a community-driven initiative has produced a successful case of ecologically aware agriculture, centred around the principles of degrowth.

At the sound of the bell, forty people set aside their seeds and tools to mount the dirt slope to a shaded garden. Among them is Marc Rojas Pazos, a microbiology student who lives in Barcelona. “I have been coming to Can Masdeu every Thursday for almost a year. Now I’m going to stay for a fortnight, to test my relationship with the city, and see if life with nature is for me,” he says, serving himself a generous portion of lentil soup.

The Can Masdeu Valley, located within the Collserola Natural Park, and accessible from Barcelona by public transport, has been a place of agroecological experimentation and climate resilience for more than twenty years. Can Masdeu has been an occupied space since 2001, when a dozen activists – owned by a hospital of the same name but abandoned for more than fifty years – decided to take over the Sant Pau lazaret in opposition to plans for turning the building into luxury flats. In the same year, the activists also chose the lazaret as the location for a conference on climate change.

Since then, the occupation has given rise to a project rooted in the alter-globalisation struggle. In Can Masdeu, the blitz, the lightning bolt-shaped arrow symbolising the culture of squatting, crosses an apple instead of the traditional circle, indicating the ecological concerns of the valley’s inhabitants. “We were members of the no-global movement, environmentalists, international activists, or people from the local neighbourhood, Nou Barris,” explains Arnau Montserrat, one of the early occupants who still lives at Can Masdeu today.

In April 2002, more than one hundred police officers tried to evict Arnau and the rest of the occupants, who for three days organised acts of nonviolent resistance, including chaining themselves to parts of the building. The owners of the facility, Sant Pau Hospital, finally decided to let it go and dropped any further eviction orders.

“A few years ago, around 20 people lived here, including families with children. Today we are about ten permanent members, plus a few guests, like Marc, who stays with us for a couple of weeks or even a few months, on an exceptional basis,” says Claudio Cattaneo, professor of Political Ecology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and a member of this eco-community for more than twenty years. Both those who live permanently in the occupied space and the guests contribute 100 euros per month. The rest of the running costs of the facility are covered by organising parties, crowdfunding, or organic catering services.

From the very beginning, however, the occupants of the building and the surrounding land, which covers some 35 hectares, have dedicated their efforts to building not only an eco-community but also a social

centre and community gardens that can nurture relations with the neighbourhood and the rest of the city. The social centre, Punto de Interacció de Collserola, organises weekly workshops in music, handicrafts, DIY, theatre and dance, and hosts the assemblies of other social and ecological movements, such as Extinction Rebellion or Ecologistes en Acció, as well as concerts, shows, and film and documentary screenings.

Around a hundred young people, pensioners and families look after the community gardens, which are divided into 35 plots and produce fruit and vegetables using agro-ecological practices. “I come here whenever I can,” explains David, a pensioner and resident of Nou Barris who has been tending the Valley’s gardens for many years. “By not practising intensive cultivation and avoiding the constraints of industrial production, we are free to experiment with agro-ecological and climate change adaptation techniques, taking the time to do it in a way that is not extractive or harmful to nature.”

To these three pillars of the project – the eco-community, the community centre and the community gardens – two new initiatives have been added in recent years: Regenerades [Regenerated] and the Casa dels Futurs [House of the Futures]. Every Thursday Can Masdeu opens its doors to anyone who wants to become familiar with agroecology or, more simply, spend a few hours in the gardens working the land. This is how many people, like Marc, have gained an insight into this place and its political and ecological commitments. “After the pandemic, the Regenerades project took off: every Thursday, forty or fifty people come to give us a hand,” explains Montserrat. “I am on maternity leave and I like to come here with my little girl to be in the open air, in contact with nature and in company,” says Marie, a young French woman who has been living in Barcelona for a few years.

*Combining ecological and feminist perspectives means  
returning life – human and non-human – to the centre.*

The Casa dels Futurs, a permanent international climate justice centre and movement school, is still looking for a space for its activities. The occupants’ idea was to recover a dilapidated building near Can Masdeu, but following some problems with the foundation that owns the property, the Casa dels Futurs may find its home in El Prat or Hospitalet, on the other side of the city. “It is an area of critical importance since it is affected by the expansion of Barcelona-El Prat airport,” explains Cattaneo.

## **Regenerative agroecology**

From the very beginning, the degrowth model, practised through agroecology, has been one of the Can Masdeu community’s main points of reference. Catalonia is a borderland of the climate crisis: in February, the government of the Spanish autonomous community declared a drought emergency, which also forced the valley’s farmers to rethink some of their strategies.

Self-production through community gardens is in open opposition to industrial agriculture. “The choice of agroecology was very natural for us,” Montserrat says. “We started producing food, partly because we had the privilege of having a garden and partly because one of the main targets of ecological demands on a global scale is precisely the agro-industrial system,” a driver of exploitation, deforestation, and pollution.

Industrial agriculture and agro-zootechnics are among the main culprits for crossingsix of the nine planetary boundaries, including biodiversity loss, chemical pollution, freshwater use, and climate change. “And then there are many academics who have spread agroecology in Catalonia that have influenced

us,” Montserrat adds.

Agroecological practice has allowed Can Masdeu to experiment with resilient farming systems and climate change adaptation tools. The key principle is the regenerative potential of land, bodies and relationships. “We use what I call ‘regenerative agroecology’ to get the best out of any agroecological work, not only within the field, but also in the relationship between us and the place we inhabit,” Montserrat continues. Among the practices used are the use of local biomass, short marketing circuits, and polyculture. According to Montserrat, it is not only an ecological choice but also a social one, because it increases the resilience of the farmers.

All this is possible thanks to the horizontal relationships developed with suppliers and people who come to buy and consume the food from the former lazaret at affordable prices (five euros for an organic, vegan lunch). Even if not everything necessary to live is produced within the occupied space, ethical relations of exchange are maintained with the outside. “For rice, for example, we turn to ecological cooperatives or similar projects, with which we practise barter and exchange of goods,” David explains while carrying tools into the storage room at the end of his shift.

Can Masdeu, like the rest of Catalonia, is also looking for solutions to adapt to the increasingly frequent periods of drought. “Climate instability is also being fought with biodiversity, with seeds that are much better adapted to the local climate than business-oriented ones, which are only very productive under certain conditions,” explains Montserrat. “The other big problem is obviously water: you have to irrigate less. We cultivate the soil in such a way that it retains much more water and nutrients.”

## **Care, life, reproduction**

The practices and ideas cultivated in the Can Masdeu Valley have spread beyond the perimeter of the former lazaret. Many of the people who have been part of the community for even a few weeks have gone on to set up agroecological projects elsewhere. One example is Arran de Terra, one of the most important agroecological consultancies in Catalonia.

Compared to the early 2000s, the principles and ideas behind the community have also evolved. “The ecological community, nowadays, leaves a lot to be desired. So many projects have sprung up, but rarely have they succeeded in making an impact, in spreading to the rest of the community and society. The problem remains a change in mentality,” explains Professor Cattaneo, as lunch is prepared in the kitchens on the second floor of Can Masdeu for collective consumption following work in the gardens. “There are now even more consumption-efficient alternatives, such as urban co-living powered by renewable energy. But in the capitalist monoculture in which we live, they do not radically change people’s lifestyles.”

Degrowth and “green growth” (or ecomodernism, i.e. the search for adaptation strategies through the implementation of new technologies) are the two alternative paths indicated by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its [2022 report](#). This is the first time since 1990, the year of the first report of the intergovernmental panel, that the term “degrowth” is explicitly mentioned.

According to Cattaneo, there is always the risk that “green growth” conceals a form of eco-fascism: an adaptation to the climate crisis that entails the adoption of efficient technologies for the global North via the creation of “sacrificial zones” in the global South; such as mining sites for the extraction of metals and rare minerals indispensable to new technologies, global landfills, closed borders, and migration paths blocked from the places most affected by climate change.

To this model of prosperity based on exploitation and exclusion, degrowth advocates in contrast an intersectional approach based on feminism, queer reflection, and decolonial thinking. “Feminism seems to me to have the intersectional potential to hold the struggles together, I see this also in my students,” Cattaneo explains. For a long time, the feminist tradition has been on the margins of dominant ecological thought in the West, but the need for an eco-feminist approach to environmental issues is becoming increasingly widespread, especially in degrowth-related circles. In *Degrowth: A Vocabulary For a New Era* (2015), edited by Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis – all from the Autonomous University of Barcelona – terms such as “care” and “feminist economy” are among the keywords.

“For a year now, we have been reorganising certain things, moving in a feminist direction. For example, we have formalised care work,” says Maria Madeleine Pérez Jiménez, a Venezuelan activist who lives in Can Masdeu. Care work refers to all those activities that contribute to social reproduction; in other words, undertakings required to address the necessities of daily life and support more productive work and social relations. Care work includes domestic work, caring for the family, but also forms of employment such as supporting autonomy or teaching.

The recognition of care as real work has formed a cornerstone of feminist demands since the 1970s, when the international campaign *Wages for Housework* was launched, which called for a wage for domestic work. As Pérez Jiménez explains, each person living permanently at Can Masdeu must devote 14 hours each week to the community project, including care work.

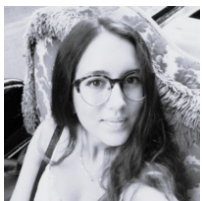
“Cultivating a feminist approach also means that we pay special attention to conflict management and conflict resolution. After we went through a crisis concerning interpersonal relationships some time ago, we decided to set up a group that deals specifically with mediating such problems,” Pérez Jiménez continues. According to the occupants, combining ecological and feminist perspectives means returning life – human and non-human – to the centre. “Being here allows us to desalarise and decommercialise our lives. And besides, protecting the earth is one of the most feminist things there is,” Pérez Jiménez concludes.

In a hospital with no more patients, a cure is sought for the future.

Translated by Ciaran Lawless | [Voxeurop](https://voxeurop.com)

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Michele  
Gambirasi  
studied  
philosophy  
and  
journalism.  
He regularly  
writes on  
housing  
issues for  
the  
independent  
Italian  
magazine  
Scomodo.



Roberta Cavaglià is a freelance journalist focusing on Southern Europe (politics, society, and environment), migration, and human rights.



Susanna Ruggia is a freelance journalist who mainly covers urban and housing issues, as well as movements and struggles connected to them. Between 2019 and 2023, she was editorial director of the independent Italian magazine Scomodo. She now collaborates with L'Espresso. In 2023 she was a finalist for the Roberto Morrione Prize for investigative journalism.

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