

# FORTY YEARS OF LONGO MAÏ

The spirit of 1968 lives on in a remarkable network of European agrarian communities.

Intentional communities have a reputation for collapsing. However over the last 150 years visionaries seeking an alternative to capitalism and the nuclear family have acquired a few skills in the art of living together, consensus decision-making and so on. Whereas 19th century communities regularly fell apart within a few years of their founding (see *The Land* 3 p26), a surprising number of the British communities founded in the 1970s are still functioning, as are most of the low impact communities of the 1990s — Tally Valley, Brithdir Mawr, Tinkers Bubble, Steward Wood etc. Communities, these days, are arguably less likely to break up than nuclear families.

However nothing in the UK matches the network of European communities known as Longo maï, which recently celebrated its 40th anniversary. Longo maï, like so many communes of the era, sprang out of a widespread movement amongst *soixante-huitards* — the hippies and radical students and workers of the 1968 revolts — to create an alternative society by going back to the land. Two leftist groups, Spartakus based in Austria and Hydra in Switzerland, joined forces at a meeting in Basle in 1972, in which it was decided to found “European communities for young people” in rural areas suffering from depopulation. A year later the group acquired a farm at Limans, in Provence, where it now runs a larger farm incorporating three restored hamlets.

The network currently comprises 10 co-operatives, five of them in France and the others in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Ukraine and Austria. Together they house and provide a livelihood for about 200 people. All of them are working farms, with the exception of La Filature de Chantemerle, in the French Alps — a spinning mill which processes wool from the other communities and from neighbouring farmers. Most of the farms produce a wide range of subsistence produce including cereals and livestock, and specialise in one or two cash crops — for example organic vegetables at the Mas de Granier, near Arles, wine at La Cabrery in the Luberon, timber and carpentry at Treyнас in the Ardeche. However what makes Longo maï more remarkable is that it not only runs these farms, and achieves a high level of self-sufficiency, but also finds time to maintain full frontal political campaigns. Within a year of acquiring the first farm in 1973, activists at Longo maï in Switzerland helped start the “Place Gratuite” movement which provided a welcome for some 2,000 refugees from Pinochet’s coup d’état in Chile. More recently Longo maï has spearheaded a campaign against the servile working conditions imposed on immigrant seasonal agricultural labourers in the EU, notably Spain, and the ecological damage caused by industrial-scale production of fruit and vegetables. And residents of the various farms have been active in campaigns against, for example, seed



Sheep graze in front of the radio station at Longo maï, Limans, and (below) take it over.

protection, nuclear power, antimicrochipping of livestock (see p.11) and currently the proposed airport at Notre Dames des Landes near Nantes.

Longo maï also has its media outlets. The community at Limans operates a free radio station - Radio Zinzine, and mails out a weekly broadsheet called *L'Ire des Chênaies* (Oakgrove Rant) whose nearest equivalent in the UK is (or rather was) the Brighton-based newsheet, *SchNews*. Longo maï also provides a base in France for the European Civic Forum, which publishes a monthly bulletin, *Archipel*, in French and German (but not in English).

Although clearly on the anticapitalist left, Longo maï does not tow a party line, or subscribe to any rigid political viewpoint. There is no guru laying down a philosophical or religious orthodoxy, nor has there ever been. As one resident puts it, any tendency to dogmatism is checked by

the practical requirements of living in a community. The agricultural and productive life of the collective is the framework in which its political views and its relations with the outside world are grounded. Unlike Voltaire’s Pascal, the inhabitants of Longo maï maintain that you *can* cultivate your garden and change the world — and perhaps you have to do one to achieve the other.

Longo maï web page: <http://www.prolongomaif.ch/> — only in French and German.

Contact details in Switzerland: [info@prolongomai.ch](mailto:info@prolongomai.ch), tel : 00 41 61 262 01 11 / 00 41 61 262 02 46, snail mail Pro Longo maï St Johans-Vorstadt, 4001 Basel.



# An Alternative Economy

**HANNES REISER, who has been resident at Longo maï since its beginning, explains something of how its co-operative farms are structured in an interview conducted by KATHARINA MORAWIETZ.**

**Katharina Morawiecz:** How does Longo maï represent an alternative to a society founded on the profit motive and economic growth?

Hannes Reiser: We don't calculate the amount of work people do or what they use, or any exchange between them; everyone gives what they can and takes what they need. It harks back to a pre-capitalist economy based more on human relations than on monetary value. Here the land, the houses and all basic resources are collective property. On top of that, we are maintaining and adapting skills and knowledge that would otherwise be forgotten – for example the art of living in a group. This could be very important for a post-capitalist society.

**KM:** To manage the budget of ten co-operatives housing 200 inhabitants is no mean feat. How is the responsibility for this borne collectively?

HR: At first sight Longo maï seems like a huge organisation, but in fact it is structured in such a way that everyone has a voice. The residents of each farm manage it themselves and take all responsibility for the life of their community. Monthly expenses and annual budgets are discussed openly by all members in meetings for that purpose. The community's income and expenditure is settled there, and individuals are given the responsibility for implementing any decisions.

**KM:** What is the relationship of the individual to the collective budget?

HR: It is open and transparent. Everyone knows what everyone else receives. We see each other and talk everyday, so there is a sort of informal control, comparable to that which exists in a family. Besides, the financial requirements of each individual are astonishingly low thanks to the shared infrastructure and to the communal lifestyle which diminishes any neurotic need to go shopping.

**KM:** So where does the income come from?

HR: The income of each farm comes from three sources: from the sale of produce; from agricultural subsidies; and from donations to support political work, facilities for visitors, agriculture in less favoured regions, community infrastructure etc. The residents of each farm present financial plans for each year and project proposals at biennial gatherings of delegates from all the farms. We discuss politics there, but also assess any proposed investments which are large enough to impact on the money available for other farms – for example when a house needs to be built or when a new group requires support to get started.

**KM:** This arrangement must require a lot of discussion...

HR: Of course. Consensus management is based on free exchange and communication – activities which in modern society have been subsumed by the administrative and financial sectors. Look at all the bureaucratic buildings in a city like Basel. The number of people who work in offices is huge compared to the number of workers in agriculture and manufacturing. These people are expensive to maintain and the work is alienating. At Longo maï we hold these sort of discussions in the evening when others are watching television. The best ideas get hatched in a convivial setting.

**KM:** Is the structure of the Longo maï laid down in writing?

HR: No it has evolved over 40 years and there is nothing on paper. It is just a verbal agreement. I think part of the reason that Longo maï is still going is down to our culture of open dialogue. Longo maï is small enough for everyone to see how the whole functions: we all know each other.

**KM:** How does Longo maï relate to the market economy?

HR: The basic aim of all the farms is to become as self-sufficient as is practicable, and to provide lodging for all residents. This flies in the face of the extreme levels of dependency that have become the norm in our globalized society – and it involves extra work. But the people who have joined us in recent years are attracted by this approach and come in with a lot of energy.

**KM:** Presumably that explains why Longo maï manufactures a lot of different products, from A to Z, and avoids dealing with middlemen?

HR: This is what we have been working at for a long time, though we haven't exhausted the potential. Take wool, for example. We keep sheep on nearly all our farms, we shear them and turn the wool into pullovers, bed covers, socks and so on. We can get a decent price for these products, instead of selling the raw wool for a pittance. This fits in well with our collective economy. Whether it be in the garden, at the spinning mill, or working in the woods, we can muster up a large gang, or just send out a couple of people, according to the nature of the task.

The facilities that we build for adding value are used by other producers. For example at Mas de Granier, in the Bouches-du-Rhône, we have an installation for processing fruit and vegetables used by other local growers, and the new abattoir at Ulenkrug is also available for other farmers in the region.

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**KM:** What is the role of donations in Longo maï's economy?

HR: They allow us to take on projects that would be impossible if we were entirely self-sufficient. I believe that as long as we invest in alternatives to a society based on economic growth we will need support for these ventures.

**KM:** So could Longo maï exist without these donations?

HR: Of course it could – if we turned in on ourselves and focussed on the community as an end in itself. But Longo maï is a movement which is working to change society and the donations help us to stay active. Besides, the people who support us are part of the project as a whole and are not kept at arms length. They bring new ideas to Longo maï and we strive to realize ideas in society at large. Thus we are pushing for the revitalization of the less-favoured regions which are currently dominated by tourist developments. And we are developing ways of working that make sense for youngsters who are denied, or don't want, a place in mainstream society.

**KM:** No one receives a salary at Longo maï or any sum of money they can call their own. All income is pooled, so what motivates members to work, if not money?

HR: It has been like that from the start. Remember that salaried work is a fairly recent invention. Today it is normal, but for most of history it was the exception. At Longo maï an individual's economic wellbeing is not dependent upon their performance, instead there is a recognition that we all have to obtain our means of subsistence together. It helps that working together is often amusing and stimulating. Added to that is the fact that people who live at Longo maï want to change the world. Spurred by the conviction that they are creating an alternative, they put their back into it. We have a full relationship with our work. Our efforts don't disappear into the black hole of industrial society. When someone transplants a seedling, they tend it, harvest it, process it and see it eaten by people that they value. That is the opposite of alienated labour.