

Who says what is absurd?

- A case study on being(s) in an alternative normality

Degree of Master of Science (Two Years) in Human Ecology:
Culture, Power and Sustainability, 30 ECTS

CPS: International Master's programme in Human Ecology
Human Ecology Division
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Spring Term 2013

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Title and Subtitle:	Who says what is absurd? A case study on being(s) in an alternative normality
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Examination:	Master's thesis (two year)

Term:	Spring Term 2013
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Abstract:

This thesis deals with norms and the perception of possibilities. I discuss how norms, individuals and society are interlinked and interdependent. From this basic connection, based on the case of Can Decreix, a centre for practical and theoretical experiments on the topic of degrowth, I explore how a different normality can be established. The way that norms both enable and restrict is discussed and used to explain Can Decreix's internal dynamics as well as those with the surrounding growth society. The study focuses on experiences made by individuals who spent time within the different normality of Can Decreix. Methods used to integrate the case and individual experiences are participant observation, semi-structured interviews and the analysis of my own experiences. Based on these materials I discuss how the individual's subjectivities are influenced by experiences in Can Decreix. One consequence of these cross-normality experiences is what I call a defamiliarization of the subjects. Having identified norms as powerful, partly because of naturalization, I discuss what practical defamiliarization can mean in the context of social change.

Acknowledgements

I thank my interviewees: Lina, Eliane, Floraine, Liisa, Luke and Arnau for being a part of this study and for the great time we shared in Can Decreix. Special thanks I express to Francois Schneider, who invited me to Can Decreix, where I learned much more than how to make vine or clay plaster. I thank everybody who contributed to the great moments I had in Can Decreix. An important role for Can Decreix and for my time there played Filka Sekulova, whom I thank for the many talks we had. In relation to my ‘Can Decreix and degrowth experiences’: Thanks to all members of the R&D reading group. In Can Decreix I also got to know Emma Saunders who gave me essential comments regarding my written English in this thesis.

I further thank the whole “CPS batch 3” for being how they are, for the warmth, for the laughing and all the inspiration. Thanks for inspiration I express also to our lecturers from the Human Ecology Department, especially my thesis supervisor Pernille Gooch and Richard Langlais, our program coordinator.

I thank Hakan Ören, who gave me, a couple of years ago, a book called “Humanökologie” accompanied with the words: “that might be interesting for you.” I thank my parents Cornelia and Klaus Burkhardt for all their support and for just accepting that I disappeared in a thesis bubble for about three months and hardly gave any sign of life to them. I am grateful to Vedra Korobar, Nickolas Panagiotopoulos, Gustav Cederlöf and Linda Dubec. They gave me invaluable comments and were a great and close company throughout a time which was, after all, and thanks to them, not so bad. Invaluable throughout the whole process of writing this thesis has been Oscar Krüger, in being patient and inspiring, in supporting me with his understanding and comments and in giving me courage in moments of doubt.

Western reality construction, that is, that which can be questioned only at the risk of sounding insane – Alf Hornborg (2001, 129)

Liisa: “In the city [. . .] people give me the feeling, that I am weird and in Can Decreix people give me the feeling that it is perfectly normal what I do [. . .] One sees, cool, there are more people...” Corinna: “...who are as crazy” Liisa: “...or as normal.” (Interview with Liisa, my translation)

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1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore connections between experiences, subjectivity and society. These connections are explored with the case of Can Decreix – a degrowth centre – where norms, different from those in a society dominated by the goal of economic growth, are lived. In Can Decreix people can engage in degrowth for short or long term. Some individuals who engaged are part of this study and helped me exploring connections of their experiences, the practices they got engaged in and their sense of “the normal”. From this small sample I take inspiration and explore more theoretically the following research questions:

- 1) Where are ‘norms’ in the connections between experiences, subjectivity and society and how do they influence these connections?
- 2) How can norms be changed and what happens if they are changed (radically)?
- 3) What does a challenge of norms mean having the goal of social change in mind?

Already in the aim and these three questions several words emerge, which need explanation. Throughout this thesis I aim to explain them. Within the introductory chapter I explain *degrowth* (1.1) before going over to describe *the degrowth centre Can Decreix* (1.2). Following the introduction, I describe my *methodological approach* (2), starting with my *basic assumptions* (2.1) before I go through the applied methods. These are: *participant observation* (2.2), *observation of my own experiences* (2.3), *interviews* (2.4) and the consultation of *additional material* (2.5). The methods part finishes with some comments on *validity, reliability and generalizability* (2.6). From the methods I move to the *empirical material* (3), where I give voice to the diverse experiences made by my interviewees and me in Can Decreix, while highlighting and contextualising the described experiences (3.1 – 3.3).

In the fourth part of the thesis, the *theoretical discussion* (4), more of the so far unexplained words and concepts will come up. I search for explanations to the made experiences. I first explain *society as the frame of possibilities* (4.1) with help of the model of society/ person connections developed by Roy Bhaskar in “The the Possibility of Naturalism” ([1979] 2005). In the next part of the discussion I draw on parts of Arun Agrawal’s concept of Environmentalism (2005), precisely on his ideas about the connections between experiences and subjectivity, the making of environmental subjects, to explore the emergence of what I call *degrowth subjects* (4.2). After this follows a short note on *relational experiences* (4.3), to highlight experiences as contextualised. In “*Degrowth subjectivities in growth society*” (4.4), I

extend Alf Hornborg's ideas about defamiliarization to explain the experiences explored in this case as experiences of defamiliarization (Hornborg 2001). The final part of the discussion deals with power and normality, or better the *power of normality*. I support my arguments with theories of Eric Wolf ([1982] 1990), David Graeber (2013, 2005) and again Roy Bhaskar ([1979] 2005). The thesis finishes with a short *conclusion* (5), final reflections and some further questions.

The motivation for this study emerges from my study of Human Ecology and my engagement in the degrowth movement. Recognizing today's diverse and interconnected problems, which are largely connected to the dominance of neoliberal capitalistic, growth oriented principles, the question of how to make change happen is for me a persistent one. Being, through the study of human and political ecology, aware of the complexity of processes which influence any given situation and problem one can easily become pessimistic about the future. Reflecting that pessimism will not help the situation and having faith in humanity, the degrowth movement provides a diverse and holistic approach towards existing problems and ideas for solutions. Being engaged in degrowth and experiencing profound change, I explore this change and possible ways to take it further.

Within the degrowth movement various notions of how to promote change exist and more and more projects are working on practical applications of degrowth ideas. There is the conviction that change needs to be in very concrete practical terms, while at the same time there is need for a change in mentality. Highlighted is as well that the one cannot go without the other. At this point my study comes in, motivated by the constant wondering how to promote change. This study focuses on the very link between practice and subjectivity and how both change.

In order to not create wrong expectations and to prevent misunderstandings I offer a few notes as regards what this thesis is and what it is not. It is an anthropological human ecology study on the interconnections of experiences, subjectivity and society and it belongs to research on degrowth. The methods applied are qualitative. There is no discussion on how sustainable or how much 'degrowth' Can Decreix is, I rather discuss how Can Decreix impacts people who live in it. While reading this thesis, I ask you, as reader, to read what I write, to imagine what I describe, the way I describe it, and to leave preconceptions at home as much as possible.

1.1. *Presentation of the Degrowth Movement*

At this point I give a short overview over degrowth ideas and the movement. Detailed descriptions and demarcations have been made elsewhere, for example very recently and at length in Demaria et al. (2013). Further several special issues, as well as other publications deal with diverse aspects of degrowth (Demaria et al. 2013, 192)¹.

The term degrowth was coined as such and entered the English speaking academic debate with the first international conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity in Paris in 2008². The title of the conference, which has remained the same for the three conferences following (Barcelona 2010, Montreal 2012 and Venice 2012) and the planned conference in Leipzig 2014³, is explained in this short and precise definition of degrowth:

Generally degrowth challenges the hegemony of growth and calls for a democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption in industrialized countries as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice and well-being. (Demaria et al. 2013, 209)

Important to highlight and often misunderstood is, that degrowth is multi-dimensional, both in its sources and discussed problems, as well as in regards of its proposed solutions (e.g. Demaria et al. 2013, Sekulova et al. 2013). The six overarching sources are (i) ecology, (ii) critique of development and praise for anti-utilitarianism, (iii) meaning of life and well-being, (iv) bioeconomics, (v) democracy and (vi) justice. The diverse degrowth strategies can be summarized under the four umbrellas: oppositional activism, alternative building, reformism and research (Demaria et al. 2013).

The goals of degrowth lie not just in material terms but regard also the processes which make this accumulation and unjust distribution possible (Saed 2012). Degrowth has, through its sources and strategies, a close connection with justice movements in the South. The demand made by these movements, “that the North repay the climate debt to the South and that this debt should increase no further reinforces the degrowth movements in the rich countries” (Martinez-Alier 2012, 66).

¹ A regular updated list of selected publications can be found on <http://www.degrowth.org/publications>.

² For further information about the conference: <http://events.it-sudparis.eu/degrowthconference/en/>

³ More about the conferences and further links: <http://www.degrowth.org/conferences> and <http://www.degrowth.org/4-international-conference-on-degrowth-in-germany>

English speakers often find the word ‘degrowth’ problematic and it leads to misunderstandings. Reading just the word, it has a negative, and for some, a non-ecological connotation. Anybody who looks closer will discover “a project positively intent on ecological democracy and frugal abundance” (Latouche 2012, 77). The origin of the term is to be found in Latin languages, where “la décroissance” in French or “la decrescita” in Italian refer to a river going back to its normal flow after a disastrous flood (ibid., Latouche 2010, 519).

Degrowth is a combination of strategies and sources motivated by the recognition that leaving out one strategy or one source would lead to reductionist approaches. Leaving out democracy for example one could easily end up with a degrowth dictatorship (see also Demaria et al. 2013, 206). Similar, the strategies complement each other; Reformism helps for a smooth change, alternative building helps one to acquire experiences, activism for awareness and so on (Demaria et al. 2013, 207). Research and other strategies on degrowth are diverse⁴. Research also includes the analysis of cases where degrowth strategies have been practiced. In my rather small view over existing studies I could identify studies which deal with concrete cases of practical degrowth projects, while the focus seems to be on quantitative results e.g. reduction in ecological footprint, change to direct democracy, time management and such (e.g. Catteneo and Gavalda 2010; Sekulova et al. 2010). My study builds as well on a concrete case, while it deals not with the quantitative, measurable change but with qualitative change.

I wish to make explicitly clear a few more aspects, which are implicitly already mentioned: degrowth should be understood as “an invitation to think outside the box” (Sekulova et al. 2013, 5), it is no new religion and nothing which should be imposed with force (Schneider et al. 2010) and it is “not an alternative, but a matrix of alternatives which re-opens a space for creativity by raising the heavy blanket of economic totalitarianism” (Latouche 2010, 520). Further degrowth can only be possible within a degrowth society and is not to be confused with green growth or sustainable development, which degrowth scholars see as oxymoron. (e.g. Demaria et al. 2013, 196-197).

⁴ As for example issues presented at the conferences show. Websites of the conferences: <http://events.it-sudparis.eu/degrowthconference/en/> (Paris 2008); <http://barcelona.degrowth.org/> (Barcelona 2010); <http://www.montreal.degrowth.org/> (Montreal 2012); <http://www.venezia2012.it/> (Venice 2012)

1.2. *Can Decreix, a Practical Realization of Degrowth Ideas*

In this section I describe Can Decreix, the place which led to the analysed experiences. For this I locate and describe Can Decreix in space and time, taking a place as never the same and constantly changing, influenced by people and ongoing activities.



Fig. 1: Overview Can Decreix and surroundings (author's creation)

“Can Decreix is a place to demonstrate and reflect around the topic of degrowth. [. . .] Can Decreix is a centre for transformation (of fruits, vegetables, constructions, societies), for research, for testing frugal technologies, arts, agroecology.”⁵

Can Decreix was my home for six months, from August 2012 until January 2013. It is a degrowth centre and home. “Decreix” comes from the Catalan word for degrowth. Can Decreix (consider Fig. 1) is located in the very south of France or in the middle of Catalonia, depending on the taken perspective. It lies at a meeting point of contrasting elements: the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean Sea, the sun and the wind Tramontane⁶ both energizing and deserting, intensive vineyards and abandoned ones on steep terraces, abandoned houses in the

⁵“Can Decreix,” Research & Degrowth (R&D), <http://www.degrowth.org/can-decreix> (accessed May 16, 2013)

⁶ A storm which reaches in gusts up to 130 km/h. It comes from between the mountains, lighter in the summer and stronger in the winter months. The locals say it stays for 1, 3, 9 or more days.

mountains and new urbanization near the coast and a gigantic train station⁷ just below the degrowth centre Can Decreix. The shrinking village Cerbère, affected by the ongoing economic crisis in contrast to Can Decreix, a place where people are not afraid of the future, but happily trying out an alternative.

The alternative, which is tried out, is rooted in the degrowth movement (1.1). A premise of Can Decreix is to respect physical limits, as those are understood in the degrowth movement (e.g. that the earth is finite), and to challenge social ones. Physical limits, which one experiences in everyday practices, are for example the limit in water or in energy. Can Decreix is connected to the public grid for energy and water and therefore no direct scarcity is experienceable, but the awareness that there are limits is present and guides decisions in Can Decreix. Practices that account for those limits are tried out. The ideal would be to stay completely inside these physical limits, a venture which is today and while being connected to growth society⁸, probably impossible to achieve.

How does this place, where an alternative is lived, look like? From the road along the opposite slope the 0.3 hectare look nearly like any other spot. Just that the site seems quite green compared to the surrounding intensively cultivated vineyards and housing areas. There are two housing structures, the sleeping, office and assemblage area and further up the slope the workshops, kitchen and eating area. The idea is to have a place, where living and working are combined, working in praxis and in theory; to have a place for degrowth theory, practice and activism, education, experimentation and a meeting point; a place to try out one possible way of living in a degrowth future.

The houses lie in between more and less steep terraces. Some rich in soil and planted with vegetables, others with vines, some dry and seemingly dead in the summer, but full of wild salads in the winter. In between stand olive trees, old and young fig trees, pomegranate trees, lots of rosemary bushes, wild lavender, herbs and many other greens. Over one hundred stairs are leading in a zigzag up the slope and connect the very low end of Can Decreix with the upper part, which stretches over 30 meters altitude. Can Decreix is in walking distance to the

⁷ At the border between France and Spain the rail gauge changes. For that reason all axles have to be changed, either by lifting the cargo on other carriages or, as done in Cerbère, by lifting up the carriage to exchange each axle.

⁸ I use the term 'growth society' throughout the thesis. When I write 'growth society' I refer to a society (this term will be discussed in part 4 of this thesis) where economic growth is the guiding premise. A detailed description would be beyond the scope of this thesis. What I call growth society, has also been characterized as being the means of economy, rather than having economy at its means. (compare Latouche 2009, 8; Graeber 2005, 429).

train station, to the beach and the centre of the village, physically not located outside what falls in the dominant range of the normal, but surrounded by it. It is connected to electricity, fresh water, phone and internet, but not to the grey water system and not directly reachable by car. The diet is mainly vegan, organic and/or local. The kitchen has no fridge, the only electrical tool there being a mixer. Dishes and bodies are washed with potassium soap which functions later, when the used water flows in the garden, as a fertiliser. Similarly the kitchen compost enriches the soil. Human excrements, collected in compost toilets, will nurture trees after being composted separately. In the tool rooms few electrical tools can be found as contrast to old tools which only need humanpower and other objects which might be good for something some day, for example to (re)invent another tool.

The spot has not been like this since a long time and one can see this newness in many ways. Can Decreix is there since the beginning of the year 2012, but it really started, is populated with degrowth enthusiasts, since the summer 2012. The degrowth centre is an initiative grown around a few members⁹ of the French Spanish organisation Research & Degrowth (R&D)¹⁰, which is committed to the research, dissemination and practise of degrowth. Before becoming a degrowth place the particular site itself existed and people's influence on the site is highly visible. People for example terraced the area, grew vine in it, used the olive trees, made wells, cut down vegetation, caused erosion, they built and rebuilt houses and paths and left garbage. This place and these structures are now engaged in a transformation process to become a centre for degrowth, while an underlying principle is that 'we have to change now, we cannot wait for the perfect solution and stay with the old until we find it. We can change and then develop the solution further, step by step'¹¹. One good example of this approach is the evolution of the main shower during the time of my stay: to reuse the shower water for the garden we started with a tube and the use of vacuum to let the water flow out after showering. In order to do so it had to climb out of the bathtub through the room and corridor. By the time I left, the water would go out through a hole in the wall while showering. And the future plan for the shower is to locate it in a greenhouse in order to water plants directly, create a suitable habitat for specific plants and make the shower an even nicer experience. The same goes for

⁹ Filka Sekulova and Francois Schneider are the actors from R&D who are engaged in Can Decreix, while the idea, as Francois says, routes far back and has been influenced, nurtured and developed by many people. For the realization of Can Decreix an important role play further Olivier Schneider and Sylvain Fischer.

¹⁰ For further information about R&D see <http://www.degrowth.org/>

¹¹ Francois Schneider said similar things, and it is an idea mirrored in many ways in Can Decreix. It is not a quote, since I cannot say if he used these words, this is how I remember it.

many practices and goals of the project. A more detailed explanation and description of practices and plans would blast the size of this thesis and is done elsewhere¹².

The time of my participation and observation took place in the initial phase of the project, which was determined by getting the place 'going', by experimentation and improvisation, planning, lots of construction work, problems, ideas and questions. The atmosphere was a positive one. Degrowth was seen as fun and interesting, but on the other hand there was a lot of work. The positivity which blew like a wind from the back sometimes met a storm from the front, simply through the overwhelming amount of work to be done. Accepting, that one has only 24 hours a day is hard, if the time left to transform to a degrowth society seems so short.

Can Decreix is planned to be the home for a little community. During my stay the little community consisted of up to three other people and me. This core group consists of those people who were constantly engaged in the place and therefore those who were responsible for the place and took decisions. But still, Can Decreix hosted most of the time more than these people. Many friends, volunteers, experts and groups stayed for some time contributing to the project. It was mostly organized in a way that a group of volunteers would be there at the same time and would work together with or without an expert on specific tasks, mainly on eco-construction and gardening. Every volunteer stayed in exchange of food and accommodation, working approximately five days a week and five hours a day¹³. The volunteers were called through the organisation wwoof¹⁴, through groups working on degrowth or degrowth related themes, word of mouth and personal contacts.

Structures like the availability of bikes or the good train connections, the vegan kitchen or the hand-power washing machine as well as the compost toilet make a degrowth life easy and favour it. And also the pro degrowth atmosphere make this simple life possible, to wash by hand or to walk over the mountain to the local vegetable stand on the market.

What is special about Can Decreix? That it is a place which does not declare to be an exception from the normal, but instead a place that makes something else normal without

¹² Consider for more information <http://agroecol.eu/candecreix1/>; this page is under constant construction and large parts of the planning for Can Decreix have not yet been published; Further, a Permaculture design/Agroecology plan for Can Decreix is in process: <http://agroecol.eu/design/>

¹³ How is that financed? Can Decreix is so far supported through savings and different incomes from work, scholarship etc., further through the hosting of events and the sale of (food) products. Further support might be gained through foundations, hosting seminars and ultimately the reduction of need for money.

¹⁴ Wwoof stands for: worldwide opportunities organic farms. It is a network which connects farms and volunteers. The basic rule is that people work for food and accommodation. For wwoof-France see <http://www.wwoof.fr/> and for wwoof-Spain <http://www.wwoof.es>; Can Decreix is a member as a host in both organizations (Spain and France).

really talking about it¹⁵. One feels moved in a degrowth world without having made a clear decision to do so. What distinguishes Can Decreix further from other ‘organic’, ‘alternative’ or ‘eco’ places is its close connection to research and activism, through its foundation in the multi-dimensional strategies of the degrowth movement. Another distinction seems to be important: Can Decreix is located in direct neighbourhood with structures which are symptoms of a growth mentality (e.g. the trains which are showing the ongoing freight of merchandise). There is not the attempt to go somewhere far away, out in ‘untouched’ nature to forget about the rest of the world; rather it’s an initiative to stay in contact with, what I call in this thesis, growth society. This distinguishes Can Decreix from projects which attempt to build up paradises, far away from others who do not share the values of the project. Finally some people might say, ‘but I have a compost toilet at home and I reuse dish wash water for the garden’. Well, that is great, but as already described Can Decreix is an ambition on a different scale than individual change.

2. *Methodological Approach*

2.1. *Basic Assumptions*

Throughout this study I take on a critical realist perspective, which proposes a

. . . view of society in which human agents are neither passive products of social structures nor entirely their creators but are placed in an iterative and naturally reflexive feedback relationship to them. Society exists independently of our conceptions of it, in its causal properties, its ability to exert deterministic force on individuals; yet it is dependent on our actions, human activity, for its reproduction. It is both real and transcendent. (Davies [1998] 2008, 19).

This view on society

. . . suggests that we can neither take behavioural observations as simply representative of some given social world nor fully reveal or reconstruct the social through our understanding of actors’ meanings and beliefs. ‘Society is not given in, but presupposed by, experience. However, it is precisely its peculiar ontological status, its transcendently

¹⁵ Here Can Decreix’s “Museum for unneeded and questionable things” fits in so well, that I have to provide a link for those who are interested: <http://agroecol.eu/candecreix1/museum>.

real character, that makes it a possible object of knowledge for us' (Bhaskar quoted in Davies [1998] 2008, 20).

This view describes an ongoing process of change, precisely the making of the world and the making of the subject as a mutual activity. This does not mean that this world is only made by the subject and only exists as a construction, but rather that "they are interrelated in that each level may affect the other" (ibid., 22). Following this perception one can wonder: What is this relationship? What is there? Why is it there? Could there be something else? What determines what is actually there? How can change what is there? With "there" I mean the actual, the actual taken from the potential real. And these questions might be illuminated through the study of a different lived actuality, different in comparison to the dominant actuality.

Next to the idea of what is possible to study, Davis ([1998] 2008) suggests, based on this critical realist perspective, that the ethnographer has to take a reflexive approach on his/her study, since s/he is part of this always changing society. I follow Davies advice to be reflexive throughout the whole process of this study and to take into account various influences, while still being able to say something and not to get lost in reflections.

The methods I used – participant observation, observation of my own experience, interviews and the analysis of additional material produced by my interviewees – fall into the methods box of ethnography. While ethnography is the study of a group of people, I see my study as a study of experiences made by people. The focus does not lie on the general lifeworld of a specific group of people, but on an experience shared by a group of people. Therefore I study people in a wider sense and therefore use methods commonly applied in ethnography. From here I go on to describe the different methods I used and start in the way I started with the study.

2.2. *Participant Observation*

I started with participant observation. The usual way of doing participant observation can be seen as a spiral process between observation and participation, as described by Rabinow, quoted in Davies ([1998] 2008, 83):

"Observation. . . is the governing term of the pair, since it situates the anthropologist's activities. [. . .] In the dialectic between the poles of observation and participation,

participation changes the anthropologist and leads him to new observations, whereupon new observation changes how he participates. But this dialectical spiral is governed in its motion by *the starting point, which is observation.*” (Emphasis added)

In this sense my participant observation was unusual, it clearly started with participation. Arriving in Can Decreix I did not have the intention to undertake participant observation in an ethnographic sense. I was there, to participate and I observed as an interested student in an internship, not as an ethnographer. During this time the participation changed me and led me to the observations I did, which I then found interesting to observe more consciously. When I became aware of my experiences and their potential in terms of study, I became an observer of myself, of my participation and of other people. I started my turns in the described spiral. This connects to the issue discussed further above, the way the researcher influences the field. The observed phenomena would certainly be there, would be experienced, but likely would not be picked up and explored further. Therefore I made the place a field site with becoming an observer.

2.3. *Observation of my own Experiences*

This unusual start of the spiral implies that I did not go out in the “field” to study the “other” in a for me unknown reality. I fully identified myself with Can Decreix and its inhabitants. Through this identification and non-distancing I could just *be* in the place and let it take me, instead of observing other people and how they deal with their world. I got to know about possible experiences through making them myself and then went on from there to understand these experiences. I got to feel what is taking place in Can Decreix.

I use these experiences as objects of study. I take myself as one part of the study. In contrast to the information I got through interviews (see 2.4) I have a first-hand experience, which is beneficial in the sense that I understand myself in a different way than I can understand anybody else’s description of an experience.

A problem, which is related to the process of objectifying one’s own experience, is the question of how far one can be attached to a situation which one wants to study. In order to research one’s own experience one would have to be fully attached to the situation. Davies states on this issue that “. . . certainly anyone *with the intention* of doing ethnographic research must find themselves detached . . .” ([1998] 2008, 221; emphasis added). As

described above I did not come to Can Decreix with the intention to do ethnography and therefore I was not detached from the people and situation I study. This does not mean that I did not feel detached later. After deciding to do the study and during the interviews I felt detached to a certain degree. I felt being in an observing, analysing position, looking closer on something which others might experience, but which they do not explore consciously. My experience got shaped by me becoming an observer.

2.4. Interviews

While exploring what I had experienced, I started wondering if other people had lived similar experiences. In order to find out more, I conducted six semi-structured interviews with people who had stayed in Can Decreix for some time. The people I talked to were volunteers, who had worked in exchange of food and accommodation. People were coming to Can Decreix from very different backgrounds, with different histories and different plans. I talked to people who were not just visiting, but engaging fully during their stay. Those I interviewed stayed for about two weeks up to approximately two months and mainly took part in work camp happenings, which I mentioned above (1.2). This means that there were scheduled activities, with various tasks, mainly eco-construction work, and that there were, at some days, up to 20 volunteers involved. I only interviewed people who came to Can Decreix as volunteers and did not interview helping friends of initiators of Can Decreix. Further selection criteria were the existence of a common language between the volunteer and me and if I got a reply after asking for an interview. The interviews were conducted between the end of October 2012 and the end of January 2013. Two interviews I could do face to face, the other four I had to do with the program Skype, since I did the interviews after people had left Can Decreix (at least for some time in one case). I recorded and transcribed all the interviews.

I did not really have the choice but to do the interviews post people's departures, since I developed the idea to do interviews after some people had already left. But already before the first interview I decided that I wanted to do all interviews after people had left in order to create a time distance with the experience and to be able to not just talk about Can Decreix, but also about the experience of the possible impact of Can Decreix after leaving. I did not only want to hear the fresh and excited memories, but those which stay(ed) present, which stand out. I wanted to know about their experience and their possible reflections on it and if they perceive a difference in their everyday life. People were not only distanced in time, but

also in space. The face to face interviews I did outside Can Decreix and people who I talked to on Skype were in different places, in different situations, which were in many ways contrasting to Can Decreix. I am aware that the memories were influenced by all that had happened since then and that they might end up more positive or negative than the experience itself. I argue that this is no limitation for the purpose of my study, since I am not aiming to do an evaluation of Can Decreix, but to explore the influence Can Decreix has on people.

Besides making long distance interviews possible, Skype clearly influenced the interviews. I did not ask to use the video option; I could only see one of my interviewee who was using a camera. The physical distance made it more difficult to make long pauses to let the other speak and to catch the emotions expressed in the talk. When a break occurred in talking, I could not know if it was a technical problem; if my interviewee was bored; just thinking; about to say something; or searching for words. All this and much more is possible to sense while being face to face with somebody, yet it is very difficult to create similar settings just through the internet. But I still think, that all interviews turned out well, mainly because we knew each other, had had a good time together, talked about an unproblematic topic and therefore did not encounter difficulties to discuss. I can only speak for myself, but I got the impression that the interviewees enjoyed our conversations and openly shared their experiences.

My underlying approach for all the interviews was to not do a “mining of interviewee[s] for information” (Davies [1998] 2008, 121), but to develop an understanding of the experiences together. I wanted to discuss a topic I found fascinating and to collect experiences in order to understand this topic better. The interviews had most of the time more the character of a casual conversation. I definitely spoke less than the interviewees, but I not always held back my opinion or my experiences. After focusing on the interviewees’ experiences I always described my experiences, my motivation for the study and what I want to write about and I was offered, through this process, very helpful and interesting perspectives on the topic¹⁶. One might call this manipulating, but if one sees the interviews “as a process in which interviewer and interviewee are both involved in developing understanding, [which] is in constructing their knowledge of the social world.” (ibid., 109), then the interview should have more of a discussion character. Davies further brings up Oakley’s argument “that both for ethical reasons and for the efficacy of the interview, interviewers must be prepared to share their own

¹⁶ Once I was forced to do this through email communication due to technical problems in the very end of the interview.

knowledge; she suggests that the interviewing process can only develop effectively ‘when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her personal identity in the relationship’” (ibid., 113). Further the interviewee can oppose her/him self to the interviewer’s position and as a result both get to a better understanding of the topic (ibid.). This approach might be problematic if hierarchies are involved and if interviewer and interviewee do not know each other personally, which I do not have to be concerned about in my case.

The interviews were semi-structured. They were all planned and I met all my interviewees for the purpose of an interview. Nevertheless I did not have a real structure in the interviews themselves; I started with a loose question about people’s experiences and formulated it differently every time. From there, the talk developed in different directions in every case.

I did three interviews in English with one native and two non-native speakers and three in German (my mother tongue) with other native speakers. In one case not using the mother tongue probably influenced our understanding, although I tried to clarify misunderstandings within the time of the talk. I transcribed and analysed the interviews in the language they were conducted. I translated only parts of the interviews, which I use as quotes, for the thesis, while I made footnotes when I think the German original wording or phrasing shows something which would otherwise get lost in translation.

2.5. Additional Material

The additional material which I analysed was produced by two of my interviewees and was introduced to me as driven by reflections about the time in Can Decreix. The material is an undergraduate university essay written as a final task and a travel blog. I see this material as an additional input for this research, since it is connected to people’s experiences in Can Decreix. Three aspects make it especially interesting. Firstly, both texts are not directed towards me. The texts are not answers to my questions about their experiences, rather they are written because the authors wanted to write them. Secondly the goal in itself has an importance: it shows the experience of living in Can Decreix is so strong that both interviewees independently desired writing about it. The third aspect is that both wrote the texts shortly after having stayed in Can Decreix, while I conducted the interviews with both of them a little later. In the essay the connection to Can Decreix is quite clear, while on the blog

it is only clear in some parts. I only consider parts which are clearly related to the experiences in Can Decreix.

2.6. *Validity, Reliability and Generalizability*

I address two more issues before moving to the empirical material. These issues regard especially readers unfamiliar with anthropological and human ecological research traditions. The first issue deals with validity, reliability and generalizability. These criteria can according to Davies be useful, if they are “removed from their positivist frame” (2008, 104). Validity can obviously be fulfilled if the research process is honestly examined and made visible in the analysis (ibid.).

The second criterion, reliability, both within and between ethnographic studies must be reinterpreted to incorporate a recognition that the reflexivity intrinsic to ethnographic research does not permit or even make desirable the superficial consistency that classical positivist position would dictate. Finally, the third criterion, generalizability, while highly desirable, is to be sought in terms of theoretical, rather than statistical, inference (ibid.).

Theoretical inference is to be understood as the extendibility of an ethnographic study in a particular theoretical debate, rather than on a larger collective of people (ibid., 103).

As regards to this thesis, this means that what I say is relevant only about the group of people I studied and in some cases I only speak about individuals. However, I then explore what extendibility the knowledge gained from these cases has on a theoretical level.

The second issue is my choice of language and the style of writing. In the following part I present the empirical material. I do not take people’s words to write my own story, rather I present as best as I can the voices of my interview partners. I leave parts uncommented which serve mainly as contextualisation for people’s words. How can one understand the meaning of a quote taken from an interviewee if one does not know what the interviewer had asked or in what context the issues came up (e.g. Davies [1998] 2008, 128, 232)?

3. Empirical Material

In the following parts I present the empirical data which I collected for this study. To keep the focus on the interviewees' experiences those are presented first. I contextualize excerpts from the interview material and highlight the issues I consider specifically important. I further explain some of the topics that come up, which are otherwise difficult to understand for an outsider. After the interview material, I describe the additional material and my own experiences.

3.1. Interview Material

My six interviewees are Arnau, Lina, Eliane, Luke, Floraine and Liisa. I introduce each of them further at a later point (3.1.2.3). To get an overall picture of what these six experienced I started the analysis with mapping out their experiences on a piece of paper, trying to sort them according to time and space, in the categories “inside Can Decreix”, “before Can Decreix” and “after Can Decreix”. I choose these categories reflecting on the interview data and to focus on possible changes in perception or behaviour and experiences related to contrast and differences. The interviews themselves were focused mainly (as I discovered during the analysis) along these lines of comparison of Can Decreix to the “outside world” and the time before and after Can Decreix. Throughout the process of mapping it became very clear that it is impossible to take the experiences of one person apart. The experiences are relational to each other. One describing something is constantly comparing it to something else s/he knows/has experienced. Luke, for example, refers to the “slower pace of life” in Can Decreix. He experiences it as slower compared to the pace in the city of Manchester, where he lives. And he can only grasp the importance of this pace of life, because he relates it to a previous or following experience. Following from this, one can conclude that it is only through the contrast of the fast pace in Manchester that the slow pace in Can Decreix can become visible. One pace alone would very likely not be described at all. I come back to this conclusion later in the discussion (4.4-4.4.3).

From this little insight one can guess that the piece of paper was not sufficient for undertaking the mapping of experiences. A third dimension might have helped. Still, it was sufficient to get a grasp on, if and how the experiences of the different people can be related and showed

through its insufficiency the complexity of experience, memory, reflection and perception. So how to present this meshwork?

3.1.1. Approaching the Experiences

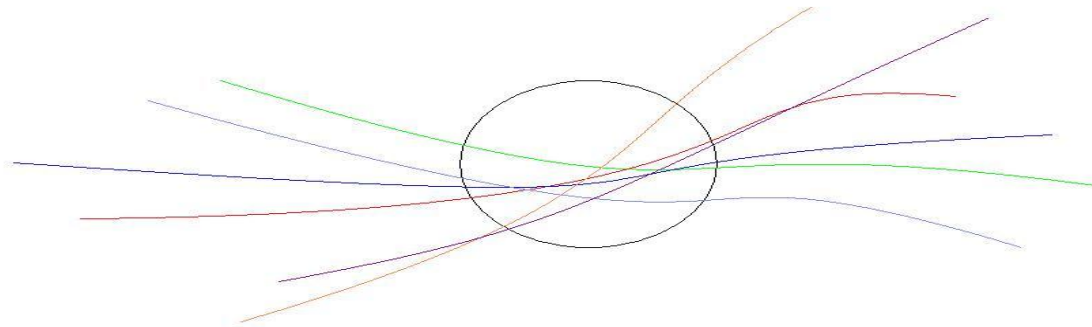


Fig. 2: Meeting lines of experiences (author's creation)

First of all, the situation is best described with a little graphic (Fig. 2). The lines are the people coming from different backgrounds, spending some time in a place which is here marked with an oval¹⁷ and then going on, on their different life paths. The lines do not merge into one line when in the oval since all people have very different experiences inside the oval, I do not even dare to say in the same place, since it is never the same as it changes with time, people and perspective. I am looking at what people describe as their experience related to the time/place in the oval, i.e. Can Decreix. What I know about these experiences is only a glimpse reduced into language and through understanding, while I know even less about what people experienced before and about what they have experienced since.

3.1.2. Sharing the Experiences

In the following parts, I share what I got to know and make sense of it. Throughout the interviews I distinguish three bigger topics, which I call people's theory of change, people's view on their 'normal' society and people's experiences related to Can Decreix. I was neither asking for a theory of how change can happen or for people's view on society, but every interview had at least one of the topics and both topics came up in four of the six interviews. These three topics are highly related. People drew their motivation for change and for coming

¹⁷ The oval is here for illustrational help. It is not to describe Can Decreix as a place with boundaries; it is rather to mark the shared experiences.

to Can Decreix from problems they see in their ‘normal’ society, while they see Can Decreix as a place of/for change. It seems therefore not appropriate for me to divide the following section according to these topics which I could distinguish. Since the experiences directly related to Can Decreix are my main interest and make up the main part of the map of experiences and the interviews, I orient the analysis of the material along this thread and show along this way people’s views on society and their theories for change.

3.1.2.1. *Different from the Normal*

A rather not surprising underlying tone of all descriptions of Can Decreix is the description of Can Decreix as different from the “normal”. Sometimes it is explicitly expressed as for example Eliane says that she

got to know a world, which she didn’t know that it exists (my translation),

or Liisa says on the question how she experiences Can Decreix that

there are so many little things which are already so normal for us [people in Can Decreix], which we are already used to, which just belong to everyday life and you tell people of them and they find it weird. (my translation)

or Luke who just says:

In Can Decreix we had a very different way of living [with] obviously a much slower pace,

or Floraine who says, that

it was good to see a system that works [. . .] to see an alternative system

or Arnau says, that there are

people that [are] really trying to change rules.

And it is not just different. It is extreme, radical, stark, and far from normal as the following quotes show:

Basically I think it is an *extreme* way of living, compared to the way of living we are used to in the oil based or oil dependent world (emphasis added)

as Arnau points out. Eliane says, that she

found it extremely exciting to see how *radically* one can live (my translation, emphasis added)

and Lina compares Can Decreix to other countryside lives, like that she knows from her grandma, who

lives [. . .] nearly like you [people in Can Decreix], but of course not as *stark*¹⁸. (own translation, emphasis added).

Luke reports from conversations with friends, that

they cannot quite understand why one would do something – to *go so far* to be sustainable. (emphasis added)

3.1.2.2. *Similar People*

A very important part of the experiences is for all interviewees that they met, like Luke puts it,

people who have very similar ideas.

Eliane says:

I met many people, who think in a similar way – and one has kind of a space to talk about things about which one would normally maybe not talk that much, because one is maybe together with people who, who are not thinking as radical or people who think, when you tell them about your experiences, they think she is crazy and so on. [. . .]. While here everybody is crazy or nobody, no clue. (my translation)

Liisa made similar experiences, in her answer on my question for changes in her life she mentions how good it was to meet people in Can Decreix who are like her:

L: . . .It was definitely good to meet people in Can Decreix who maybe live similar like me or have similar ideas like me. I don't feel as weird as I feel in the city. I feel very normal.

C: And why do you feel weird in the city?

L: I don't know, in the city I often have the feeling, people give me the feeling, that I am weird and in Can Decreix people give me the feeling that it is perfectly normal what I do. People I meet in Can Decreix [. . .] are often super cool and interesting people, with whom I share a lot. Where one sees, cool, there are more people . . .

¹⁸ Original in German “... , also natürlich nicht so krass”. I make this note here because I cannot find a word as strong as the German “krass”, especially not for Lina's way of saying “krass”.

C: . . . who are as crazy!?

L: . . . or as normal. (my translation)

Floraine even points this issue out as best of her visit in Can Decreix, she says:

And for me it allowed me to know that there is lots of young people like me, so I feel more self confident to be free with these ideas, to feel it's possible and trust and to see this organization, because even if it is not perfect it began and it exists so I really feel happy to come in Can Decreix to see people and organization. I feel more in the truth. I'm not alone.

It already becomes clear why my interviewees experience the meeting of people with similar ideas as so positive and important, it gives them confidence, motivation and courage about their own ideas about life. The feeling that one is not alone, as Floraine says. Luke summarises, after I asked, if it is easier for him, compared to his friends, to change his life/habits since he made experiences with alternatives:

I don't know. I guess ya, because I know that other people are committed to changing their lives as well. It definitely gives me a lot of confidence when I see other people, changing, trying to change.

Lina also talks about confidence:

. . . and it gave me a little bit of confidence. [. . .]. That there are many other people, who think like that, and that one just has to do it and that one is not alone fighting against the whole world. (my translation)

All these quotes show that it is a mixture of the meeting of people who share similar ideas and the place itself with its different practices, with people engaging for a change, which gives confidence and courage to my interviewees.

3.1.2.3. In and Out of Can Decreix

All these quotes are somehow related to the not-Can Decreix world. Can Decreix is pictured as somehow in contrast to other places my interviewees know, and this is not without a judgment. The world of Can Decreix they describe as a better world, one to change to. This brings me to the experience the interviewees talked about from this not-Can Decreix world, after and before being in Can Decreix. A way of talking about the experience of contrast or difference was for me to ask about how it was to come to a city after having been in Can Decreix. I did this because coming to a city, namely Barcelona, after being in Can Decreix

was one crucial experience for me regarding realising contrast and differences. The talking about the experience of coming back to a city blended together with the question if people experienced change in their everyday life after being in Can Decreix. Regarding this issue it becomes clear, that one can talk about different kinds of changes in daily life. One is the change of practices like composting, then there is the communication and increased confidence about the own ideas and there is a change in perception, an increased consciousness, awareness and questioning towards certain things. But read yourself from the interviews to get a better picture.

Eliane came by bike from Switzerland to spend three weeks of her holiday in Can Decreix. She lives in a city and has a full time job, where she works with refugees asking for asylum. Here a part of the interview with her after I asked how it was for her to get back home after the weeks in Can Decreix:

E: I actually left Can Decreix a few days earlier than I had planned, because I expected to be really extremely shocked when I am back in Switzerland. [. . .]. And in the beginning *it was really strange, you come home and wash the dishes and you feel bad, because you just let the water go. And somehow I could talk to people about it, what I did [in Can Decreix] and they were interested, but more like you are interested in an alien or so. They really want to hear it, but then they couldn't really comprehend. And it was somehow strange to come back to civilization, you know. Where you, even if you do not want to, you start consuming again, even if you in principle know very clear that you do not need it, but simply because you are out of this bubble. I think it is like a bubble, when you are in Can Decreix or another place like that. You are away from all the impressions and forces.* [. . .] And then yes it was strange to come back to Switzerland and to start consuming again. In the beginning you don't want to consume, but then suddenly it is normal again, that you consume, and then even if I am not a person who buys lots of stuff, but you start again anyway, *and then you have needs again.*

C: To keep up?

E: Yes, it is just – you fit in, in your surroundings. (my translation, emphasis added)

One can imagine the situation Eliane describes. Someone who feels bad because of letting dirty dish wash water out through the sink? Who would not think that this is a bit peculiar, since letting this water out is something ‘modern’¹⁹ people do every day, if they do not have a dishwasher. Who would not see Eliane as behaving somewhat alien in this situation? Why is

¹⁹ I use the term ‘modern’ because it takes together everything which is seen as the appropriate way of dealing with things in today’s western, capitalistic, growth society. I put it in exclamation marks because I disagree with the idea that this model of society is somehow located at the end of a ladder of modernity, where we go from primitive to modern. For further discussion on this topic see e.g Quijano (2000). Another opposition provides Graeber (2004, 46- 53). He argues that ‘modern’ people are not so different from all the others who are or have been.

she thinking, wondering about something so normal? Just to explain her estrangement: in Can Decreix we used a natural soap, so we could give the dish wash water²⁰ to the garden. We were collecting it in a bucket, not letting it down the sink. Not so alien in the end.

Eliane mentions the example of consumption. Consumption in the sense of buying goods has very little importance in Can Decreix, the only regularly consumption is the buying of food on local markets, which only a few volunteers get involved in. Back in Switzerland Eliane experiences consumption as a force. Consumption becomes normal again after the protecting bubble of Can Decreix is gone.

Can Decreix was like a protection from forces and impressions, a place where the false needs could not get her and as we saw before a place where other people hang out who do not consider one alien when one has ideas and thoughts which do not fit in a growth society. Let me jump a bit ahead in the talk:

C: And how was it on the street? I just remember how it was to come to Barcelona the first time that was super weird.

E: I got home quite slow on the bike, so I could process it a bit, but definitely, it was strange and then you have to dress different again, you have to cut your hair the same length. No, that was super weird. *Actually I see the people then also as aliens. What are they doing? They are crazy. Why are they doing that?*

C: And do you still have that feeling?

E: Yes, I still have that a bit, but I have it always a bit.

C: You had that before [coming to Can Decreix], or would you say it came just now?

E: No, I had it before as well, but after Can Decreix – or *maybe now it is more conscious than before*. That I give more thought because of that [experience]. Maybe I question more things than I did before. [. . .] When I talk, it annoyed me already before [before Can Decreix], with someone, with my sister, when I had to talk about her iPhone, but now it annoys me even more, stuff like that. *It seems so banal or I don't understand how people can give value to such things.* (own translation, emphasis added)

So it is not just other people seeing Eliane as alien, but they are strange to her as well. Eliane wonders about what they do, and why. She cannot understand their reasoning, does not share their interests and values. Eliane had this already before coming to Can Decreix, felt a bit estranged, but the experiences in Can Decreix, showed her that it is possible to do things in a

²⁰ Wasting of water and reusing of water will come up more often in the talks. To explain why: In the Mediterranean water is a scarcity. In the area where Can Decreix is located it normally does not rain at all in the summer while it reaches high temperatures. Therefore the water recycling has high importance in Can Decreix.

very different way and this made her question the before normal even more as you can see again in the next section:

C: You said that after you have been in Can Decreix, that this [wondering, questioning] is much more extreme/strong. What do you think, why is it like that? Is it because it is so different here?

E: As I said in the beginning, I saw in Can Decreix that one can live really radically. Things which I did not think about before. [. . .]. Like when I wanted to throw away a piece of plastic somebody came and said: Noooooooo, why do you throw this away?²¹ *That was so self-evident for me before. I never questioned that in this way. Through the radicalism you actually see that there are so many more possibilities than you had thought before.* [. . .]

C: Like opening the eyes?

E: Yes, exactly. (my translation, emphasis added)

Arnau is originally from Barcelona and a bio-scientist. He questions this work and the way of life which comes along with it. Before coming for one month to Can Decreix, he spent time with travels in and outside Europe. What is he saying about Can Decreix and the rest of his world? The following is a part of the interview with him after my question what feelings he connects with Can Decreix:

A: Ah, [. . .] I see what you mean, well it's a mixed feeling, cause I think of the construction of the place, [. . .] you are always sort of or *going back to the asphalts*, where you have the town, where you have the - or I mean its surrounded by, [. . .] like summerhouses [. . .] on the top of the hill or if you go down you go to the town [. . .] but at one point you end up going through this summerhouse areas, no, like I don't know suburban areas, and that's like a kind of thing.^{22, 23}

C: A what?

A: It's not appealing, you *don't feel fully converted to like a new way of living*, because *very easy you collide again with the past way of living*. [. . .] Like the worst example of modern society, which is like I mean summer houses, I don't know, *but I think at the same time it gives you an idea of reality, of like – still the world hasn't changed much in the direction we would like to change.* . . . (emphasis added)

For Arnau Can Decreix is not so much a place to forget about reality. It is too close to it, to “the past way of living” and therefore creates a somehow difficult atmosphere. Arnau sees it negative, because for him it is through this not so much a bubble to forget. But he sees it also

²¹ The person saying “Nooooooo” was probably thinking about how to reuse this piece of plastic.

²² The many cut-outs here, result from word doublings and such, which I cut out to make it easier to read and understand.

²³ For illustration you can go back to the map presented in part 1.2, fig. 1 on page 5

positive since it “gives you an idea of reality” and reminds him that there is still a lot to change.

How was it for him being back in this “past way of living”? Here his answer when I asked how it was for him to go back to Barcelona:

A: That was really hard actually, because going to Switzerland was nice, we went to, how do you call it, dumpster diving, and then we went to the mountains, to a sort of squat, [. . .] so it was not so shocking because I was like still sort of doing the same things. But when I came back here [to Barcelona] and that was much more difficult because *then you realize of many things, which usually you get used to it* – like I don’t know flushing the toilet. It’s like, seriously, we need to put so much water just for going to the toilet, what for? It’s like good water. I could drink that water, no? So, and there is many other things like that, like the fridge, why do we need to have so many things in the fridge, cause it’s like, what for? Can we just buy what we need and or maybe cultivate what we need and then just eat it, no. [. . .] In Can Decreix there is no fridge no, I don’t know, we just don’t need the fridge, no? [. . .] [It is] sort of *like some sort of habits*, no? They are not good for the planet and probably not good for you either, *but just end up doing them, you get used to them and then you forget about them. They are actually not necessary, and I don’t know, that’s like many other accessory things, that I don’t think we really need.*

[. . .]

A: [. . .] we are forgetting what really makes us [. . .] feel like we are alive, no? Which is basically love and some tasty food. But we, I don’t know, we destroy all this and now we think, that now we, through machines overcome our need for love, but I think again it’s another illusion, like more technology is not gonna bring us more love or better food, it’s just gonna bring us worse food and be more alienated. *So we’re just going in the wrong directions and I think people are not realizing that, so ya, coming from Can Decreix and then going back to Barcelona, then is like going back into the past again, no? Where people don’t realize all this.* (emphasis added)

Arnau, like Eliane, wonders about these things which are so normal, searches for reasons, why we do things which are so unreasonable, if viewed from a different, maybe alien, perspective. And after a while for him these things become habits again. From his own experiences he is going out making a statement about the people, who live this past way of living. For him it became obvious that “we are going in the wrong directions”, but other people do not realize it and are forgetting what really counts in life.

How was it for **Luke**, a student in Manchester, who made a bike trip around France and stopped in Can Decreix for two weeks, to come back to where he had been before the summer?

C: So after - when you finished your travels - you came to London, or? Back to England, how was it to stop this kind of different life?

L: Well going back home, that was okay, seeing my family and to relax, [. . .] Then going back to Uni[versity] *was quite a struggle*, trying to go back to a very *regimented way of living* in [. . .] Manchester. And it was, yeah, *it is very very different*.

C: Can you specify this a bit, what is so different? What makes it so different?

L: *The pace of life, I think*. Everyone is rushing to get things done so much. They are so busy, that they cannot even look in each other's faces, when they pass in the street. You look at someone and smile, saying hello and they just look away, trying to hide. They don't wanna get into, involved in anything, that might take of their time. In Can Decreix we had a very different way of living; everyone was very open, talking about their feeling to each other. Obviously a much slower pace, because we don't need to rush in and to work for others people's deadlines. (emphasis added)

For Luke the pace of life makes the difference between Can Decreix and the city. And the fast pace contains stressed people, distance to each other and regimentations. He realized

a couple of years back, that everyone is so stuck in their own little worlds and don't really want to open up to the bigger picture, are scared to do anything different than the norm as well. (from the interview)

The following search for something different, he started after being politicised through the elections in Britain a couple of years back. The experiences he made back then led him to the realization that it is better to work by yourself for alternatives, because politicians will not do it anyway. So Luke came to wwoofing and did it the second summer now. I ask him further:

C: And then after the experience of wwoofing last year or the year before and last summer in Can Decreix. [. . .] What did it mean for you, like do you perceive some change? What did you learn or...?

L: [. . .] *Mainly I learned a lot about myself, about what I believe in and I want my life to be. Don't want to be trapped within the western system, want to be able to live a more sustainable life and do the project which I want to do without being hindered by corporations and governments*

C: [. . .] Before you went for the wwoofing and made these experiences would you have been able to say that? Like, did you do that back then?

L: Not really, definitely not, no. Before *I started really looking on the way the world works, exploring, talking to different people* in different countries who running their own projects, *that's what really helped me to understand how things worked and to see how it can be done differently*. Kind of did inspire to start my own projects with communities or people in my life in Manchester. [. . .] (emphasis added)

The search and the discovering of alternatives showed Luke what he wants and what he does not want and it also helped him to understand a bigger picture. He describes the *western system* as a *trap* and positions his beliefs and goals outside this trap. He sees governments and economy as restricting, while he got to understand how things work and that they can be done differently and better. He also mentions some ideas for projects which followed and to name them, there is for example the idea to create a skill-share project²⁴ or a community garden where everybody gives part of their backyard for the community.

Lots of inspiration for projects and I believe he will work on them. Regarding everyday practices Luke could convince his corridor mates to eat only from dumpster diving and he established a kitchen compost. But he experienced that it is not so easy to convince people. Maybe they understand and agree, but it is a different thing to get them *to do it*:

C: [. . .] What do you tell about Can Decreix to make it – to like best describe it, so like what is the special thing about it? What would you say?

L: I tell them [friends] that we recycled pee and poo. It's always very – a little bit controversial or disgusting. They cannot quite understand why one would do something – to go so far to be sustainable. *They can understand it, but they just can't do it themselves. They wouldn't commit to it.*

C: Do you think they would commit to it, if they would come to Can Decreix?

L: Yeah, I think so. They understand the problems with the world and with the environment and would like to be more sustainable or environmental friendly, but they are kind of, *are scared to do it. Scared to push themselves to do something different and be a bit outside the norm.* (emphasis added)

Luke is struggling to make others change, to get people do stuff which is *outside the norm*, while **Eliane** fits herself in a bit after a while. Did she change practices in her life after being in Can Decreix and what is her motivation or what keeps her from doing something, what makes her fitting herself in again?

C: What would you say, what was your biggest lesson from the three weeks [the time in Can Decreix]? Or what was the most important?

E: Yes, mhh, *I somehow went home with the thought, that I could and should live very different. – And I somehow still have this thought. Actually I haven't put anything in practice. [. . .] I'm about to move and look for a place with Garden [. . .]. And just the biggest lesson is actually, that this idea has a future and that we somehow can change something, if we are many people who start something . . .*

²⁴ An online platform where people say what they can do, state their skills and share them with whom needs them. Luke's idea is to do this for a specific local community

[. . .]

C: you said that you didn't change anything in practice, just that you look for a garden and . . .

E: Didn't really change anything in my life as such. I mean I talked with people about my experiences and such [. . .], *but I did not change anything concrete, because I think as long as I live in the city, in this world, in this society.* As long as I live in the city, I am kind of – it's extremely difficult. I think I would have to live, so that I could live like in Can Decreix, I would have to live more isolated, a little bit away from the city or with people who think similar. I think it is extremely difficult. And if you live in a city you can hardly shift down like that. *I think it is more easy in a place like Can Decreix.* [. . .] I would need an own house in the countryside [. . .], therefore I would need people who share this idea. *I need time and I need I don't know, there are so many barriers, that in the end it is easier to say for the moment I just stay here and earn my money.*

C: With the goal to change sometime in the future?

E: Yes, definitely! (my translation, emphasis added)

Same as Luke she is convinced that change is needed and possible, but for her right now there are too many barriers. The situation she finds herself in is making it not easy.

How was Can Decreix for **Lina**, who is studying in Vienna and who made her first wwoofing experiences in the south of France?

C: You just said, that it [the time in Can Decreix] gave you lots of new ideas/thoughts. Can you elaborate on that a bit?

L: Yes, sure. First of all of course, that *I think more about degrowth* and that I read a few things about it and that *I talked with people about it*, that's like the first thing and then when I think about what I want to do with my life, then this is like an option to live like that. That's what I meant with it, that *it gave me a small idea how it can go or could go.*

C: Did you search for something like that? [. . .] Did you already think there has to be a different way?

L: Yes, sure, otherwise I would not have had the idea to go wwoofing, then I could have gone lying at the beach, yes for sure I looked for something like that.

C: You said you talked with people about it, so you talked more about this kind of stuff after being here [in Can Decreix]?

L: Yes, simply because they ask me what I did in summer and what keeps me busy, yes sure. And yes, *it keeps me busy, did kept me busy, or it still intensely keeps me busy.* It's logical, that I also talk more about it.

C: What keeps you busy?

L: *That it is a really good idea [degrowth]! Perfect kind of and that something changes, that people change something that people want to change something and that one just has to do something on one's own. That is the idea, that there is only change if you do it yourself and not wait for others to start and not wait for the revolution.* (my translation, emphasis added)

Can Decreix gave Lina an idea how an alternative could work and she learned about degrowth; a good idea, which she talks about. She realized that you have to do something if you want change to happen. In contrast to the others she does not experience the city as so regimenting, she does not have to readjust too much. She sees many alternative ways to do things also in the city and does something:

C: And how was it for you to come back? Like to go away from Can Decreix?

L: [. . .] I tried to put some things which I got to know into practice [. . .]

C: And how did it feel? [. . .] How was it to come back to the city?

L: [. . .] here in Vienna, there are also lots of projects, which go kind of in the same direction. Where I somehow engage a bit more now. There is for example a giveshop²⁵, so there are just a place, like a shop, with cloth and stuff and people come and bring and somebody who comes can take them, it is not exchanging, but giving and there I work from time to time now.

C: As volunteer?

L: yes, sure. *And there are many things in this direction.* That's why it wasn't such an extreme readjustment, it's not that I live in a new apartment block and that I have to buy my food in the supermarket, *it was not such a big readjusting, because there are so many alternatives, which you just have to take.*

[. . .]

C: You said now you do that more than before?

L: Yes, definitely. In the 'Schenke', the shop's name here is 'Schenke', I went there before from time to time to bring or to get stuff. And now I thought, since they were looking for people, that when nobody does it, then it won't work. *That's why you just has to do it somehow, engage somewhere and if everybody does that a little, then there is potential, but it's just that everybody has to do something.*

[. . .]

L: What else do you want to know?

C: You can tell me anything related to Can Decreix.

²⁵ In German "Schenkladen". "Schenk" means to give a present. A present is a "Geschenk".

L: [. . .] And all the theory, all this theoretical stuff I always find a bit problematic, because we then think in university we should do this and that different, but in the end, I don't know or we watch a documentary about some kind of natural disaster, but in the end nobody is consequent after. *We think about it and then the lecture is over and then we already forget about it and yes in Can Decreix, there you are really consequent, you know that something goes wrong and you just do it different, no matter if it is less comfortable.* (my translation, emphasis added)

And Lina even says that it is not enough to understand something, to understand that there is something wrong. Again, you also have to do something if you want to change something and that is what she likes about Can Decreix.

Liisa walked from Barcelona, where she had a home and job the last time, to Can Decreix to stay for one week in the summer. Since then her home is everywhere where she is welcomed. And she is welcomed in Can Decreix, so she came back several times and stayed longer. Liisa lives nearly without money, exchanges her time for food and shelter. From time to time she goes to Barcelona, therefore the question:

C: How is it in Barcelona, when you suddenly have all the stuff [fridge, warm water, washing machine etc.]?

L: *I get really nervous when I hear water running.* When I was at a friend's place and she took a shower, I got really nervous from the sound and thought of all the water that just runs away. [. . .] *Later you get used to it a little bit, but in the beginning you are much more sensitive.* Or all the stuff that just gets thrown away. *Things, when one lives in a city, they might be normal, one doesn't realize and suddenly – I realize that – one lives closer with nature and gets more sensitive in this regard, how much we waste without knowing.* (my translation, emphasis added)

For Liisa the realizing is not only in the conscious. She gets nervous, cannot stand it anymore the past way of living. And she sees that for a person living in a city, things, which she now realizes, might be normal, nothing to give a thought on.

Can Decreix gave her more confidence about her ideas and she has influence on friends with whom she stays in Barcelona, while not all of them are as open for her way of life or cannot imagine it as an alternative for themselves:

C: Not long ago²⁶ you told me that lots of your friends are unemployed and that the only solution they see is to find work and that they don't see alternatives.

L: Yes and they don't dare. We got so *imprinted in our minds*; we got so many things incorporated. *And it is, that they don't even imagine to do something else and not to live*

²⁶ Not in the interview, but in a casual conversation Liisa and I had.

like we are told to, to just try what other possibilities there are. (my translation, emphasis added)

That was a lot. What do we have here? What are these experiences? I try to summarize them, to be able to go further from here. I am conscious that it is a reduction (which it is already through my interpretation) and also a mixture of the experiences which different people made, but still as you could see, there are many parallels in the experiences, which I want to highlight, without erasing the diversity.

There is Can Decreix as a different place compared to the interviewees' normal, a different normality I will call it. And those who are coming to this place are different from the people they meet in their 'normal' normality. Meeting alike people with similar ideas and values gives confidence and inspiration to those coming to Can Decreix.

Nearly all interviewees said something about the dominant normality which they are used to. Eliane speaks about different values and missing understanding and imagination. Arnau describes people as not realizing what is going on, they do not realize that something goes wrong. Liisa also speaks of this 'not seeing' when she talks about her friends, who do not see alternatives. And she sees the reason for this in the limited set of options which people get imprinted. Luke talks about people who are stuck in their little world, rushing, who have no time for conversation. His friends are scared to step outside the norm, which would, as he says, be necessary to create the desired change. He also says that you have to try to understand, that one has to make an effort, that it is not obvious how things work. Arnau mentioned something like that as well; he talks about the people who started Can Decreix as "some people who are realizing of it". If one goes back to what Liisa says, how would one realize how things work if one has imprinted not to do so? And even if one understands does not mean that one acts. Lina complains about the lack of going from theory to practice which she meets in University. People talk about problems, but do not try to solve them.

To make it even shorter: there is a bunch of people who realize that something goes wrong with the world around them, and the way people live in certain places, those my interviewees are refereeing to. They come to Can Decreix and experience that there are different ways to do things and see that there are actually other people who share these ideas. They get encouraged that their ideas cannot be too wrong, that they are good and they want change to happen.

But is everybody experiencing Can Decreix like that? - Probably not. And one of my interviewees, **Floraine**, a student of geography who made her first wwoofing experiences in Can Decreix, talked indeed differently about her experiences:

I was a little lost. I had to understand everything by my own. ... It was a shame, because it was a project ... I was a little bit disappointed that when I came it was just an experiment to try and it was not sustainable, but it was great for me to meet a lot of young people from all over Europe, even the world with the Brazilian girl.

Like the others, Floraine liked to meet young people with similar ideas, like her statement further above underlines (see part 3.1.2.2), but for her Can Decreix as such was also disappointing. She expected to come to a place which is perfect sustainable and kind of a degrowth demonstration site²⁷. On the other hand she says:

F: [. . .] It was good for me to see a system who works.

C: You mean to see a system that works, I'm not sure if I understand!?

F: To see an alternative system.

C: Okay

F: The peeing or to eat like vegan. It was great to learn about it. And I was happy to see they did it.

So she also got something out of her time at Can Decreix, to see an alternative system which works. The following part of the interview shows what she experienced as problematic in Can Decreix:

F: [. . .] I think it is good not to be [. . .] - on the marginalization. It's good to stay in the system and *it's good to be balanced between the traditional system and the new way of thinking - degrowth thinking*. Because it's hard for me to think I'm with people, who are in minority and we try to be against the big system. I prefer to be in the system and to say 'No I don't do this, because I'm against that, but I'm as well with you, I with everybody.' Because for example after that experience at Can Decreix, I have been in another farm, it was family and they had a car, house, normal system, they were biologic²⁸, for me it was a good balance between the two ways of thinking. *They begin to change the system, being in the system. They are not out and I think, I felt in Can Decreix we were out of the system. And I didn't feel good.*

[. . .]

C: And what do you think Can Decreix could do then? What do you see is the potential of such a place?

²⁷ I would say it is, if one understands degrowth as a process and not as a fix system

²⁸ Read as "organic", in French organic is "biologique"

F: I think ... huge potential – to *communicate about degrowth*, to show the compost, to show the vegan way of eating, show everything they can do, they *have to show it and communicate a lot about it to have a real impact on public*. (emphasis added)

For Floraine the way Can Decreix works seems not to be the right way. One could say that the philosophies of Can Decreix and Floraine are different. She has a different idea of how change can happen, she suggests a balance between new and old and through communication, showing different techniques and in Can Decreix she does not find this.

Another issue which comes up very clear here is “in” and “out” of the system. Can Decreix is very far from the normal the interviewees are usually confronted with and in this sense all the interviewees were talking about it, just that for others this was positive, while for Floraine it was somehow negative. But still Floraine got encouraged through Can Decreix, she likes the idea of degrowth, she wants change, just she believes in a different way to bring about this change.

In the following quote Arnau points out how big the gap is, which is between the realities the interviewees are usually confronted with and the one Can Decreix represents. He does not speak of inside and outside or system, but about a collision of different realities:

So I think, well, Francois²⁹ knows a lot about degrowth [. . .] how to live in a degrowth society. But *then comes another reality* and all this is new and nobody has lives this exact way ever. And *also seems there are many contradictions with us, this is supposed to be a system that can be adapted by most of us so that it is actual useful, but many people don't want to actually* - the way they are living, it is a collision of cultures, to find a balance. *You actually using zero energy balance, and at the same time having the same commodity*. Ahhh, I don't know how to say. . . (emphasis added)

Yes, what to say? As I understood Arnau in this moment it was something like: It is ridiculous, how can people (in growth society) think like that? Or: How can we ever live sustainable if there are such contradictions between a way which could be ecologically sustainable and the dominant idea of life in growth society? Or: How can we make people, who are caught in growth society, realize what is going on? Or: How can we create change towards a sustainable future for humanity and the planet humans inhabit?

Nearly all my interviewees have a theory how we can make change happen. Luke says that you have to do something yourself, the government will not do anything and you have to step outside the norm. Arnau says we need communities, because we are how we are basically

²⁹ Francois Schneider is part of R&D, researcher, activist and practitioner of degrowth, he is one main initiator of Can Decreix. Mentioned already in note 9.

through imitating each other, so we need communities which are living different and others will copy³⁰. Lina says that we have to be the change, that everybody has to do something and that it will work, when everybody does something. Eliane says that it needs many people and then it is possible to change something. And Floraine says education and a balance between old and new could be the way. I asked some of my interviewees what they think, if it might help if people would come to a place like Can Decreix and they said yes, that could work. But then comes the question: how do people get to go to a place like Can Decreix? And we are back again where we were before, that people, those with a growth mentality, have to realize something.

What would that mean when all people would realize what these people who I interviewed realized? Would it mean that we would have a different normality? A different normality which is realized in practice, in norms, in structure and in the way of being?

The just posed questions and reflections lead me to the theoretical part of this thesis, where I want to understand how norms are established and maintained and from there how they might change. But first I want to go into other empirical material which helps for the understanding. First I shortly present additional material which I got from two of my interviewees and then move to the material which I take to explore my experiences with Can Decreix.

3.2. Additional Material

3.2.1. An Essay

Lina wrote her essay for an university undergraduate course in philosophy and development as part of the Bachelor program “International Development” at the University of Vienna. She discusses the topic of identity in western capitalist society and degrowth as a possibility for reformation (of identity)³¹. It was written after the time Lina stayed in Can Decreix, while the task to write an essay and the idea to bring in her experiences from Can Decreix were already present during her stay. In the essay Lina discusses identity as in a constant process of change and formed by society, by dominant values, by the ruling paradigm and therefore today made by the western capitalistic system. She then introduces degrowth as an alternative, radical

³⁰ This I take from the interview with Arnau, I did not bring in this part of the interview.

³¹ Title in German: “Probier’s mal mit Gemütlichkeit – Die Identitätsbildung in der westlich-kapitalistischen Gesellschaft und Post-Wachstumsökonomie als Möglichkeit der Neugestaltung“

different economic system, way of thinking and living (Benz, 6). As an example how degrowth can work in praxis she introduces Can Decreix and writes how she experienced the place. From this part I quote:

The simple life at Can Decreix meant on the one hand austerity, which then lost more and more importance as time went by and on the other hand it created for me personally an increased attention and valuation for the small things. It also showed me how many things which we see in our everyday lives as indispensable, are actually unnecessary. (ibid., 8; own translation)

Thereafter, in her conclusion, she states that she is shocked how the identity is formed by capitalistic values and she wonders why people live the way they do:

Why do people do that? In principle all humans live voluntarily like that [with capitalistic values], are going to work every morning and in the evening for beer. Nobody is forcing us. Or maybe there is? (ibid., 9, own translation)

After she says about her experiences in Can Decreix:

The good experiences at Can Decreix showed me, how simple it can be to free oneself from the capitalistic persuasion³². (ibid., 9, own translation)

When reading Lina's essay I thought that my thesis might be a bit like an expansion of the essay. I add empirical material to it and make a bigger theoretical discussion. My empirical material shows among other things that Lina is not alone with her experiences, precisely that the so believed normal and possible gets a bit shaken and that one starts to realize, to question and to be freed from certain values, which Lina calls capitalistic persuasion. In terms of theory I try to answer the question she poses in the end, if there is something that forces people to live how they do. Lina developed that norms influence people's identity. I want to know how norms are established and maintained and from there go to the question of how change in norms might be possible.

3.2.2. *And a Blog*

After asking Arnau if he had any notes in a diary from the time in Can Decreix, he gave me the link to his blog called "Dreaming Reality"³³, which he started with his travels in

³² Lina uses the German word "Durchdringung" which would literally translated be something which is sucked in completely, like a sponge full of a fluid or also something which goes through something else like a sword. The meaning is that one is fully taken by an idea and not able to think in any different direction.

³³ Arnau.vina, "Dreaming Reality" (blog), <http://andrewwine.blog.com>

December 2010. The blog entries, which I take into account are those, which were new when Arnau gave me the link to his blog and which are in date close to the time he spent in Can Decreix.

Two things I want to add for the understanding of the blog entries: after Arnau left Can Decreix he went to Barcelona and started a course which dealt with renewable energy. To do this course he lived in the city and had an everyday routine of going to school with public transport early in the morning and coming back in the afternoon.

There are three entries posted on the 28th of September 2012 nearly one month after Arnau had left Can Decreix. One is called “Arguments for Degrowth”³⁴ and deals with humans using long stored and accumulated energy (fossil energy) to be very fast in a very short time. He shows with the help of a metaphor that the fast pace of life in modern society can only work with exploitation. Another blog entry from the same day, called “I had a dream”³⁵ describes a society which is build on values of generosity and sharing, acknowledging the interdependency of humans. In the third blog entry of that day named “Another example of ‘stupid circles of modern society’”³⁶ Arnau shares his reflections on strangers who he meets in the mornings in the subway, who he describes as caught in a circle of work which they do not like and the attempt to forget about this work with alcohol.

In all three blog entries one can read Arnau’s wish for a different normality. One where resources are not exploited, where people share, and where people enjoy their life without “intoxication”³⁶. He reflects on society, how he sees what is going on around him. My interpretation is that he connects his experiences that things could be different with how it is in his direct environment, at the moment of the blog entries, the city of Barcelona. It is difficult to say, what of these reflections are really related to the experiences he made in Can Decreix. For example the sharing he talks about? It could be related to Can Decreix, but it could also be connected to the monastery he stayed before coming to Can Decreix or to both or to any other experience. But what I can say is, that he did experience a different world than the one he meets in the city, and he draws upon these experiences to critique and wonder about what he meets now in a hub of mainstream society.

³⁴ Arnau.vina, “Arguments for Degrowth,” *Dreaming Reality* (blog), September 28, 2012 <http://andrewwine.blog.com/2012/09/28/arguments-for-degrowth/>

³⁵ Arnau.vina, “I had a dream,” *Dreaming Reality* (blog), September 28, 2012 <http://andrewwine.blog.com/2012/09/28/i-had-a-dream/>

³⁶ Arnau.vina, “Another example of ‘stupid circles of modern society’” *Dreaming Reality* (blog), September 28, 2012 <http://andrewwine.blog.com/2012/09/28/another-example-of-stupid-circles-of-modern-society/>

3.3. *My Diary and Notes*

How did I feel entering this huge city? Sensory overload. [. . .] And it makes it easier to take an alien viewpoint. So many things become arbitrary. All the unwritten rules and also written ones. Traffic, sidewalks, traffic lights, cueing, brands on bags, huge houses. All that is, doesn't have to be like it is. It emerged because of some things that happened in the past and that happen today, but everything could be different. (October 7th)

This I wrote after arriving in Barcelona for the first time. I had spent a bit more than two months in Can Decreix. The quote from the arrival in Barcelona contains thoughts I had after getting out of the underground station in Barcelona and finding my way to another station wherefore I had to cross one of the major shopping roads in Barcelona (Passeig de Gràcia).

By that time the idea for this thesis was nearly ripe. I had started thinking of how to study the impact Can Decreix can have on people and in the following days I decided to include myself in the study. After the stay in Barcelona I became a more conscious observer of change which was going on with me.

What happened in the two month before? What experiences make it “easier to take an alien viewpoint”? And what else was I wondering about, what did I experience in Can Decreix?

Already what we do here with our shit and pee wouldn't be possible for a lot of people. Collecting the own shit and using it as compost? It is not new this idea, but it became something you don't do and so impossible for our imagination. When, where and how became it impossible? Even for me, whom I consider as very open for this kind of stuff it will be special to empty the compost toilet the first time, same for the pee. (July 30th)

A couple of month later, when I prepared the interviews and reflected about how it was for me to come to Can Decreix I wrote down this note:

Can Decreix challenges habits. Or does not even challenge, I just change my habits. Maybe because I stay so long? I forgot already what I found astonishing when I came here. I was not shocked by the toilets or the shower. . . (October 16th)

It seems that it really changed my habits and clearly also my perception, my attitude. I could not imagine anymore that I could have been shocked by the compost toilet, but following the entry from July, I was at least thinking about it and considering it a challenge.

There were more things which I found astonishing, which I stumbled upon and thought about:

Working by hand, a very tiresome hard work, many of us [the volunteers] thought about machines. What could we invent, which technique, to make it easier and faster? The percussion drill makes the work much easier and makes it possible to go to the beach. We

can use it because we have energy produced somewhere/sometime else [fossil fuels/uranium], we don't have to produce the energy from calories we eat. (August 1st)

So much time for one hole in a tree trunk, with a machine, this would have gone much faster, but why? Because we have all this energy available, that developed over so many years, that's why we can save some time now. Is anybody [who uses machines all the time, drives a car, bakes a cake, takes a hot shower] conscious about this? (August 9th)

The slow, long and often monotonous work gave time and brain capacity to think about the very action. The work we (people being in Can Decreix) did was the renovation of a house, precisely the work of taking first away old plaster, a mix of sand and some kind of industrial generated glue which created a closed surface and later the application of new plaster made from clay and grass which we harvested locally and recycled sand from the old plaster. Parallel we were building a wood structure from tree trunks made to carry a roof of climbing plants. All the work was done with little or no machines, the only exception was the percussion drill mentioned in the quote, which helped to remove concrete. This little use of machines made any machine which did appear something special and something to think and talk about. The effect of a machine, for us, who were working with it or without it, became visible.

You cannot know how it is without a specific machine if you have never been without this machine. Machines become, through their absence, present in Can Decreix. It is actually possible to transport food for a group of twenty hard working people without using a car, but with the help of two bicycles and public transport. I had never carried so much on a bicycle and I suppose those who were looking at us in the train, on the market and on the street have not either. Another example is the fridge. With a mainly vegan diet, there was no need for a fridge. Who would think that, when a normal kitchen comes with a fridge? It is an option, which is not present, before it becomes present. What about the machine which divides time in hours?

Time again. 'Can Decreix time' [a wwoofers] said today. [. . .] The reason why we spoke about time [was] that we don't remember when people arrived. And we forget which date it is and the time of the day is just passing by. The sun and the heat tell, that it is somehow after noon and before six. (August 24th)

Like my interviewees I experienced Can Decreix as a place different from the normal, different in practices and different in atmosphere. Here another quote related to the atmosphere and to the way people view each other:

I also think there is a Can Decreix dress code: It doesn't matter what you wear and you can wear the same every day. (August 24th)

The decision what to wear, was not so much a decision. It was just the same as yesterday, unless it was too dirty. And the clothes of yesterday were those of the day before and once they were picked because of their practical use. I experienced this as something unusual. Not to think about what I wear, to not have to meet other people's expectations on what I wear. The absence of a norm what to wear. While I am thinking, what would have been the reaction of people if somebody would have showed up with a fancy outfit? So there was some kind of norm, the norm that you wear cloth which can get dirty. A couple of month later I made this note regarding clothing, when I made an attempt to figure out what changed in my perception and being:

[Now] I don't care much how I look when I'm around in the village or go for a hike, I did this before, yes. When I go to a city I still do, not so much when I just come from Can Decreix, but the longer I stay, the more I realize how different I look and the more I want to be in my city clothes. (October 16th)

These quotes are examples, sections of thoughts about living in Can Decreix and about what it does with me. One day I wrote in my diary:

I feel very human at Can Decreix! (August 14th)

What was this feeling about? I remember that this though came to my mind on the way to the beach. I felt human because of what made my everyday being in Can Decreix. What made my everyday being in Can Decreix becomes clear in another note. The note I made after my internship-supervisor Richard Langlais³⁷ had written the following to me as a reaction on my reports from Can Decreix:

. . . and I think that you must be going through a radically fundamental process of 'deconstruction', literally speaking, in all the senses that you have mentioned, in questioning to the very roots all the things we take for granted in contemporary post-industrial society. I can truly imagine how you must go through so many phases of adapting yourself to the situation, since it is so *extremely demanding and unconventional*.³⁸ (August 24th, emphasis added)

I stumbled upon his formulation. How he put it, it sounded like a struggle, which it was not. Here my reaction:

³⁷ Thank you, Richard for this input. It definitely added to my thinking about what was happening.

³⁸ Richard Langlais, email message to author, August 24th, 2012.

When thinking about the adaption to this ‘unconventional’ situation here, like you wrote, I have to say, that this adaption is not so difficult, I feel very human at Can Decreix. I wonder more how it will be to adapt to all conventions again, once my time here [in Can Decreix] is over. All these conventions [in post-industrial society] which seem so normal, ‘naturally’ while living with them, but so arbitrary once left behind and questioned. (August 27th)³⁹

The explanation of what it is to feel human I found in a note in my diary one day after the word “unconventional” was introduced to my reflections:

Is it unconventional, the living here? For me it feels so normal. We sleep, eat and shit, we built shelter, grow food, collect food and building material, stuff we like, find beautiful, make music, art, we communicate, share, live together. Yes, very natural, normal for a human being. But unconventional for a human machine. (August 25th)

When I reflected upon my experiences in Can Decreix the *unfamiliarizing of the familiar* became central to the impacts I could observe on myself. With this I mean the process of something once normal, becoming weird and arbitrary. Through the unconventional living, conventions became visible, questioned and arbitrary. For me it became obvious that things do not have to be like they are. Not that I would have opposed to this before coming to Can Decreix, but being in Can Decreix made it impossible not to see it, not to think it, not to say it and not to live it.

Here a note which hints on another aspect to consider, while evaluating the influence of experiences:

I think, what is central for me is, that I feel a bit alien. I am able to ask why is this like this and not different. It makes it possible for me to see things which were not questionable before as questionable, former normality becomes something unreasonable [. . .]. Now I can of course wonder if it is because I study Human Ecology. It becomes clearer for me that what is today is like it because certain things happened and it could have been all different. Imagine the Inca would have conquered Europe and not the Europeans Southamerica!?! (October 10th)

These thoughts are surely influenced by my studies in Human Ecology and by degrowth literature. I mention this to show what other experiences, the experiences of reading and listening to critical thought influenced my reflections upon the practical experiences in Can Decreix.

After half a year in Can Decreix I made this note:

³⁹ Corinna Burkhart, email message to Richard Langlais, August 27th, 2012.

Now I find it even more normal how I live at Can Decreix and not even astonishing anymore in its abnormality. (January 2nd)

Francois and Liisa⁴⁰, with whom I talked to about this issue, and I got troubles seeing what is special about Can Decreix. We got so used to the way of life there, that having a compost toilet, having no fridge, walking over the mountain to the market and such was nothing to talk about, it was just so normal and would not come to our minds if someone asks how it is at Can Decreix.

The time in Can Decreix had an end for me. I had talked about ‘going back to normal’ with my interviewees, so how was it for me to ‘go back to normal’?

Over 600 kilometres of traffic jam.

Cars in all directions I listen and view.

How could I think that the way I grew up is the norm?

Maybe I am less alienated from nature, from the planet, from the universe, but I am more alienated from everything else I knew before.

(February 7th)

These are random thoughts I noted down one week after I had left Can Decreix, staying where I grew up. It reflects situations I found myself in and comments I heard, stuff I was thinking about.

But even if it was difficult in the beginning, it works and the feeling of being in the wrong place becomes less strong, disappears from the surface. Writing this thesis probably channelizes these feelings and wonderings and at this point I move to the theoretical discussion.

4. *Theoretical Discussion*

With the help of different theories and scholars, I here attempt to give an explanation to my own and my interviewees' experiences in Can Decreix, and link these experiences to a broader context. Therefore I aim to build up an explanation first of how persons and society⁴¹ are connected (4.1) and to see what role norms play in this connection (4.1.1). Then I take Can

⁴⁰ Francois Schneider again, see footnote 29 and Liisa who is one of the interviewees

⁴¹ What I understand as society I explain in the following paragraphs

Decreix as an example, to examine the question of how a different normality is established (4.1.2). After this I discuss how experiences are connected to subjectivities⁴² (4.2). Once this framework is built up I focus on the experience of practices which challenge norms and a possible defamiliarization accompanying this experience (4.4). I then explore the power of norms and the role defamiliarization can have in changing society (4.5).

Within the theoretical discussion I continuously connect back to the empirical material, to hint on interview sections which are related to the presented arguments. In the text I give the page number where the section starts, often it is not a specific word or sentence but the whole issue of the section which I refer to.

4.1. Society as the Frame of Possibilities

In this first part of the theoretical discussion I describe one model of society that helps explaining the case of this study. As already mentioned in the very beginning of the methodological part (2.1) I base this study on a critical realist perspective. Above I stated this in relation to what I can research, but here I want to discuss what a critical realist perspective means for a theory of change and for a model of society. To this purpose I focus on the chapter “on the Society/Person Connection” in “The Possibility of Naturalism” by Roy Bhaskar ([1979] 2005, 34-41), who is an important thinker in the tradition of critical realism.

Bhaskar describes society as a process. Society is not some superstructure, which acts upon reality. Bhaskar ([1979] 2005) also disagrees with the idea, that humans would create society⁴³. He formulates his point in the following way:

But it is no longer true to say that agents *create* it [society]. Rather one must say: they *reproduce* or *transform* it. [. . .] It is not the product of their activity (any more, I shall argue, than human action is completely determined by it). Society stands to individuals, then, as something they never make, but that exists only in virtue of their activity. (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 36-37; emphasis in original)

This means that any human is born into the ongoing process which is society and that through acting, the human reproduces or transforms this pattern of activities which is society. Therefore one cannot describe the society/person connection on a linear axis, where one

⁴² Another term which I define in the discussion.

⁴³ Here Bhaskar refers to what he calls “Weberian stereotype ‘Voluntarism’” (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, e.g. 34)

would be there before the other, it is rather that the persons' activities taken collectively *are* society. There is regularity to the process which can be understood “as an ensemble of structure, practice and conventions” (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 39). In this description, structure is not the state or some kind of institution, but as Porpora (1998, 344) describes: “social structure is a nexus of connections among” human actors. In this nexus of connections human actors exercise practices and conventions and therefore shape society, which mutually shapes them.

Before thinking further about transformation or change of society, I want to pose the question: what does the existence of society mean for a person? Since an individual is born in an already existing society it is not only, that it cannot be created by the individual, but “it is equally clear that society is a necessary condition for any intentional human act at all” (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 37). What Bhaskar says here, highlights the importance society has for a human action to become meaningful.

To make this point more clear I want to have a look on the case discussed in this thesis. The existing society where all interviewees and I were born into, is a growth society. We grew up in a society oriented towards the goal of economic growth. This growth society comes with a framework of meaning which is reflected in “practice, structure and conventions.” (ibid.: 39). Growth society develops over time through people's acts which reproduce and transform it. Society is and gives the “*condition* for any intentional human act at all” (ibid.) preformed in this society. The emphasis on condition makes clear, that this growth society makes human actions that take place in it, possible. On the one hand making possible in an enabling sense, but on the other hand making possible in a restricting sense. To illustrate this dual aspect I take Bhaskar's example of grammar:

The rules of grammar, like natural structures, impose *limits* on the speech acts we can perform, but they do not *determine* our performances. This conception thus preserves the status of human agency, while doing away with the myth of creation. [. . .] And in so doing it allows us to see that necessity in social life operates in the last instance via the intentional activity of agents. (ibid., 39; emphasis in original)

What becomes clear in this quote is that for Bhaskar even if society limits human action, it still does not completely determine human action. There is room for decisions for the individual, but within certain limits or opportunities. Society can then be understood as a frame of possibilities in which humans can act. This frame is maintained by just these humans

acting inside it in certain regular ways. Humans are relating to each other and their environment⁴⁴ and are doing this in a particular way. This particular way is organized through rules, norms and conventions. It has to be done in a shared way to make understanding and interaction possible.

4.1.1. Practical Impossibility

Back to the case of this study: Can Decreix's initiators aim to accept ecological limits and to question social ones. A question that arises is: are social limits questioned in Can Decreix, if one takes social limits in the sense Bhaskar is describing them? In the previous chapter I brought in growth society as a frame of possibilities, which sets what is practical possible to do in this society. Next to having enabling effects, like creating a shared understanding, there is also another side to it.

Bhaskar takes the following quote from Durkheim. The quote is useful even if Durkheim draws different conclusions out of the described situation (see Bhaskar [1979] 2005):

I am not obliged to speak French with my fellow-countrymen nor to use the legal currency, but I cannot possibly do otherwise. If I tried to escape this necessity, my attempt would fail miserably. As an industrialist I am free to apply the technical methods of former centuries, but by doing so I should invite certain ruin. Even when I free myself from these rules and violate them successfully, I am always compelled to struggle with them. When finally overcome, they make their constraining power felt by the resistance they offer. (Durkheim in Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 43)

Next to the enabling role of rules and norms this reflection highlights the limited room an individual has to move. These limits are not about the theoretical impossibility of the individual to perform an action or any theoretical impossibility of its environment; the restriction comes from a practical impossibility, which can be understood as a condition of a social system at a given time, that renders certain options practical realizable and others not. The example of language is good because it highlights, that doing something else than the norm would mean, that the individual who is acting in a different way, would simply not be understood and therefore would be in a sense socially dead, as long as s/he keeps on acting in

⁴⁴ The term environment is meant to include everything (human and non human; natural or constructed; gaseous, fluid, solid; concrete and abstract; everything and also what is considered not to be a thing) that stands in relation to the individual

that different way. Language rules are partly written down today, and organized in a formal way. However there are many other rules and norms, which are unwritten, but still breaking them can cause social exclusion.

Marshall Sahlins (1976, 170-176) writes about an edibility/inedibility code in American society. Certain animals (pig, cow) are considered to be edible and others (dog) not, and further certain parts of animals are more valuable (steak), while others are less (intestines). It is obvious, that the edible/inedible distinction is not based on a theoretical impossibility for a human to eat certain meat, but on norms dominant in the society discussed. Next to just being one of the many theoretical possibilities, once it is the norm, this code has great influence on the world. Marcus and Fischer (1986, 143), discussing Sahlins' example, formulate: "Our production of feed grains and cattle would change, and so too our international trade, if we primarily ate dogs" (ibid.). One can imagine many other scenarios and what change they would bring. Imagine for example that eating fruits from overseas would be considered a sin. How different would supermarket shelves look like or the livelihood of fruit farmers worldwide?

What has this to do with the question, if socially constructed limits are questioned in Can Decreix? Let me take the example of the compost toilet, which came up in several interviews (see p. 26, 31) and is also exemplified in the analysis of my experiences in Can Decreix (see p. 36). It certainly would be theoretically possible for most of us to build a compost toilet in the own garden or even on the balcony. But still let me ask you: could you, not just theoretically, but really, build a compost toilet in your own backyard? And for those of you, who live more or less far out in the countryside, imagine living in city or village, could you build a compost toilet in your backyard? The answer is very likely: no. I wonder, why it is possible, and not just possible, but normal for you to flush a toilet with drinking water, while it is, even if you would want to, impossible to transform human excrements to valuable compost? This is only one example. There are many more: Why is it normal to have an immense reservoir of clothes and experienced as impossible to go with the same clothes – clean and appropriate for the weather – every day (see p. 22, 378)? Why is it normal to have an individual car and why is it seen as something weird if one uses a bicycle for transportation (see p. 36)? Or why is it normal to not reuse water which was used to clean the dishes to feed plants (see p. 21)? Or why is it normal, to build houses from materials which are undegradable, in some cases toxic and produced with enormous use of energy, when materials to build houses are locally available, which are nontoxic, degradable, and useable with only

human power⁴⁵(see p. 36)? There are many more questions that I could bring up here as examples. All of them are of course connected to the special situation I describe here. It is about what is normal in a growth society and what is normal in the situations my interviewees and I are usually exposed to, in contrast to the specific practices in Can Decreix. But still the not simple answer to the questions which I hope to find can be understood more generally.

One might carry the thought that some rules make sense and make interaction possible and that grammar rules are not so bad after all. And what does this have to do with compost toilets anyways? What is essential at this point, is that, all these rules are bound in a society, which is, to say it once again,

an articulated ensemble of tendencies and power which, unlike natural ones, exist only as long as they (or at least some of them) are being exercised; are exercised in the last instance via the intentional activity of human beings; (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 42).

These tendencies and powers are reproduced by the activity of human beings and the way these tendencies are, has real impact on human and other beings in the respective society and beyond. As long as certain tendencies are exercised other tendencies, other practices and other theoretical possibilities will stay practically impossible such as compost toilets in backyards.

Let me come back to the question, if Can Decreix succeeds in questioning socially constructed limits. It does, I argue. In Can Decreix these practices which I just located outside the social limits of a 'modern' society, are practiced. They are made possible. And they are normal in this place. Remember Eliane, who could not throw away a piece of plastic, certainly something normal in growth society, but something against the norms in Can Decreix (see p. 23). In Can Decreix other practices are considered normal, a different set of norms and rules, and therefore a different normality, is lived. Another framework is the guiding principle behind practices, the idea of degrowth and of a non exploitive more satisfying life.

Even if I am talking about norms, which might sound like something 'only in people's heads', these norms have impact on the physical environment, according to norms a 'normal' environment develops. Which human actions are 'normal human actions' influences the shape of the environment and through this makes certain actions possible for an individual and others not. For example that there are water toilets, that one can easily buy toilet cleaning tools and fluids, but no carbon material, which one would need to mix with excrements to

⁴⁵ I'm leaving out the aesthetic aspect at this point, but it definitely belongs to the discussion of what is considered normal and appropriate to do.

compost them or that there are rather highways than bicycle overland routes. Norms are not just something non material, but they are manifested in the material structure that constitutes our environment in within we act. And to come back to the example taken from Sahlins, norms are not just mirrored in what people eat, but also in what one can find in the supermarket and further they influence the livelihood of farmers on the opposite side of the globe.

4.1.2. *Island of Different Normality*

How is a normality, or the different normality in Can Deceix established? To develop an answer to these questions I go back to Bhaskar, who says about human practice⁴⁶:

. . . praxis is both work, that is, conscious *production*⁴⁷, and (*normally* unconscious) *reproduction* of the conditions of production, that is society. (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 37-38; emphasis added on “normally”)

Here Bhaskar brings in consciousness and the unconscious. He says that human action and praxis is somehow conscious in the sense of what is produced as direct tangible outcome, while the effect this action has on the conditions for further human action, on society is normally unconscious. Reproduction of society and also gradual change in society is according to Bhaskar usually not a process characterized by “purposefulness, intentionality and [. . .] self-consciousness” (ibid.).

. . . [W]hen social forms change, the explanation will not *normally* lie in the desires of agents to change them that way, though as a very important theoretical and political limit it *may* do so. (ibid., emphasis added on “normally”)

This quote describes both unintentional change and unintentional reproduction of society. An example for this can be marriage. A couple who decides to marry will most likely not do this to reproduce the concept of the nuclear family; or to take another example, someone who exercises a paid job does this usually for other reasons than to keep up the capitalistic economy (ibid.).

⁴⁶ Bhaskar uses the word praxis. I stay with practice, since this is what I am using in the rest of my discussion. In the way it is used here, by me and by Bhaskar, there is no real difference. There could be in a different theoretical context.

⁴⁷ Bhaskar does not refer to production only in a material sense.

Now, what does this theory mean for the case of Can Decreix? In Can Decreix people (those who started Can Decreix and developed the idea for it) want to make a change, a change in concrete actions, because they perceive growth society and many actions performed in it as flawed. They establish Can Decreix and change practices which they experienced as wrong. This could for example be the establishment of a compost toilet and the abolishment of the water toilet. The motivations behind the actions in Can Decreix are, as stated by the initiators, to degrow the impact, or exploitation of other humans and nature. The ideas of degrowth, rather than growth, is the guiding principle. In Can Decreix, to be able to perform these different concrete practices, physical structure is changed, practice is changed and the mental structures, norms, and social limits are changed. From my observation I can say that the change of practice was conscious and that people want to collectively create a place where these practices are possible and where other values and norms are exercised.

Therefore Bhaskar's theory for change fits because of his emphasis on possible exceptions (see the two quotes above). In the quotes Bhaskar describes what is *normally* happening, but this means that change can also happen in different ways. People in Can Decreix do change practices consciously and parallel also the framework of meaning in Can Decreix. However in Can Decreix, people also want to change society, the larger framework. The concrete way the change happens might be unconscious, in the sense that nobody gets up in the morning saying "Today I build a compost toilet, to change the norms". But the motivation for changing practices lies in the aim to promote a change in the dominant way of live. Change in society is in the case of Can Decreix intended and the changes of normality in Can Decreix "lie in the desire of agents to change them that way" (ibid.).

To consider at this point are literally the boundaries of this change. I am only talking about one specific small place. Can Decreix had to be established as I wrote above. In a public place these changes would not have been possible. A place had to be created which is, in terms of legality, considered private⁴⁸. In this place the actors decided consciously to do things differently and to establish a different normality. But it is an island. The different normality is only present inside Can Decreix. Outside Can Decreix one meets the still existing social limits discussed above. And since no island is an island one meets them also inside Can Decreix. As just mentioned it is a non-public, a private space: 'the land had to be bought'. While one can wonder how land can be owned, it is normal in 'modern' society and therefore being located

⁴⁸ Private only in the sense of legality; Can Decreix is in its policy open to the public and nobody would defend Can Decreix as "private property"

on private land is the only legal possibility for Can Decreix to exist the way it does. Another example is the need for money in Can Decreix, for example to buy food. Ideal would be greater self sufficiency and trade with other local producers, which is practically impossible, since there are not many local producers to trade with. This is certainly a theoretical possibility, but to be practically possible would require collective change at a much larger scale. Here Can Decreix's position is analogous to the one of an individual in society as discussed above.

Can Decreix is constrained by pre-existing structures. E.g. that the houses were once built according to growth society standards and the land transformed in the same way, now have to be transformed towards a physical structure which makes a degrowth life possible, e.g. make the land arable to be able to grow more food. Or the mentioned issue of owning land. One can either buy land and be inside the legal frame or occupy land and always be threatened to be removed. It sounds more like a theoretical problem, but it is also material. There is money, the estate register, contracts and in the end fences and police.

Further Can Decreix is also connected to pre-existing structures in a more abstract sense. Only coming from a growth society one can speak of a degrowth society. This puts emphasis on the idea discussed in the very beginning of this theoretical discussion, that humans do not create society, but reproduce or transform it. Any act, idea, change, any "real subjectivity requires conditions, resources and media for the creative subject to act" (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 40), they do not emerge from a nowhere. Degrowth is motivated through problems detected in growth society.

To summarize this first part of the theoretical discussion: the model taken from Bhaskar explains the relation between Can Decreix and the normality of 'modern' society which is surrounding it and to an extent penetrating it. Can Decreix can be explained as a place with a changed normality, changed through the change of practices, while built onto and bound into growth society. As emphasized with the example taken from Sahlins, norms do not only have impact on those exercising them but also on nature and every human who is affected by the "normal practices".

With this discussion not all questions are answered and new questions emerge. There is the question of why questioning growth normality like I did with examples from Can Decreix, is something that does not happen often. It seems to be forgotten that what is normal is set by humans, and that there are actually other possibilities to deal with the world. This simply does

not seem to be present in people's imagination. Maybe an answer can be developed by looking under what conditions this questioning can happen. Obviously, taking evidence from the interviews presented in this thesis, there are people who are questioning norms and are aware that they are just norms. To understand how people might develop such an attitude, such a view on the world, I look on the connection the experiences of my interviewees might have with their subjectivity.

4.2. *Degrowth Subjectivities*

The just presented arguments show, how human actions are bound into society. That practices are restricted and enabled while there is room for human agency. But I have not put emphasis on the question what humans who are bound in such a society are able to imagine, what questions they ask and what possibilities they see.

Agrawal (2005) discusses in his book *Environmentality*⁴⁹, specifically in the Chapter about making of subjects (ibid.: 164-200), how social practice has influence on imagination and subjectivities. I am building on Agrawal to find a framework where simple practices can function as causes for changes in subjectivity, and where practices are not just effects of subjectivities. I understand subjectivities as the guiding framework of meaning a person has for his/her actions, where this framework is not to be seen as an object of consciousness or like a guideline, but as an unconscious reference of meaning, of right and wrong, of normal and abnormal, of practical possible and impossible.

To introduce his argument about the making of environmental subjects Agrawal starts with Anderson who says that "power groups were able to colonize the very imaginations of the people" (ibid., 168). He then takes into account scholars of resistance, who say quite the opposite, which is that subjects are able to resist the colonisation of their imagination, of their consciousness (ibid., 169). With these two conflicting conclusions Agrawal goes on through bringing in the importance of practice. He writes:

[b]ut closer attention to social practices can lead to species of theorising that would be more tightly connected to *the social ground where imagination is always born* and, reciprocally, which imagination always influences. (ibid., 170-171; emphasis added).

⁴⁹ Environmentality is a concept build on Foucault's concept of Governmentality (Agrawal 2005).

On this ‘social ground’ Agrawal centres his argumentation. He focuses on social practices, introduced by policy decisions, and their influences on subjects which are effected by these policies. His conclusion about the making of environmental subjects (ibid., 164-200) can basically be divided in to two parts. Described in a very short and reduced way, one part is that engagement in the environment⁵⁰ creates environmental subjects (ibid.). These are people “for whom the environment constitutes a critical domain of thought and action” (ibid., 16). The other part is, that policies, which make individuals engage in the practices favoured by the policy, have influence on a local basis and that they consequently can be useful instruments to govern people (ibid., 164-200). In combining these two parts Agrawals says that “environmental *practice* [. . .] is the key link between the regulatory rule that government is all about and imaginations that characterize particular subjects” (ibid., 167; emphasis added). I take Agrawal’s theory so far as that practice is influencing people’s imagination, but I see that practices are not only guided by regulatory rule from above, but by the person’s subjectivity, and further by the practical possibilities a person has and perceives to have. Seeing Can Decreix as an island of different normality where a different range of practices is possible, it becomes interesting to explore what influence the experience of engaging in these practices has on the subjectivity.

4.2.1. *Experiences and Subjectivity*

The first part I discussed above can be applied to my observations in Can Decreix. Agrawal gives more detail about his conclusions about the connection of practices and subjectivities. He writes that people’s actions might not always follow their beliefs, but that beliefs sometimes might follow action (Agrawal 2005, 166). His case study shows, that if action is taken because of other motivations like short term interests, beliefs can change according to an involvement in these practices (ibid.). Transferred to my case I can say that other people and I came to Can Decreix for different reasons, but none of us really knew what concrete practices we would get engaged in and how to do what we did. From the interviews I know that all of us had somehow the wish to downshift, to live simple, were looking for an alternative way to live, were disappointed by what is going on in growth society or were looking explicitly for a degrowth way of living. So one could argue that all of us were acting

⁵⁰ In contrast to how I defined “environment” in footnote 44, Agrawal refers to non-human nature, when he uses the term environment (Agrawal 2005).

according to our beliefs, but for all of us the act of coming to Can Decreix was an act according to each's beliefs, while to the actual concrete practices in Can Decreix we came about in a different way. Not in a forced, top-down way like in the case of Agrawal, but rather through having the opportunity to do practices different or to do different practices and also through getting to know that there are other ways of doing something. As the interviews and the notes in my diary show, these practices and the experience of this different normality had a big influence on our imagination, on our subjectivities.

Due to the short time period of this study it is not possible to speak about long term impacts these experiences might have and how they shape the way of life of each of us, but the short time study shows some influence which is likely to not be just forgotten. Here I am thinking of for example Lina's engagement in the giveshop (see p. 28), Luke's changes in daily life and his plans for the future (see p. 25, 26) or Liisa's low tolerance towards the wasting of water (see p. 29). Another example is Eliane, who has increasing troubles to understand other people's interests and values (see p. 22). These examples are of changed practices and changes in beliefs, while acting according to some changed beliefs becomes, due to the above discussed social impossibilities outside Can Decreix, impossible. I also count as changes in subjectivities changes in the way people perceive their environment⁵¹. Eliane's feeling of being an alien or being surrounded by aliens (see p. 22) or Arnau's feeling of going to a past way of living (see p. 23).

Agrawal goes further into detail and basically argues that unexpected outcomes of practices or one could say unexpected experiences achieved by engagement in practices can cause a reconsideration of "existing preferences and subjectivities" (Agrawal 2005, 166) and further an incorporation into people's mentality of "new propensities to act and think about the world" (ibid., 167). As unexpected outcomes one can see examples like Eliane who said she got to know things which she had never thought of before (see p. 23) or Lina who writes in her essay that the practices were restricting in the beginning, but then made her give importance to small things (see part 3.2.1). Agrawal further writes:

Even if only a very small proportion of one's daily experiences undermine existing understandings, over a relatively short period there may be ample opportunities to arrive at subject positions quite different from those held earlier. (Agrawal 2005, 167)

⁵¹ This is again environment how I define it, see footnote 44.

In the quote it strikes me that, in contrast to what Agrawal writes, the proportion of one's daily experiences, which undermined existing understandings, was fairly high in Can Decreix. So for example the daily experience of living without a fridge, of using bikes for transportation, of reusing dishwater for the garden and of using a soap which is a fertiliser for plants. Experiences with these practices undermine existing understandings and influence subject positions as for example the already mentioned worry about water by Liisa (see p. 29), the thoughts about water-reuse and consumption by Eliane (see p. 21) or Arnau's realization about fridges, toilets (see p. 24), people around him and city life in general (see part 3.2.2). Further what Luke mentions about work, the working not for money or other people's deadlines (see p. 25) and the slower pace of life. People change their position towards practices, ideas, convictions and their environment.

To summarize the just developed connection of *being* in Can Decreix and the emergence of subjects: people's engagement influences their attitude and behaviour towards what they engage in. A certain subjectivity is not only the framework through which a subject gives meaning to actions, but also actions influences the subjectivity. In Can Decreix people engage with degrowth, voluntary simplicity and alternative building to use more abstract terms or (water) recycling, compost toilets, non monetary relations etc. to speak about concrete issues. The individuals, let me call them 'growth or capitalist critical' subjects, might become through engaging in degrowth practices, 'degrowth subjects'. A conclusion from this discussion is that what subjects emerge is connected to what experiences are made, taking now into account the discussion in part 4.1.-4.1.2, it becomes clear that what is crucial for what subjectivities develop is what experiences are practical possible to be made in a society.

4.3. *Note on Relational Experiences*

Important to remember at this point is, that I take the discussed experiences as experiences among many other experiences which make a subject. And it is rather an ongoing process of becoming than that there ever would be a finished subject. I am not arguing that people *were* 'growth or capitalist critical subjects' before they came to Can Decreix and *are* 'degrowth subjects' after being in Can Decreix. That would be too easy and also in a sense scary since it would imply, that one can put anybody in a place for about three weeks and after the person will be completely different than before. Rather I see people's experiences in Can Decreix as experienced in relation to other experiences people made before and since. And all these

experiences are constantly influencing the subject. People who are coming to Can Decreix have made experiences which made them be interested in alternatives to what is normal in growth society and not just made them being interested, but also made them want to engage in these. This engagement and the resulting experiences make them again engage in other things and experience these things in a different way.

4.4. *Degrowth Subjectivities in Growth Society*

As discussed above, Can Decreix is a small place and surrounded and impacted by growth normality. Also most of the people who stayed in Can Decreix stayed only for a limited amount of time. Outside and after Can Decreix people are to different extents reengaged in growth society. I am wondering now what happens to, let me formulate it like this, a ‘degrowth subject’ who meets ‘growth society’? To answer this question, I first show what happens to those ‘degrowth subjects’ who are part of this study, when they meet ‘growth society’. After this I bring in different ideas about defamiliarization and discuss in what way the experiences discussed in this thesis are experiences of defamiliarization.

The interviews show that certain behaviour, which would correspond to the changed subjectivity, is not practical possible outside Can Decreix and the ‘degrowth subject’ ends up in conflicting situations. Further it becomes clear that changed values and perceptions are not understood by people who do not share the experiences of the interviewees (there are of course exceptions, people who do understand). An example for this can be Eliane, who feels alien (see p. 21), or Luke and the reaction of his friends (see p. 189, 26). Degrowth practices and imagination do not fit inside the norms of growth society. To keep on with the degrowth practices and to act according to degrowth ideas, Luke says for example, that he has to step outside the norms (see p. 25) and Eliane experiences the norms as so strong that she steps back into them⁵² (see p. 21, 26). These considerations highlight again the importance practical possibility has for the actions of individuals. They provoke to think further about the relation of experience and subjectivity, about what influence experience of contrast or of being outside the norm has on the subject.

⁵² This in and out is probably not as conscious and concrete as it sounds here.

4.4.1. Normality or Absurdity

My interviewees and I did not only experience differences in practice or that certain practices become practically impossible outside the Can Decreix normality. Another aspect is the ‘realizing’. With ‘realizing’ I mean that we got somehow defamiliarized. What was before experienced as normal becomes absurd and questionable. Conventions become seen as what they are – just conventions and not, as they might have appeared before, unchangeable rules. The thought that everything could be different is present and increases the uncomfortable feeling with the now absurd values dominant in growth society. These statements are, as I can see from the interviews, to different degrees valid for all my interviewees and fit my own experiences.

One could argue that this is related to the fact that I conducted these interviews, but not only the examples of Arnau’s and Lina’s independent formulated texts show that I do not play the role of the ‘awareness riser’. Also in the interviews it becomes evident that people make these experiences of ‘realizing’ independent from my questions. Examples for what I am describing here are e.g. the (new) consciousness that “another world” is possible (see part 3.1.2.1); that there are so many things which can be done different (see e.g. part 3.1.2.1); there is critique on the guiding principles in ‘modern’ society: the fast pace of life (Luke, see p. 25), people who lose the sense of what is really important in life (Arnau, see p. 234) or Liisa’s worries about her friends disability to see all the possibilities she sees (see p. 29). Another example is Eliane’s comment about her seeing other people as aliens and her wondering about what they are doing (see p. 22) and she describes that even if this happened to her also before coming to Can Decreix that she now experiences this alienation more extreme. Also Arnau speaks about things which he realizes after coming back from Can Decreix, things which he normally was used to (see p. 24) and Lina writes in her essay that small things have importance again (see part 3.2.1). Luke describes his experiences as helping him to see how things work and how they can be done differently (see p. 25) and again Liisa further describes herself as more sensitive to her impact after living, as she says, closer to nature (see p. 29). From my experiences I can tell similar stories: e.g. the role of machines in ‘modern’ society, their impact for the user and for all others involved in its lifecycle (see p. 36) and so on.

Why do I bring in all these examples from my empirical material? Because it describes, what sounds very much like a defamiliarization. Many scholars inside and outside the degrowth movement (e.g. Latouche (2009), Hornborg (2001), Graeber (2013), Naess (2002)) write

about the need for a defamiliarization. They name it in different ways (decolonize (e.g. Latouche (2009)), defamiliarize (e.g. Hornborg 2001), reimagine (e.g. Graeber 2013), ideological change (e.g. Naess (2002)), but mean in a wider sense the same. They criticise ‘modern’ growth society and the ruling paradigms and demand a paradigm shift to make fundamental changes possible. What is the defamiliarization about, which is demanded and what defamiliarization happens to people passing through Can Decreix? How are both related? These questions I want to discuss in the next section.

4.4.2. *Defamiliarizing Theory in Theory*

I start with one scholar, who is discussing defamiliarization. In Alf Hornborg’s book “The power of the Machine” (2001) the call for defamiliarization is very present. Here I just pick one quote dealing with this issue:

[. . .] we cannot understand or hope to solve global problems of solidarity and survival unless we are prepared to experience a radical “defamiliarization” (Marcus and Fischer 1986) vis-à-vis conventional categories of economics and technology. What is required is a major epistemological or paradigmatic shift. (Hornborg 2001, 89)

Throughout his book Hornborg stays inside the academic frame when he discusses defamiliarization. The concepts and categories he focuses on with his call are theoretical conceptions of society which are penetrated by growth religion. Of course these conceptions are present not just in academia but in media, politics and everyday life and are as Hornborg says to most of us “as natural as water to fish” (ibid., 87). Still, he calls for different *theoretical* understandings and does not go further into applications for practical defamiliarization. He only describes a way of defamiliarization in academia. More precisely he focuses on Anthropology and on one of its “central ambitions” which is to “‘defamiliarize’ aspects of Western civilization by means of ‘cross-cultural juxtaposition’” (ibid., 40). The word ‘defamiliarize’ and the idea of ‘cross-cultural juxtaposition’ Hornborg takes from Marcus and Fischer (1986, 138), to whom I proceed after following Hornborg’s ‘fish’ for a moment.

To be able to defamiliarize, Hornborg says, one has to be like a flying fish, jumping out of the water to be able to see what is normally invisible just as the water is for the fish (Hornborg 2011). “We must, in other words, both immerse ourselves in our life-worlds *and* see them

from the outside. [. . .] [F]or it is *at a distance* that human meanings assume the appearance of ‘constructions’” (Hornborg 2001, 52-53; emphasis in original). This means not to lose contact, not to become alienated, but also not to forget about the bigger setting we belong to. One should permit oneself “the naïveté of a first encounter” (ibid.: 43). What he says is that it is possible to see the ‘water’, the norms, concepts and understandings which influence pretty much everything and that this seeing or defamiliarization is needed to change concepts and norms. All this happens for Hornborg on a theoretical level, one thinks and defamiliarizes oneself through thinking. One further produces texts to show other people that we all should defamiliarize our conceptions of the world. Hornborg also demands, as a first step towards a different thinking, a reformulation of vocabulary (e.g. ibid., 109). But still, he stays inside theory and academia and therefore leaves me with the question of how to change vocabulary or how to change conceptions and understandings in practice on an everyday level?

George Marcus and Michael Fischer describe in more detail how it works for anthropologists, the defamiliarization, and how anthropology uses “portraits of other cultural patterns to reflect self-critically on our own ways, [to disrupt] common sense and [to make] us reexamine our taken-for-granted assumptions” (1986, 1). They describe two different ways of defamiliarizing: first “epistemological critique” which is based on raising “havoc with our settled ways of thinking and conceptualization” (ibid., 138) and often ends up close to satire; second “cross-cultural juxtaposing” which is a more empirical “matching of ethnography abroad with ethnography at home” (ibid.). To defamiliarize, the anthropologist has then to contrast common ‘modern’ or growth understandings with different understandings which are working in a different setting. One goal achievable with this technique would be to show that the ‘modern’ growth reality is “as constructed and non-‘natural’” (ibid.) as any other reality.

Again, this might work inside University and convinces scholars who want to be convinced, but as David Graeber writes in a similar context, those who do not want to be convinced will say that these examples of working alternatives are so different from the situation in the ‘modern’ world that nobody can really compare them, nor that it is possible to learn anything from them (Graeber 2004, 41). Hornborg also points on this paradox with saying that “plausible, alternatives images” (Hornborg 2001, 128) are needed to successfully show the arbitrariness of the familiar, while those taken from e.g. the “Bemba and Bisa” (ibid.) will not be considered as plausible (ibid.).

4.4.3. Defamiliarizing through Practice

What has all this to do with the defamiliarization in Can Decreix which I described further above (4.4.1)? I argue that people who are passing through Can Decreix make a cross-cultural experience or better a cross-normality experience. The problem pointed out by Graeber and also Hornborg is that the other normality, which anthropologists often refer to, is abroad, in a faraway place. It kind of belongs to the ‘modern’ normal that there are other places which are different; it is not so shocking and sometimes gets more the face of a spectacle than of a cultural critique. Everything is different in these faraway places: the way people grow up, the way they interact, their values, their history and their experiential backgrounds. In contrast, Can Decreix is an island in the (former) familiar⁵³ and is a transformation of the former familiar. The star pattern is the same, for some the climate and the local language are the same, people who live in the place and who come to the place have similar experiential backgrounds, grew up in the same growth society. The surrounding is familiar, there is the big train station, the summerhouses, one goes regularly “back to the asphalts” (see p. 23). And also in Can Decreix the “old” familiar is still visible, the water toilets are standing around, the degraded land, the house is only partly transformed. To make it short: many things are familiar and still it is so strikingly different.

The defamiliarization in Can Decreix is happening on an everyday level. What is defamiliarized are everyday practices and values rather than theoretical conceptions of ‘labour’, ‘money’ or ‘technology’. Is this challenging on an everyday level connected to the challenging of theoretical conceptions Hornborg is talking about? To some extent they are, I argue. Hornborg writes:

The conception I have been trying to defamiliarize is the notion of the machine as a “productive” force, or of industrial “production” as such. To ascribe a generative force of its own to a specific moment in an economic process is an act of signification [. . .]. From a *local* vantage point, the machine may signify “productivity,” “efficiency,” and “progress,” whereas from a *global* perspective it would be more appropriate to let it signify “destruction,” “waste,” and “exploitation.” (Hornborg 2001, 128; emphasis in original)

⁵³ For those whose experiences I include in this study. It would be interesting to see how Can Decreix would be for somebody who grew up in a different setting.

Hornborg defamiliarizes through writing about all this arbitrariness, while in *Can Decreix* we talked about these topics, despite nobody was reading or had read Hornborg's book at that point. While experiencing the contrast of not having machines it became obvious what they do in our former everyday settings. Also the energy used by machines becomes experienceable when one has to bring it up by oneself. Here I am referring to the building process described on page 36. Is not this the needed jump out of the water? And the water is still present, it is very close. It is the concrete which is being unbuilt, deconstructed and transformed into waste and reusable sand, the asphalt, the train station and so on. Through the closeness of *Can Decreix* to the "past way of living" – also called 'modernity' – a strong contrast emerges for those people engaging in *Can Decreix* and in any sense of the word contrast makes things visible.

What is made visible is that humankind can live in many possible ways. Many practices, which seemed to have to be done necessarily like they are done in 'modern' society, can actually easily be done different. Further it becomes visible that norms are norms and not natural laws. What is special about the defamiliarization I describe is that it happens through practice, rather than through argumentation. If one would bring up *Can Decreix* as an example that things can be done different, it would very likely be considered just as far off and therefore as invalid as the example of the "Bemba and Bisa".

This part of the discussion brings me to the point where I want to look on the larger context in which this study can be seen. Besides writing that we need to "reimagine the very nature of what [for example] work is" (Graeber 2013) and that we "have to change our accustomed ways of thinking" (ibid.), David Graeber writes how important it is for the maintenance of (power) structures, that nobody reimagines anything (ibid.). This needs further explanation.

4.5. Power of Normality

In the first part of the discussion, in the discussion of the connections between society and individual and further the discussion of the connection of experience and subjectivity, the power which norms have over people's actions can already be seen.

If, as argued on page 45 (this thesis), 'tendencies and power' have to be exercised to exist and this exercise is lastly depended on the '*intentional* activity of human beings' then, to

understand reproduction and, intended as well as unintended, change of society, one has to understand where intentions come from. One line of argumentation is already explored, which is, that experiences influence subjectivity and then also intentions and that intentions then again influence what one experiences.

What is also explored, in this discussion so far, is that the theoretical possibilities humans have are vast, but that there are norms, which make certain actions practically possible and others practically impossible. In the last part of the discussion I developed, that these norms are usually hidden, in the sense that what they constitute is just the ‘normal’, ‘normal environment’, ‘normal behaviour’, ‘normal way of life’ and not seen as constructed norms. The normal is seen as something outside the thought potential agency of humans. Further, I argued, that this familiar norms can be defamiliarized through experiences of unfamiliar practices and situations.

The dominant normality is not seen as such, or rather, it is seen as just normal and not as something which could be different. Eric Wolf puts the same issue in another way: “Ideologies codify these distinctions [distinctions between people, categorization] not merely as instrumental aspects of social relations, but grounded in the essence of the universe – in the nature of nature, in the nature of human nature, and the nature of society” ([1982] 2010, 389). The normal, in this quote socially constructed differences between people, is not seen as something which is actually based on an ideology, but as belonging to the universe.

Wolf’s thoughts on the topic connect to the question I posed earlier, about why people normally do not come to question the seemingly normal. With describing why some people come to question the normal it becomes clear, that one way is to experience that there can be another normality. Wolf states in the same context, that

[t]he development of an overall hegemonic pattern or “design for living” is not so much the victory of a collective cognitive logic or aesthetic impulse as the development of redundancy – the continuous repetition, in diverse instrumental domains, of the same basic proposition regarding the nature of constructed reality. (Wolf [1982] 2010, 388)

Who would, if asked how a room looks like, speak of the white walls? Who would, if asked to describe a city, speak of the roads, cars and houses? One speaks about a green city, when it has more parks, or trees than ‘normal’ cities. Who would say that there are water toilets in the university? Nobody, who is used to them, nobody, for whom this is normal, for whom this is the ‘nature’ and not a ‘the nature of a constructed reality’. And somebody who would, would

probably be considered to be weird or absurd, like my interviewees and I experienced. Alternative perceptions, “alternative categories”, are assigned “to the realm of disorder and chaos, to render them socially and symbolically invisible” (Wolf [1982] 2010, 388).

Who is doing that? Certainly there are some people, who, due to the process called society, are in a position that they have power over other people. But they did not, I argue drawing on Bhaskar, take this power from somewhere and are since then the rulers. Following Bhaskar’s theory and critical realism the power cannot be converged in somebody’s hands. It is rather a situation which is because of what has been and what is produced by human beings.

So rather than thinking about a certain group of people who might have some power over norms, I suggest thinking about what power norms have over people. The power is given to the norms by people. People believe in the norms and forget that they are human made⁵⁴. This is not a call for the abolishment of norms, but for the recognition that norms are made by humans and are there to regulate human interaction.

Graeber writes in a very recent text (2013) that financial capitalism failed according to its own measures, but still it is able to persist, very much through the persistent idea that there is no other way to go. He writes:

We are talking about the murdering of dreams, the imposition of an apparatus of hopelessness, designed to squelch any sense of an alternative future (Graeber 2013).

Seeing this constructed hopelessness described by Graeber, and the big arbitrariness described before by Hornborg as an overreaching problem, it is reasonable to call for something that would solve this problem. Graeber explicitly calls it a “revolution in common sense” and says that there are endless “pieces of conventional wisdom” that are to be challenged (ibid.). Graeber talks about renegotiating definitions. While I again wonder how one actually does this in practice.

Taking evidence from this study it should be clear by now, that by making experiences of contrast in regard to one’s normal experiences, definitions which were held before can become challenged. Therefore a way for people, who want to promote the challenging of norms, would be to construct a space where life centres around different ideas, where different practices are exercised, which give rise to challenging experiences for those engaging in them.

⁵⁴ I take inspiration from David Graeber and his discussion about fetishism (Graeber 2005).

Where and how exactly alternatives emerge from in the first place somebody else has to answer; I can only say, that the recognition, that the so called normal is a constructed normality might be an important part of it. Just as Graeber says on the question about how humans are able to create new things:

The key factor would appear to be, [. . .] whether one has the capacity to at least occasionally step into some overarching perspective from which the machinery is visible, and one can see that all these apparently fixed objects are really part of an ongoing process of construction. (2005, 431)

Just imagine that a ‘critical mass’⁵⁵ of people would reach this overarching perspective. The deepest rooted conventions would lay exposed open for any reimagination. And this is, I argue, not only theoretically possible.

5. *Conclusions*

What are the conclusions of this study? Are the research questions answered? My aim was to explore connections between experiences, subjectivities and society and this exploration stretches over the whole discussion. Throughout the discussion answers to the sub-questions are given. I developed an explanation of the case of Can Decreix and with this explanation the answers are given rather than that they are answered one by one. In the following three paragraphs I give summarized answers to the three questions (for aim and questions see p. 1):

(1) Where are ‘norms’ in the connections between experiences, subjectivity and society and how do they influence these connections? My discussion shows that human interaction in society is regulated through norms. I describe the structure that the process of society takes, as a frame of possibilities. Certain practices and experiences are practically possible to be made by an actor in this society and others not. Norms play a regulating role in reproducing this frame. Acting outside the frame is against the norm and causes social exclusion or even social death. The frame of possibilities is normally not an object of consciousness, but rather a simultaneous physical and mental structure that frames the objects of conscious thought.

⁵⁵ A term borrowed from nuclear physics, which refers to the smallest amount of material needed for a nuclear chain reaction. It is widely used to indicate a sufficient number needed to make something happen which sustains and grows after.

(2) How can norms be changed and what happens if they are changed (radically)? My study shows that, with a change of norms along with practices, a place and people bound change of normality can happen. Taking into account the experiences of my interviewees, one can see what happens to people who live in such a changed normality. The influence the discussed cross-normality experience has on people's subjectivity, I describe as defamiliarization. The former normal becomes absurd. Norms are then seen as what they are, constructions to regulate human interaction, rather than natural laws. A change towards a different world becomes perceived as possible.

(3) What does a challenge of norms mean, having the goal of social change in mind? Taking the answers to the first and the second question together, I conclude that if one wants to actively promote social change, one way is to establish a place where a different normality is experienceable. As argued before (4.2.1) experiences influence subjectivities, but inside a frame of possibilities only certain experiences are practically possible to be made (question 1). In a place with a different normality different experiences are made, which provoke a challenging of the former normality (question 2). If as argued in part 4.5 a defamiliarization is a step on the way to social change then the promotion of cross-normality experiences, which provoke such a defamiliarization, is a useful strategy. Important is the individual experience which creates this personal defamiliarization, which is much more direct than a defamiliarization which can be caused by theoretical argumentations.

Besides these conclusions there are also limitations which emerged throughout the study. The topic of normality, society, subjectivity and imagination, which I have taken on, is a complex field and many words have been written connected to it. I have only discussed few of these ideas in this thesis and more perspectives could be brought into the discussion. Another limitation could be seen in my methodological approach, since I only interviewed six individuals. But it is sufficient for my aim, which is to establish an in-depth understanding of experiences which *are made* by the specific individuals who are part of this study. I can only infer that similar experiences might happen to a lot of people in similar situations and it would be interesting to take this issue on in further studies and cases. My ability to only do interviews in English and German closed the opportunity to talk to many other volunteers in Can Decreix and also highly influenced my sample. All my interviewees have an academic background, even if volunteers with various backgrounds came to Can Decreix. Local volunteers not involved in academia speak rather Castellano, Catalan or French. From casual

talks I can guess that people with other backgrounds made similar experiences, but this is something which could be further explored.

One issue, which could also be further examined, is how for example work or time is conceptualized in Can Decreix. Since I describe it as a different normality and as a place where people through practices get new perceptions of concepts, then it would be interesting to see, how do these new concepts look like? And of course one could compare to those dominant in growth society. A question to think of could be for example: what motivates work in Can Decreix? It is not the earning of money, not the goal to grow (the own property, capital, or the GDP) and so on.

Another aspect which is very present throughout the thesis, but which is not explicitly discussed like that, is how important society is for individuals on an emotional level. Values emerge, when they are shared by people. One alone cannot hold up a set of values, one alone is not a society. All the interviewees were saying this. It was for them something to highlight about Can Decreix. They could meet people, who share their ideas; they met people who do not consider these unconventional ideas crazy or absurd. As soon as there are other people who share the sense of what is absurd and what not, the perception of the self changes from being weird to being one of others.

6. *Literature*

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