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ROB HOPKINS

Imagination taking power

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A dazzlingly delicious taste of the future in Liège

Something really amazing is happening in Liège in Belgium. [I was last there 4 years ago](#), where I gave talks and did meetings in support of Liege en Transition, and to attend a meeting to promote a project they had just launched called '**Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liégeoise**' ('The Liège Food Belt'). When I was there, their event brought together academics, politicians, farmers, and many other people with an interest in food, to explore the practicalities of a coordinated relocalisation of the food system. That was four years ago. Now I've been back after four years and, as I said, something really amazing is happening in Liège...

I had been invited by Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liégeoise (CATL) to be the Patron of their '[Nourrir Liège](#)' festival, a 10 day event designed to raise the profile of their work. When I last visited, a cooperative vineyard, [Vin de Liège](#) (of which more later), had just raised €2 million in shares, much to everyone's surprise and delight. That was the first one, which gave CATL the confidence that this was possible.



Now, in 2018, 14 cooperatives exist under the CATL banner, 10 of which have been created after the official launch of the CATL in Nov. 2013. These include Les Petits Producteurs (two shops), Fungi up, a co-op growing mushrooms on coffee waste, Rayon 9, another using bicycles to distribute goods around the city, Cycle en Terre, a seed saving coop, Les Compagnons de la Terre, a farm growing a wide diversity of produce, La Brasserie Coopérative Liégeoise, a cooperative brewery, Vin du Pays de Herve, a second vineyard in the same model as Vin de Liège, ADM Bio, transforming the vegetables of seven local farmer to reach collectivities kitchens, HesbiCoop, a food cooperative, Marguerite Happy Cow, a local fair trade milk transformation project, plus three

distribution coops, Point Ferme, La Coopérative Ardente et Le Temps des Cerises, which are forming, together with Les Petits producteurs, a network of local food distribution. And running like a thread through all of these is Le Val'Heureux, the region's local currency.

So what I want to explore in this post is what this ecosystem of co-operatives looks like, to introduce you to some of the key players, to how the imagination runs through this and to how this looks to be scaling up.

To kick us off, I sat down one evening with **Christian Jonet**, one of the people who has been constant in CATL since the beginning, and who now co-ordinates this network of coops, producers, researchers, institutions and associations (my full conversation with him is below). He told me that when Liege en Transition started there were lots of working groups, but the ones that lasted were the money and the food groups.



With Christian Jonet of CATL (left) and Pascal Hennen, manager of Les Petits Producteurs, and the €5 Les Val'Hereux note which features CATL.

It became clear that they were not going to Transition the city just with volunteers, and that what they needed was to change the scale and, as he put it, “professionalise the movement”. Belgium has lost 100,000 agricultural jobs since 1990, and some new thinking was clearly needed.



The image shows a SoundCloud audio player interface. At the top left is a pink circular play button icon. To its right, the text reads "Rob Hopkins" and "Christian Jonet on Ceinture Aliment-Ter...". In the top right corner, there is a "SOUNDCLOUD" logo and a "Share" button. Below the text is a waveform visualization of the audio track. At the bottom right of the waveform, a small black box displays the number "24:50". In the bottom left corner of the player area, there is a link for "Cookie policy". In the bottom right corner, the number "452" is displayed, likely representing the number of plays or likes.

They started with an event in November 2013 where they hired a big venue, invited everyone in the city with an interest in food, and asked them the question “what if within one generation the majority of food consumed in Liège was grown locally in the best ecological and social conditions?” Good question. One after another people took the mike and identified elements of what needed to happen access to land, finance, seeds, know-how, etc. The first co-op to get running was Compagnons de la Terre, and then the brewery and the others started to follow.



The event that launched CATL.

“What was most important”, Christian told me, “was that we created a narrative”:

“It was about mobilising citizens for the transition of the food system (fixing the environment with agroecology, empowering the community for the good of future generations, creating local jobs, etc), in three complementary ways. First evidently, it was about voting with your consumption, being a virtuous consumer. But it was also about saying if you can, invest in local economy. And if you invest, then also get involved in running things, volunteer, get your hands dirty. And it was a message that really resonated with people”.

And it worked. Together with Vin de Liège (which raised €3 million on its own),

the 14 co-ops have nearly raised €5 million in investment from local people so far.

I was curious as to what, for Christian, were the elements behind the project moving from the 'What If?' stage into action. "Firstly, we had a good narrative. CATL is based on the narrative of projecting the future and how it could be, and also the fact that Vin de Liège had been a success gave the whole initiative a foundation of confidence. Each new project inspires more confidence in the next one". Now, the good narrative was only just a start:

*"Many people had to step up to imagine, create and run collectively all of these cooperatives, and each time it meant hard work. Some projects have been lots of fun, but some others have really been about blood, sweat and tears, and holding on strong until the boat was afloat". The fact that a local endogenous dynamic can be created must also not be taken for granted. "People in other localities have tried to launch projects similar to Ceinture Aliment-Terre, mimicking the methodology used in Liège, gathering the local food chain actors in an **open space** to draw a collective strategy for local food system transition, but if in the immediate continuation you don't create projects in which people can put their enthusiasm, energy and money; nothing just happens."*



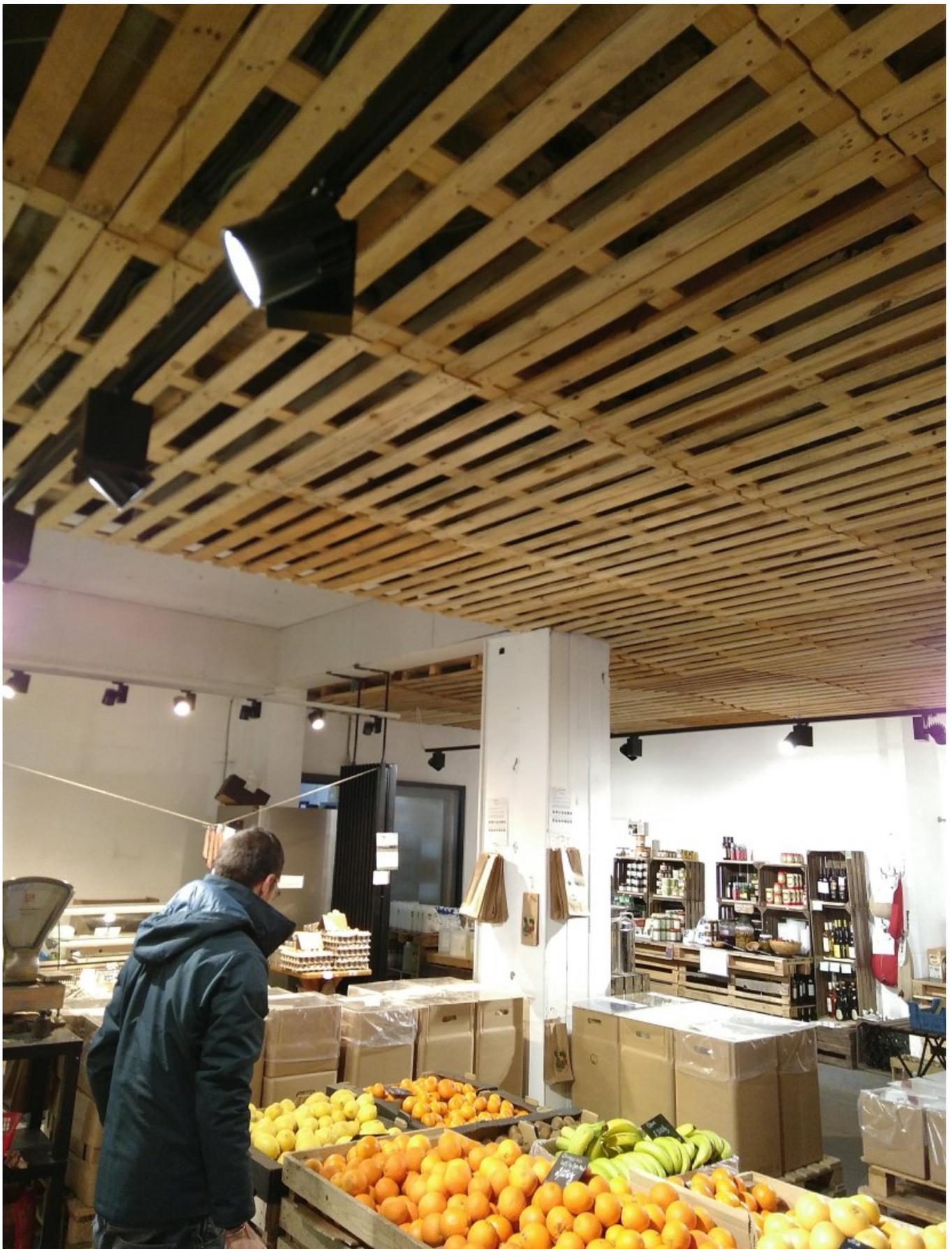
Les Petits Producteurs.

The first of the co-ops that we visited was **Les Petits Producteurs**, a shop in the centre of the city that has been open for just over a year. I asked the shop's manager, **Pascal Hennen**, to tell me what it is (you can hear our full conversation below). He told me, “Les Petits Producteurs’ is a co-operative of 200 co-operators (members of the co-op), around 15 local farmers plus a few further afield (they source their oranges from a farm in Sicily for example), 2 shops, 7 workers and lots of energy”.

A screenshot of a SoundCloud audio player. At the top left is a red play button icon. To its right, the text reads 'Rob Hopkins' and 'Pascal Hennen of Les Petits Producteurs'. On the top right, there is a SoundCloud logo and a 'Share' button. Below the text is a black waveform representing the audio track. In the bottom right corner of the waveform area, the number '16:26' is displayed. At the very bottom left of the player area, the text 'Cookie policy' is visible. At the bottom right, the number '384' is shown.

When they found the shop unit, they had just 5 weeks to transform it into a

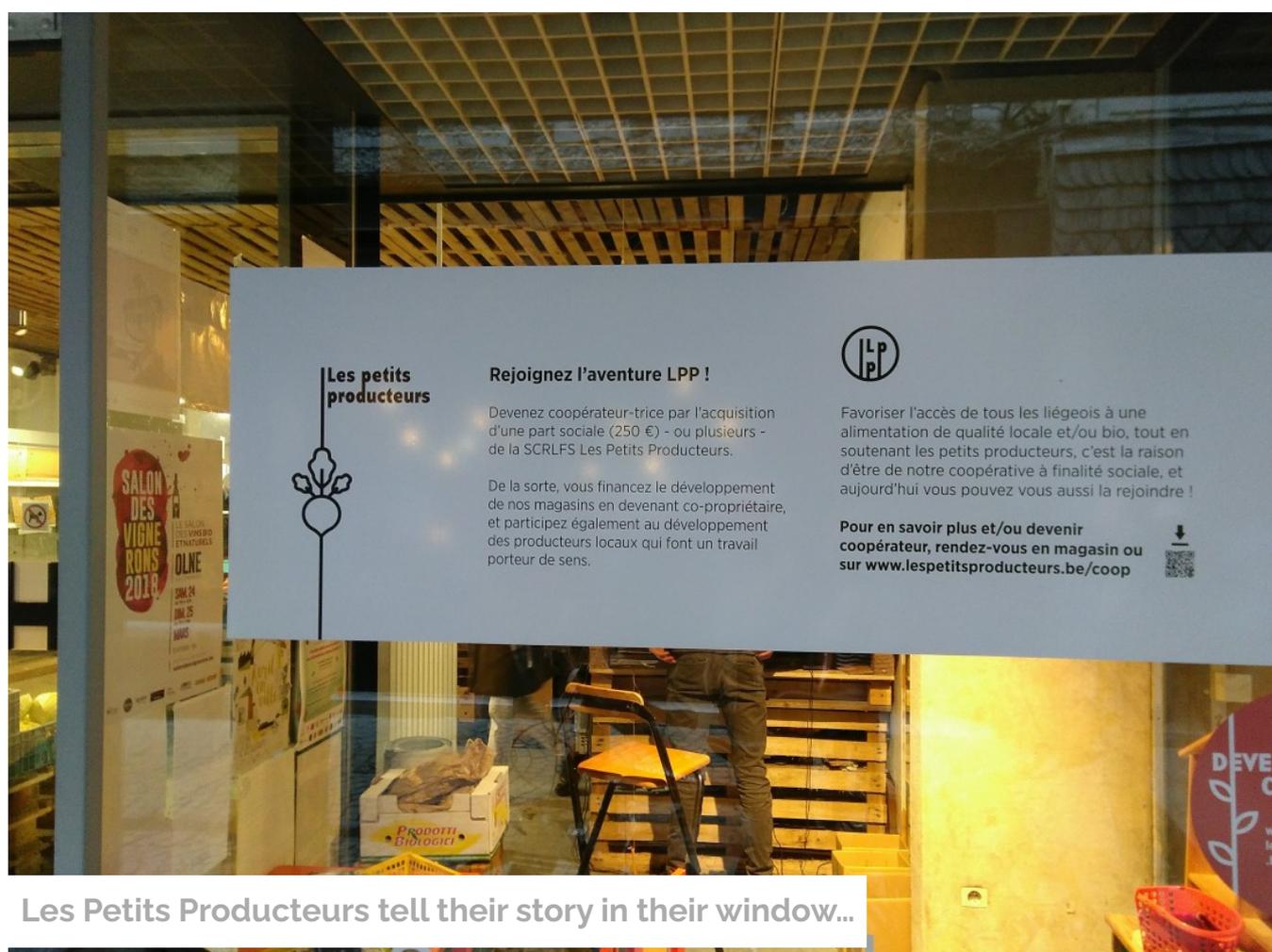
shop, something they achieved by mobilising their friends, wielding sledgehammers and paintbrushes. It's a very simple concept. A big space, painted white, with pallets on the ceiling, pallets on the floor, food displayed on pallets, in boxes, with a note about the farmer and their story.



They did a financial forecast with a worse case, middle and best case scenario. The shop has been such a runaway success that they are exceeding the best case scenario, and it is already a challenge managing storing stock and the

queues that form in the shop. “All positive problems to have...”, Pascal told me.

They raised €100,000 in shares from local people, although the shop took off so fast that they didn't end up using much of it. So, I asked, what's the money for? “For us, this is an agriculture project, not just a shop. The goal is to reinvest profits and exceeding capital for the farmers. Will we use it to buy land? To invest in helping new farmers? In buying buildings to help farmers?” It has been such a success that a second shop is already open elsewhere in the city, and Pascal dreams of opening “15 shops, perhaps 10? We never expected to be so successful, never”, he told me.



Les petits producteurs

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Les Petits Producteurs tell their story in their window...

They have a principle of not negotiating the farmer on price, and of keeping costs low. So they spent the minimum on fitting the shop out, and have a policy “one need, one product”. So they stock one kind of jam, one kind of beer and so on, the whole shop containing less than 200 products. Les Petits Producteurs is mostly organic, and their prices for organic produce are, on average, 15% lower

than in Carrefour. Part of their staff's job is to tell the stories of where the food comes from.

Being part of CATL really helps. It provides the links between the different co-ops, and they trade with each other, and share resources. Where might it all go, I wondered? "If we have 20 stores, we will reach the point where the supermarkets will start to say "oh shit". We would love to fragilise (great word) them locally".

I asked Christian about what a difference community investment makes for a business like Les Petits Producteurs. "As I said, in CATL we have created beautiful stories, we must now create beautiful stories of success, and Les Petits Producteurs is one of them. It is not easy to have a profitable business in food. This is about inventing new economic models and testing them until they work".



The second CATL coop we visited, on an organic farm on the edge of Liège, was

Brasserie Cooperative Liégeoise, a small brewery brewing 2 different types of organic beers using barley grown in the region, wheat grown on the organic farm where they're based, and Belgian hops. They are planning to grow all their hops on the farm and are expecting their first harvest this year.



Raphaël Lambois, the brewer at Brasserie Coopérative Liégeoise.





They are currently brewing on a scale at which it is difficult to be profitable, so they are looking to double capacity soon, although within the same space.

Raphaël Lamblois, who showed us round, told me that it was very useful to be part of CATL, as the other members are some of their best customers, and it really helps the business to have good connections with the town.

Rob Hopkins
Raphaël Lambois on Brasserie Coopérat...

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We also paid a visit to **Vin de Liege**, in many ways the co-op which gave confidence to what followed that this kind of citizen investor-led approach is possible. Vin de Liege is amazing. We were taken on a tour around the

production facilities and also the cellar. It's impressive to walk around and think that 3 years ago none of it existed. Now it is a state-of-the-art facility, producing 12 wines, with about 30 acres of vines already planted, and plans to at least double that. They are already winning awards.



Their cellar was fascinating, hearing how they commission each barrel so it is a particular mix of different woods, so that the woods are able to impart certain flavours and tannins to the wine. Creating a vineyard is a long term investment, they take many years to be profitable. As a testament to having a dream, telling a powerful story and creating something amazing, Vin de Liege is a remarkable thing.





Where it is all starting to get very interesting is in the impact that CATL is having on the city's local government. While in Liege, I met with the city's Mayor and councillor responsible for agriculture, and it is clear that something is really shifting. As Christian told me:

"Now the local authorities are stepping up and saying wow, this is really interesting. They can see that what we are doing is good for society, can create jobs, build social links between people, and it is good for health and for the environment. I think that in the future, new projects will be a combination of the forces of the public and citizen-led initiatives. This week the City of Liège launched a new project called CreaFarm. We had many discussions with them about what was blocking agricultural Transition, and one of the key themes was

the price of land.

They were convinced they could help because they own a lot of land in and around the city which is not really used properly. So they have identified all the sites, characterised the kinds of uses they'd be best for, and tested them for contamination (as a former industrial city, land contamination is not uncommon). They have then invited suggestions from people who would like to use the land, and created a panel to decide applications, which we are part of, and once they've decided, the land will be made available at low rents".

Talking to the Mayor it is clear that for him, CATL is what the city sees as being its future story. Ten years ago, the city was set to move towards being a "smart city". "Now we want to be a Transition City" he told me.



Members of Nourrir Liege, CATL and the Liege municipality sharing breakfast.

I was fascinated to get a sense from Christian of how the projects underway and their success had impacted his, and others', sense of the future, how

imaginative and positive they felt about it. “A lot of people were very pessimistic”, he told me:

“Someone who’s been changed by this? Me! I had been very worried and concerned about the possibility of an imminent social collapse. It was very hard. My therapy has been doing these positive projects. I still believe the future might not be very bright. But being active means I feel much better. For me, it’s the connection with other people that changed everything for me, and for many others too!! The antidote was to do something. My sense is that when you read about collapse, you collapse yourself. Doing this work sets you into movement”.

Sitting in the back office at Les Petits Producteurs, Pascal is quietly excited about the increasing involvement of the municipality. “At the beginning, the municipality laughed, but now they think we are quite interesting. We are doing so well, that the municipality will have to follow – I don’t think they have a choice actually! I think it’s going to work. I’m positive because I am a pragmatic guy. I manage a shop. They can’t say no, because we exist and we are making things...”



Pascal Hennen.

The following day, in Louvain-le-Neuve, Olivier de Schutter gave a presentation in which he used the term ‘Partner State’, his vision of the state getting alongside bottom-up community action, allowing the ideas and inspiration to rise up from below, and seeing their role as being to remove obstacles and to help things to flourish. My strong sense from everyone I spoke to in Liege was that that looks like the very model that is unfolding in Liege.

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