

1. Projects



Following one's path, the desire to slow down in Ariège

Ongoing research
Begin: March 2022
End: December 2024

Rural areas are often described as being challenging in terms of mobility, and the recent Yellow Vests movement revealed just how sensitive the issue of accessing various resources is: jobs, health, education, culture, etc. Yet, more and more people are moving to rural areas with the aspiration to change lifestyles, and more specifically to slow down and live more locally. So what do these desired lifestyles in rural areas look like and how do they materialise?

Research participants

- Céline Gaille
- Christophe Imbert
- William Berthomière

The global health crisis of 2020 led to a significant increase in the desire to change living environments (more space, closer to nature). Many social science studies are now attempting to contextualise these residential migrations to rural areas, to understand if they are driven by amenities, entrepreneurship, or deceleration. This last kind in particular seems to underpin a diverse set of relocations that William Berthomière, Céline Gaille and Christophe Imbert have been observing since 2017 in Ariège, where the pursuit of a different activity is less of a priority than the desire for a new relationship to time.

Research objective

For the research team - two geographers and a photographer - the aim of this project is to gain a detailed understanding of what these notions of deceleration and slowing down cover, as well as the transformations (demographic, social, economic) that must be carried out in order to meet these aspirations: How do we slow down? How does one put into practice such a lifestyle change and different rhythm of life? They will base their work on the life courses of people living in the Couserans region in Ariège. While it is easy to link these life choices to ideologies or utopias, it is much harder to account for their implementation. Yet it is by following how life projects are established over several years that the researchers and the photographer hope to understand how people redefine their relationship to mobility in rural areas: the persistence of dependence, the innovation and creation of new social links, the honing of new skills, etc.

The dozen or so respondents will each fall into one or more of the four modes of deceleration identified beforehand by the researchers and the photographer:

- Becoming rural (rhythm of life and rural sociability)
- Making home (concrete implementation of deceleration projects)
- Making expression (artistic and cultural projects)
- Becoming school (training places, awareness raising)

By regularly monitoring these deceleration projects, the research team will gather information on how these people's relationship to mobility is transformed in isolated rural areas. These relationships change through the relocation of professional and domestic activity ("being rural" and "being home"), through thoughtful mobility choices, and even through utopian creations of new modes of transport ("being expression" and "being school").

The main theme of the research will be to explore which relationships to mobility are maintained in order to achieve these projects. What place is there for ecological concern? What relationship to time emerges from these modal choices? What role do weak ties play (good advice and tips, hitchhiking, informal carpooling, etc.)? What uses of digital tools? The main hypothesis is that people cobble together different practices in a complex system and make hybrid choices according to spatial and temporal constraints that are hard to avoid (for instance, regularly commuting by car for a salaried job that is necessary for a household budget or to finance a project).

Methodology

The methodology of this research is based on an ethnographic approach which involves regularly monitoring respondents over several years.

Respondents will have a "deceleration notebook" in which, between each visit, they will report their activities, movements, visits and also when they receive people from outside the region. The notebooks won't have any particular formal constraints, with their content to be discussed beforehand with each respondent according to what suits them best (narrative diaries, drawings, collages, time-budget tables, etc.). An interview will be carried out at each visit. The notebooks and interviews will lead to individual sensitive maps, which record the location of trips and activities as well as the location of resources for travel. More specifically, they will examine the respondents' relationship to the urban area of Toulouse (to see the link between deceleration and the break with the urban environment).

In addition to this subjective dimension, an inventory of the transport offer in Ariège and its evolution over the last 20 years will be carried out through interviews with public actors from the local authorities (Couserans and Arize-Lèze). Based on this census, they will draw up a statistical mapping of transport accessibility, as well as a mapping of business and real estate dynamics. All of this statistical documentation will allow them to contextualise the respondents' lifestyle choices, and more particularly the territorial nature of their activities and modal choices.

The results of this research project are expected by the end of 2024, and will take the form of a research report, a photographic collection and 4 visual and audio creations ("slideshows").

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

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Hitchhiking

Classic hitchhiking, an informal mode of transportation, has been supplanted by widespread car ownership and the development of carpooling. "Local" hitchhiking, which has been developing since the mid-2000s, is a safe variation of classic hitchhiking for short daily trips.

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