

## 1. Videos

# Do environmental values challenge mobility practices?

By  
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03 April 2023

How much does ecological awareness shape our travel practices by car, train and plane? Analysing environmental values alongside travel habits reveals a complex reality. From the car as a neglected part of the ecological transition to the myth of the democratization of air travel, via the links between daily and residential mobility, Yoann Demoli discusses what really structures and governs our mobility practices.

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English subtitles available.

**Yoann Demoli, you are a sociologist and you have worked a lot on household car ownership, and more recently, as part of the project “Conduire” [Driving], on the ecological conversion of lifestyles, you show that the car, and more generally automotive mobility, remains a blind spot for households, especially in peri-urban and rural areas. For what reasons?**

We have indeed carried out a project, this project “Conduire,” to try to explain a paradox: cars are more than ever seen, for good reason, as causing environmental externalities, environmental damage. Yet they have never been so essential for households. So there is a paradox, where the car is necessary, but also heavily criticised

and the cause of damage, in a broad sense. So, to question this paradox, we used two types of materials. We surveyed about twenty households living in the inner or outer suburbs of Nantes; and we also used a quantitative survey: SVEN, "lifestyle and environment," Conducted among approximately 2000 households. For these 2000 households, we know their consumption practices, in particular in terms of cars, but also their levels of environmental sensitivity, which we assessed thanks to a synthetic score, often used in the literature, which is called the NEP Scale. And so we looked at the environmental sensitivity of households according to what they consume. And in reality, we found something that at first seems counterintuitive: households that own a car are on average more pro-environmental than households that don't. Of course, this can be explained by what we call structuring effects, that is, the least environmental households are among the poorest, the oldest, and most often live outside of big cities. But these are also characteristics of people who don't own a car: poor, old, etc. But even when we use models known as "all other things being equal," we see that environmental sensitivity doesn't impact whether or not someone owns a car. We thought then that maybe it doesn't impact the ownership of just one car, but maybe it would impact owning two. And there again, we looked at the environmental sensitivity score of households depending on whether they owned two cars or none, and here again, people who have more than one car are a little more pro-environmental than others, all other things being equal. So we thought: it resists. The only thing that we really noticed – there are two things actually – is that the type of engine is related to environmental sensitivity. The more I am sensitive to the environment, the more likely it is that I will stop using diesel, I won't drive a diesel car. The effects are in the order of a few percentage points, it remains low, but in any case, there is a significant effect. The second effect is much stronger: people's type or model of car is for its part strongly informed by their environmental sensitivity. So we took a reverse approach to the issue: we looked at who owns an SUV or a 4x4, and saw, very clearly, that households with an SUV have an environmental sensitivity that really is a few points lower than households that own any other type of car than an SUV. It also means that there are some consumer items that are more or less invested with environmental sensitivity and that are almost I would say, like statements. They are statements in the social space, but also political statements, with regard to the environment, etc. So in these households, why are there so few links between environmental sensitivity and cars? First because the automobile, today, solves a spatio-temporal equation. In households which have increasingly unsynchronised schedules, in households that live quite far from the workplace, or dual-income households where each partner commutes to other places, cars end up being very important. The car is in fact taken for granted. People think they already have what they need to move about, to go shopping, to take the children, etc. And then of course, having a car allows them to chain trips that are sometimes a bit complex. Driving a child, and finally deciding: "Oh yes, this time I need to take them to football or to a competition." "I want to go shopping"... You can't do all this with carpooling, for instance. Carpooling with neighbours or colleagues is complicated. Firstly because while you may work in the same place, you don't all live in the same place. And it's also complicated because my own car allows me to make these small trips that maybe I didn't want to do in the morning, but that I might finally think about a bit later. I can't say to my carpooler, "Listen, we're going take ten minutes to go to the bakery," "we'll take fifteen minutes..." It's simply impossible. So very often, what we read, what we heard from the respondents, is also that having a car is necessary.

**Consequently, an ecological conversion has less of an influence on automotive practices than in other areas of life. Is that also what you observed?**

Exactly. What we saw when we surveyed the households is that that an ecological conversion affects many other areas than the car. With my colleagues, we wrote that the automobile was in some ways the "blind spot" of the ecological conversion. On the other hand, a colleague, Geneviève Pruvost, has studied what we could call the radicals of the ecological conversion: artisansal bakers who live in yurts, for example. And while these households have converted absolutely everything - their heating method, their toilets, their food... - they continue to drive old diesel bangers that are over 20 years old. And they drive a lot, because they live in places – and this is paradoxical – that are very far from city centres, and far from amenities, which intensifies the trips. For other more traditional households, the ecological conversion actually occurs where the body is most at stake. Often, psychoanalysts or other specialists will tell you that a car is the extension of a person's body. I'm not so sure, because actually, we can clearly see that what people convert ecologically is that which is closest to the body. Food passes through our body. Body care products, similarly, pass on our body. No wonder they are the first targets of the ecological conversion. Conversely, when I pollute with my car, I don't see it directly. At least, I can't quantify it easily. Perhaps if my exhaust pipe was at the front of my vehicle, I might be better able to see that I'm polluting. But then again, I'm not even sure, because in reality, the externalities that I produce with my car have an impact on me, but not only me. In fact they impact me almost marginally. While the externalities I produce when eating poorly, or using harmful products, they impact me directly. I remember a respondent living near Nantes, who went to an organic store, in a car a little over ten years old, with a diesel engine, even though the trip she had to make was a few hundred metres, 400 or 600 metres, simply because she also had to carry

containers to buy loose items. And like many other respondents, this respondent had a family unit. Thus having children has a very strong impact, and significantly determines car ownership.

**Your more recent work explores longer-distance mobilities and questions in particular the democratisation of air transport and high-speed rail travel. What can we learn, then, from the sociology of users of rail and/or air transport? What are their main characteristics ultimately?**

Long-distance mobility has often been overlooked by research in social sciences and we can even say overlooked by public policies too. When we talk about environmental public policies on transport, we often think about daily mobility. We think of cars. But cars are also used for long-distance. That's why I wanted to look at long-distance mobility, because it was something that was a little outside the scope both of researchers and of specialists and experts on mobility-related public policies. I also wanted to study long-distance mobilities, because, like automotive mobilities, they are major causes of externalities. Not all: some are seen as being more virtuous than others. In this case, what is very interesting in these long-distance mobilities – high-speed trains and airplanes –, is that they share commonalities. First common point, they are marginal mobilities, in the sense that they are mobilities practised by about only a quarter of French people every year. And yet, low-cost companies keep saying: "More and more people can fly." Recently I was talking to a senior official of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation who told me "Nowadays, even my baker goes to Thailand." I found it interesting that even a senior official who's an expert – he was a senior civil servant in the research department –, believes there is a very strong democratisation. A quarter of the French population will have flown in the previous year, just like only a quarter of the French population will have taken the train for a long-distance trip – a Corail train, or a TGV – in the previous year. Only a quarter, compared to more than 80% of French households owning a car. So that's the first significant feature. The second significant feature of these long-distance mobilities is that they share the same social morphology in several respects. This social morphology, to put it briefly, corresponds to people who are educated and rather rich. It will be the richest French people who will fly and take the TGV. Mainly, of course, because these tickets, train tickets, airline tickets, remain expensive, but also because they involve leisure or activities that are going to be expensive. These are services called higher transport services, which are indeed expensive. Another common point of these different mobilities is their feminisation. We have mobilities that have become highly feminised over the past for 40 years. The long-distance mobility which has experienced the strongest feminisation, is air mobility. Take a plane 40 years ago. We can look at ads or even the myth of the air hostess, that is very gendered, serving men, the male passenger: this is disappearing. Today, we really have a strong diversity in planes. Who takes the plane? We have about an equal split between men and women. Same thing for high-speed trains, that we studied with Alexia Ricard, a fellow research engineer in my lab. We were able to show that these rail mobilities are mostly used by young people. The train is rather something for young people, 20-30 years old. People travel mostly alone on trains, while for air mobilities, on average, people travel with more people, and more for leisure. So what links are there between these long-distance mobilities and the phenomena of the ecological conversion? This is a question that has really been in the spotlight lately, for instance with flygskam, or flight shame. We could assume that there are certain forms of mobility that we give up on because they are too environmentally costly. For now, in our investigations, we are struggling to detect this link. In older surveys, in 2017 for the Environmental Lifestyles survey, we saw, in the same way that there is no link between environmental sensitivity and cars, that there was no link between environmental sensitivity and the use of air transport. We even saw perhaps an opposite phenomenon: we saw that the more environmentally sensitive the person, the more they fly, which we explained by an ideal-type we called eco-cosmopolitanism. Eco-cosmopolitanism refers to having lifestyles that are more open, less inward looking, lifestyles which come from city centres, where they were called eco-cosmopolitanism because they are rather frugal in terms of daily travel practices. They take public transport, but they have this openness to the outside, to long-distance mobility, which is very expensive ecologically. But we also have profiles that are highly qualified, highly educated, highly urbanised, who are also very invested in the environmental cause. With my colleagues, we recreated some ideal-types depending on a person's degree of sensitivity to the environment and how costly their lifestyle is ecologically. So, in each case, we have two types: more or less expensive and more or less sensitive to the environment. And here, we see that these eco-cosmopolitans are therefore rather sensitive to the environment and rather frugal in some areas, but not all. Conversely, we have individuals who don't fly, who don't take the train, but whose environmental awareness is rather weak. We called this profile: unintentional frugality. These are households that are working-class, rural, elderly, removed from the leisure activities that are very expensive, economically and ecologically. Then, conversely, we have profiles we called: unapologetic consumerism. I travel by plane, I know it pollutes, but I don't care, it doesn't matter to me. I was able to question some frequent flyers. I became interested in people who have travelled up to 200 or 300 times in their lifetime. And then, at the very end of the questionnaire, of the interview, we discussed ecology. I got some pretty edifying answers from these households, closely connected to choosing not to drive a car anymore. They told me: "You know, I never drive a car, I don't own a

car, I live in the centre of Paris and ultimately, all my kilometres, I do them by plane. I don't drive 12,000 kilometres a year with my car. Granted, I travel a few kilometres more by plane, but when you think about it, I'm not polluting on our countryside roads." So we can have this form of unapologetic consumerism, and then we also have forms we can call eco-consumerism, where I am very aware of the environment, but I'm still going to consume. That's also why our TGVs and planes remain full. They remain full of people who are very environmentally aware. This is becoming the norm today.

**So you are observing forms of mobility, of travel, with ranges that are diametrically opposed: very distant for planes, much closer on average for cars. Yet, what link can be observed between these forms of mobility, especially, as you previously did when answering our questions, by challenging them from the standpoint of the ecological conversion?**

The different forms of mobility are known in the form of a small table according to whether the mobilities are short distances or long distances, and also the timeframe of these mobilities. Do I return the same day? Will I return later? Or will I return in the longer term? We have mobilities that are daily; we can have mobilities that are residential, if I move homes; we can also have migratory mobilities, where I change my living area for the long-term; And there is also travel, what we more generally call long-distance mobility. With my colleague Alexia Ricard, we tried to look at the links that may exist between two of these mobilities: long-distance mobility by train, and residential mobility, i.e. moving homes (how many times have I moved during my life?). With Alexia Ricard we looked quite simply at how many times a person has changed Department during their lifetime and we linked this little indicator to another indicator, which is the one we're interested in, i.e. long-distance mobility. Did I take the train in the previous year? And it works very well. Residential mobility and its intensity very clearly inform train travel. And so the strongest factor is having moved at least three times and having lived in at least three Departments. This multiplies by two and a half the probability of taking the train compared to someone who has never moved, who has never changed departments. This goes to show just how much these residential mobilities influence the use of long-distance mobilities. And it holds true even when controlling for income, education level, age, car ownership and therefore the availability of alternative means to perform these long-distance mobilities. How can we explain why people who have relocated many times are frequent train users? Most certainly because they very frequently perform what we call VFR trips: Visiting Friends and Relatives. So trips to see family and loved ones. In this case, they are people who have left relatives and formed sociabilities in different places, and who return to visit. We can therefore also understand, by another form of timeframe, the mobilities that may exist. These residential mobilities, for now, remain hard to understand through surveys, because each time they require biographical surveys, retrospective surveys. It is sometimes hard to know how many times a person has moved during their lifetime. And then, of course, this residential mobility isn't randomly distributed and equally intense throughout the social space. Obviously, the more economic and cultural capital a person has, the more they tend to multiply these residential mobilities. So I really think it would be interesting today to combine these different forms of mobility, to see how modes of transport within these mobilities are complementary, substitutable or cumulative. If I drive my car a lot on a daily basis, does this also make me less anxious to use it for a long-distance trip? Or on the contrary, does this mean I just want to leave the car behind in the garage and take a high-speed train?

## **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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## **Residential mobility**

Broadly speaking, residential mobility refers to a household's change of residence within a life basin.

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Associated Thematics :

### Lifestyles

- Cars / motorcycles
  - Diversity of lifestyles
  - Inequalities
  - Housing
  - Representations
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Yoann Demoli

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To cite this publication :

Yoann Demoli (03 April 2023), « Do environmental values challenge mobility practices? », Préparer la transition mobilitaire. Consulté le 01 December 2023, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/videos/15842/do-environmental-values-challenge-mobility-practices>

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