

1. Dictionary

Neo-nomadism

By Yves Pedrazzini (Sociologue)

It is the mobility of his/her home that characterizes the nomad; thus the “neo-nomad” or traveller, who recycles a modified vehicle as a travelling home, positions himself or herself on the fringes of contemporary societies dominated by the values of sedentariness and residence.

A brief definition

The term neo-nomadism—that is, 21st-century nomadism—refers to the way of life of individuals or relatively loosely-linked, barely-organized groups that come together in a somewhat haphazard way at different spots in a territory during short-term stays or festivals, or in pursuit of seasonal economic activity.¹ The constitutive elements of the shared identity of such neo-nomads are based on particular practices of mobility, the re-use of vehicles, trucks or buses as travelling homes, along with a position that can be described as being on the fringes of society and its dominant values, not the least of which are sedentariness and residence. These practices may be the outcome of situations of economic precarity, but in most instances they arise out of a decision to break away from the market-led society for which “mobility is quite simply an ability to function within the system” (Kaufmann, 2008). Thus, in general, beyond such economic questions as living in a truck or a bus and taking one’s home nearer to the sources of employment, ideological choices also determine the decision of travellers to take to the road. This distinguishes them from certain socio-professional groups that have appeared in recent decades and whose nomadic practices are similar to theirs, but whose economic objectives are radically different; on the other hand, it is only in the imaginary of the sedentary section of society that they can be compared to Rromane, gypsy and traveller populations, whose “ethnic” and cultural roots are quite different from theirs, although the name “travellers” is borrowed from that of British gypsies, even though their way of life and their use of travelling homes may be seen as presenting marked similarities. Unlike the “pure” nomads of the steppe or the desert, “neos” are characterized by their hybrid practices, that is, by their practice/tactic of combining genuine know-how, DIY-type improvisation and real skills, drawing upon both traditional, vernacular corpora, and new information and communication technologies (use of mobile platforms, etc.).

Extensions and clarifications (of the definition)

According to the Larousse French dictionary, nomadism is “a way of life characterized by the movement of human groups in order to ensure their livelihood.” And, by extension, a “wandering, nomadic life.” But in the present article we focus less on nomadism than on new, contemporary forms of nomadic existence which are non-traditional and non-ethnic, that is, on neo-nomadism: a present-day form of the eternal human desire to be on the move, to escape from the horror of domesticity, to pull up one’s roots, and break with a world whose stifling narrowness is unbearable.

This new nomadism is a societal phenomenon which, though still emergent, has already been present on the fringes of contemporary society for a number of decades. It first appeared in the 1980s in the United Kingdom, and its practitioners—more or less linked by a radical critique of the Thatcherite liberalism that leaves on the scrapheap thousands of people belonging to the post-industrial proletarian sections of society—manifest themselves and go under the name of “(new) travellers,” one borrowed from the Irish gypsies. Subsequently, via “techno” culture and through rave parties in England, and later in France and throughout Europe, these travellers offered a polemical image of the new forms of nomadism, combining economic precarity, social critique and urban cultures in a disparate movement which they exported to the highways and roadside verges of Europe, North Africa, Asia, and so on. The link with gypsy cultures is not merely anecdotal. But today, it is principally the link with uncertain, post-urban (Cuff, 2008), or even post-metropolitan (Soja, 2000) societies—ones that Zygmunt Bauman would describe as liquid (2006)—that we should bear in mind if we are to understand the political and economic culture of the neo-nomad. And, while one cannot but be reminded of the pastoral or gypsy societies that were the neo-nomads’ predecessors, it is also the mendicant orders and the voluntary adepts of a Franciscan type of “extreme poverty” (Agamben, 2011) that serve as models.

The mobility of the neo-nomads, so our initial understanding of their behaviour leads us to believe, brings together, in an undertaking that is both the product of improvisation (impulse, intuition...) and long-term planning (seasons, schooling of children...), of the physical involvement of people and trucks with a territory, and the occasional activity as telecommunications geeks. Here again, we find a hybridisation of practices. Their choice of itineraries, their halts on the way in France or Spain, in short, their practice and capital of mobility, are the outcome of, on the one hand, a hybridisation of modes and techniques of migrational movements which, unlike the arrival of a circus in town, are rarely theatricalized and more often than not remain secretive and nocturnal, and, on the other, of more or less voluntarily-chosen periods of immobility. Lastly, their social mobility is itself “hybrid,” paradoxical, a toing and froing: there are as many people on the breadline eking out a better existence as nomads than as sedentaries, melding home, vehicle and workshop into one, as there are individuals who have chosen to be “socially downwardly mobile,” turning their backs on their over-burdensome middle-class origins. By becoming neo-nomads, these children of good families, destined from the outset to hyper-mobility by virtue of their class origins, muddy the waters by becoming ever more mobile, but outside their original milieu. Unlike the hypermobile social elites of the 21st century, neo-nomads practice a mobility of a slower kind: they do not hesitate to go the long way round, take their time and stop by the wayside, rather than dash from place to place by the shortest possible route.

a) A history of the concept of nomadism.

Most dictionaries—for instance the Littré, as early as 1880 2—as well as the “lowest common denominator,” also known as Wikipedia, define nomadism as “the character, or way of life of nomadic peoples.” As far as the synonyms of nomadism are concerned, we find notions such as wandering and instability, and also mobility and immigration. Different “forms” of nomadism are recognized today: the archaic form of pastoral nomadism, the postmodern, virtual form of digital nomadism... But what should particularly draw our attention is the a priori association of nomadism with instability. Especially as this “tendency to instability” not only applies both to people and their homes and movements, but also, so it has been claimed, corresponds quite simply to “the need to provide a means of ensuring a livelihood,” as the “nomadic way of life [...]” is, “it

is true to say, generally considered an inferior mode of existence" (Paul Vidal de La Blache, *Principes de géographie humaine*, 1921, p. 212).

This vision of a "poor" nomadism (as one speaks of *arte povere*), can still be found today in the way our (post-)industrial societies perceive nomadic practices, that is, "the obligation for individuals or groups to repeatedly move on elsewhere, because of the instability of their employment situation due, at times, to the very nature of this employment on, for instance, building or civil engineering projects." "Such, lastly, is the price paid by the age-old condition of the sub-proletariat: the 'nomadism' of employment. Workers tend to move on from company to company" (Le Point, 5 December 1977).

As regards character and thought, what is most often defined as nomadic is the tendency—which appears regrettable to the minds of serious people—for individuals to let their interests wander in function of their desires. Thus it is difficult for intellectual nomadism to establish itself as a research method even when it is acknowledged as having creative virtue (White, 1987). For in that instance, too, it is plainly instability that lies at the heart of nomadism, not a practice of mobility, but a constant irrepressible desire for movement with which are associated ideas of anomia, vagrancy, wandering, aimless travel and, at best, a Bohemian artistic existence and a spirit of adventure.³ According to this "erratic" approach, nomadism above all involves the act of leaving, going from place to place, travel, an expedition and, hence, more or less forced migration. But rarely is the basis of this way of life attributed to anything other than a simple law of nature and of economics, according to which the nomad moves according to the needs of his pastoral activity and, therefore, the quest for new pastures. Thus it is tacitly recognized that human mobility merely follows on from the needs of animals going in search of food. And this is how nomadic empires come into being (Chaliand, 1995). In consequence, a vision of history has gained credence according to which humanity advances not only from a nomadic Palaeolithic stage to a sedentary Neolithic stage, but also from a primitive, tribal stage to a complex social organization that is truly differentiated into groups and professions.

b) The origins of the traveller movement

It is because of an evolutionary view according to which humanity has progressed from a primitive state, described by Hobbes as the state of nature—nomadic and warring—to its present civilized, cultured state—sedentary and industrious—that contemporary nomads, whether the children of traditionally nomadic societies or those social groups that have recently taken up the practice of traveller-type migrational movements, are perceived as the expression or reactivation of primitive ways of life whose place in the modern world is, in consequence, neither normal nor functional, and whose practitioners need to be limited and driven to the fringes of the contemporary social system.

Sometimes, as on the plains of the post-Soviet Central Asian lands, populations continue to practice their semi-nomadic or semi-sedentary lifestyles, adopting a mixture of practices and types of habitation, including a house that has become their principal place of residence. But it is now uncertain whether they really exist or are merely figments of the imagination of melancholic sedentaries (Volodine, 1999)... In point of fact, if a certain number of populations have survived and kept up their nomadic practices, their very existence remains conditional upon the good will of states whose borders, dividing their territories and limiting their movement, they are incapable of respecting. This is the case of the traditional inhabitants of the great deserts of North Africa, America and Asia, on whom modern states have, for centuries, in a more or less authoritarian, legal or violent way, sought to impose a sedentary way of life.

In Europe, the case of the Romani peoples is obviously emblematic of this situation. But the Roma, the Manush, Yenich, Sinti or Gypsies who persist in a nomadic way of life and mode of habitation—gypsy wagons, caravans or camping cars, or even simply automobiles—and seek to preserve their traditional traveller practices, no longer represent a majority of those who nevertheless are still referred to as the traveller community (Liégeois, 2009). At present, the economic and political globalization of Europe has relegated them to the eternal population of impoverished migrants whose movements are above all the result of chronic precarity, long exacerbated by the different forms of social, racial, cultural and linguistic discrimination of which they have been the victims since the legendary Indian origins of their “travels” and their migratory movements under different names (Roma or Bohemians) across the European continent.

In connection with our subject, mention must also be made of the people— the Irish gypsies—who, perhaps more at a symbolic level than in reality, formed the link between Rromane and travellers, and to whom the “new travellers” of the 1980s, revolting against the liberal policies of the Thatcher government, freely made reference when they abandoned the cities and heavily taxed housing for a life on the road (Frediani, 2009). Despite which, most of them opted for the construction of hybrid villages of caravans or gypsy wagons set on breeze blocks, situated on the urban fringes, and whose existence was constantly under threat.⁴

Thereafter, with the spread of new electronic musical genres and “techno” culture, it was through their rave parties in England, then in France, Italy or Spain, that travellers came to offer a polemical image of these new forms of nomadism (Kosmicki, 2010), combining economic precarity, social criticism and urban cultures in a heterogeneous movement, propagated along the highways and roadside verges of Europe and North Africa. The connection with gypsy cultures then becomes little more than anecdotal: it is the coming, uncertain, post-urban societies that are now the reference rather than the earlier pastoral or gypsy models.

One important—though, in our opinion, essentially negative—effect of the arrival of the traveller phenomenon in France via the “techno” connection has been to reduce, a priori and up to now without being re-evaluated, the image of the new nomads to that of “punks with dogs” and other festival-goers, as portrayed in the most widely-circulated media iconography (Tomski and Bze, 2006). In this respect, those scholars and artists who have taken an interest in the phenomenon have also largely contributed to this amalgamation, one of the most evident consequences of which has been to fuel the misunderstanding of their innovative social and cultural reality, perfectly in phase with the somewhat chaotic state of our human societies (see, for instance, the website Nomad’s land: <http://lasallepolyvalente.free.fr/punks/>), by continuing to associate travellers exclusively with fourth-world situations or social cases, and ignoring their politically significant, not to say, representative nature...

Lastly, it should be pointed out that at present are described as “nomadic” a certain number of professional activities that are characterized by a high degree of mobility at the local, international or even, in the case of certain “hyper mobile” individuals, at the global level. These executives, who could perhaps be described as nomads—less so as vagabonds—travel the world on business or for science, in the service of the capital constantly flowing around the planet. In their case, hyper-mobility is not a consequence of but a precondition for their high level of professional performance, and is not in the slightest way linked to any sort of economic precarity. For this elite of the highly mobile, their habitation is merely one staging post among many, as are the hotels or planes in which they spend the night... Thus, in the West, nomadism tends to be conflated, from an

ideological perspective, with the hyper-mobility of the entrepreneur. It is even considered a valued professional quality in capitalist societies (Abbas, 2011; Jones Lang LaSalle, 2012...). The philosopher Gilles Châtelet (1998) refers to this elite of the highly mobile, which dominates the legions of precarious nomads, as the “flying old-boy network,” because of the speed with which they glide from one chief executive job to another... What we have here, then, is clearly something very different from both the nomadic spirit celebrated by intellectuals such as Kenneth White and the nomadic alternative practiced while writing and travelling the slow way by, among many other authors inseparable from their moleskin notebooks, writers such as Bruce Chatwin (1996; 2010) or Patrick Deville. However, despite the existence of such “resistance fighters,” it is the force of acceleration that continues to rule the world (Rosa, 2012).

c) The neo-nomads of today

Even if it is not a matter of attributing a certificate of nomadic authenticity to certain mobile individuals and refusing one to others, it is still helpful to avoid lumping together all the various types of mobile existence in a single global figure of “21st-century man.” To do so would make it impossible to understand the fact that nomadism constitutes a complex, heterogeneous, multicultural “world” and that it also forms a power system with its classes, dominant groups and chosen few.

To come back, then, to the “contemporary nomads” or “new nomads” who have been the object of recent anthropological and sociological studies, what we have here are relatively loosely-linked, barely-organized groups of individuals, that come together in a somewhat haphazard way at different spots in the national territory during short-term stays or festivals, or again, in pursuit of seasonal economic activity, and whose shared identity is based on particular practices of mobility, and the re-use of vehicles, trucks or buses as travelling homes, along with a position that can be described as being on the fringes of society and its dominant values, among which sedentariness and residence are far from negligible. These practices may be the outcome of situations of economic precarity, but in most instances they arise logically out of a decision to break away from the market-led society for which mobility is nothing other than an ability to function within the system (Kaufmann, 2008). But, in general, beyond such economic considerations as living in a truck or a bus and taking one’s home nearer the sources of employment, ideological choices also determine the decision of most travellers to take to the road. This distinguishes them from the socio-professional groups that have appeared in recent decades and whose nomadic practices are similar to theirs, but whose economic objectives are radically different (Le Marchand, 2011). Well-known examples of the latter are the workers, known as nuclear nomads, who travel from one power station to another to perform the most dangerous tasks and settle for a relatively short time in the area, living in camp sites (Courrier International, 2011). Similarly, workers who specialize in winter activities in ski resorts may occasionally live in mobile accommodation and, moreover, be recruited from among travellers.

On occasion, this dominant feature—camping—might wrongly be thought to bring them closer to those groups, mainly made up of retirees, who have chosen to live in camping-cars; but today’s new nomads seem to be as allergic to camp sites as they are to residential areas, housing developments and social housing estates which, as a general rule, they tend to keep well away from. The camps of today’s new nomads do not belong to such categories: because, after a short while, the traveller always moves on.⁵

d) Nomadic skills and know-how / contemporary mobile habitations and relationship with the city

“Cities capitalize the immobile instances of man, his need to lie down full length in a duration constructed from the void of the past and the void of the future. For his part, the nomad spreads out in the horizontal fulfilment of man on the surface of the earth: cities must be destroyed” (Duvignaud, 1975, pp. 18-19).

At present, doubtless as a result of a just appreciation of the forces in presence, neo-nomads (who are not Mughals) seem (for the time being?) to have abandoned the idea of destroying the cities. They prefer, instead, to leave them, and in some cases, perhaps, to flee from them. In point of fact, perhaps they do not actually hate them, either because that is where they come from or because, despite everything, that is where they hope to live one day, or at least for part of the time. This is why, when they stop, they often set up camp on the edge of cities, in places whose territorial status—as belonging to town or country—is undefined, on land, in zones and spaces that are often described as peri-urban. But it is also indisputable that the city is not always made for the nomad. According to Noël Cannat, sociologist and specialist in the study of “outsiders,” one of the contemporary figures of whom is the nomad, “all men are born nomads with a Palaeolithic brain that aspires to verticality. It is society that ‘neolithizes,’ makes him settle in one place and urbanizes him” (1998, p. 198). Thus we may put forward the hypothesis that nomadic habitation and, more generally, the practices, tactics and knowledges of neo-nomads sketch the as yet embryonic outline of a resolutely contemporary form not so much of architecture as of urban planning, one not embedded in the earth, but gliding over it, offering a territorial poetics that is at once archaic and hypermodern.⁶

The above remarks offer a few elements of a reflection that is on-going, on a daily basis, in function of political events and the agendas of various research institutes. As a conclusion to this note, I would like to come back to the pages by Jean Duvignaud published in 1975 and, in particular, to the following extract:

“Nomadism still remains a recourse. Because of its very principle, that is, the vocation which enables it to circulate, by the use of cunning, through a hostile cosmos, through a static civilization, and endows it with the ability to dissolve the consensus on which the political system is founded in order to replace it with a social legal order, that is, by the invention of new social forms that will not be crystalized in institutions. The fact that this creative effervescence is unquestionably linked to nomadism, is equally well demonstrated by the festivals in which is concentrated, in a short, perishable portion of duration, an intense experience of communal creation, and by the sort of re-appropriation of man by himself that comes about when he discovers that his existence has been stolen from him by static institutions and ultimately by history (in the Hegelian sense of the word). Nomadism is the utopian genesis of man to come” (Duvignaud, 1975, p. 39).

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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.

[En savoir plus](#) x

Sedentariness

To be sedentary is to opt for stability and to put down roots, both social and spatial, whether by choice or not.

[En savoir plus](#) x

Neo-nomadism

It is the mobility of his/her home that characterizes the nomad; thus the “neo-nomad” or traveller, who recycles a modified vehicle as a travelling home, positions himself or herself on the fringes of contemporary societies dominated by the values of sedentariness and residence.

[En savoir plus](#) x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

[En savoir plus](#) x

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-



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