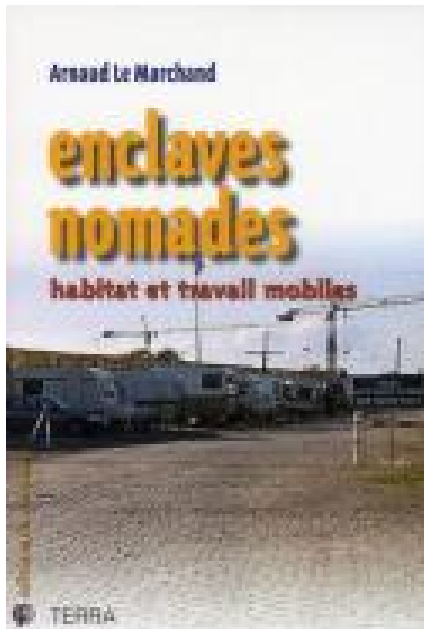


1. Crossed Perspectives



Nomadism and neo-nomads

Between Ferjeux van der Stigghel (Photographe-voyageur)
And Arnaud Le Marchand (Économiste)

22 May 2013

The term 'nomad' includes many categories of people who are mobile: the Roma community, lorry drivers, fairground and seasonal workers, etc. However, over the past few decades, a new category has been added to the list: neo-nomads or "travellers". A photographer and a university professor, both experts in their fields, discuss the situation today.

01. Is the economic crisis the only factor that explains the increase in nomadism in developed countries?



Ferjeux van der Stigghel

No, the crisis isn't the only factor. You can become part of the neo-nomad world for all sorts of reasons. What unites them is a genuine philosophy, a search for a certain kind of freedom. Changing your life from one day to the next is all about a state of mind. While the economy is still at the heart of developed societies today, neo-nomadism is perhaps an indicator of the changes possible in the society of tomorrow: our means of survival, or the way we reduce costs. For example, their lorries are also their homes, so they don't pay rent and can move close to where they work.



A. L

I agree with this point. The world of neo-nomads, like that of other "travellers", is a laboratory for the kinds of practices that could lead to real innovation with broad implications.



Arnaud Le Marchand

The increase in nomadism in developed countries pre-dates the current economic crisis. It's linked to changes in the way industry is organised (sub-contracting, the disintegration of support industries, the return of itinerant trade, just-in-time logistics, etc.) and a general increase in short-term, casual work since the end of the 1970s. The current crisis has quite probably accelerated this trend, but it didn't create it. Instead, the phenomenon of neo-nomads and squats is actually tied to the crisis of the welfare state. That said, there's also a more cultural, non-economic aspect to all this – a rejection of towns and cities, a culture of rock festivals and "techno" music – as well as a more political one, based on a libertarian or "post-anarchist" revival, to use the American terminology.



F. V

For Europe's neo-nomads, the advent of Thatcherism was clearly an explanatory factor in their multiplication. Where I agree with Arnaud Le Marchand is that if you go beyond the contemporary notion of nomadism, you take the debate out of the purely economic sphere. In the US (where vast open spaces led to mobility's becoming a social practice), change and mobility are viewed as strengths, proof of someone's ability to adapt. In Europe, mobility is equated with fragility. The idea of people completely changing their working lives, for example, isn't something that's readily accepted.

02. Why is nomadism so often seen in a negative light? Are all nomads on the fringes of society?



Ferjeux van der Stigghel

They are often faced with incomprehension and fear of the 'other'. Meanwhile, there is a paradox in the neo-nomads' way of life: their mobile homes are invisible in fields or on the outskirts of towns, yet their skills make them an integrated part of society. This invisibility and visibility are all part of a simple truth that contradicts commonly-held views about nomadism today. You just need look at the daily lives of neo-nomads and ignore the media sensationalism to realise that they are people just like us, with the same worries – especially when they have children – but other constraints and other obligations. As a result of the crisis, we are all becoming more aware of an alternative lifestyle—that of neo-nomads. And yet, in my opinion, this alternative is actually a reflection of our own society: chaotic and organised, mobile and sedentary, marginalised and integrated.



A. L

Yes, and we can add one more point. A lot of “sedentary” people are afraid of becoming nomads, or worse ending up on the street, because of the economic crisis and the changes it's bringing. Whether those fears are well-founded or not, they create a sense of anxiety relative to and rejection of those who have “already left”, those they're frightened of having to follow. For some, those fears arise from the realisation that neo-nomads aren't actually that different from themselves.



Arnaud Le Marchand

The State is wary of nomads because they are difficult to control. The authorities have developed an attitude of defiance – sometimes unconsciously – towards these groups, which partially explains their hostility. In addition, there's the suspicion of unfair competition exercised by nomads to the detriment of non-mobile traders, even though these suspicions are contradicted by fact. Shopkeepers sometimes accuse fairground workers of undercutting them on prices because their costs are lower. However, it's a debatable point, especially as fairground stallholders have no shop signage (brand protection). Employers may also be wary of hiring staff who might suddenly walk out on them in the event of a disagreement or a better-paid job elsewhere. Finally, there are hints of the hygiene issue, which still makes them appear suspect in health terms.

However, for me, most nomads are part of society and the economy; they perform a range of functions and act as an adjustment variable. And their cultural role, though denied, is nonetheless essential, notably in the history of cinema and live entertainment.



F. V

Here, again, I agree with Arnaud Le Marchand and would like to highlight the comparison between what has happened in Europe – particularly with regard to neo-nomads and the way they are systematically marginalised – and in the US, where mobility doesn't make you an outsider. It really comes down to a question of perspective: for me, the neo-nomad is a perfect reflection of our society, with its qualities, flaws and contradictions.

03. Do neo-nomads have a special relationship with the urban environment or its fringes/ peri-urban areas?



Ferjeux van der Stigghel

This question has been at the centre of a debate in the Noland's Man collective ever since a project on neo-nomads was launched with the Mobile Lives Forum in late 2012. What's emerged is that neo-nomads are the very expression of the peri-urban; it is a zone in constant transformation but that, at the same time, is marginal. It is witness to the disappearance of old structures and the creation of new ones, and so represents a kind of "in-between" area of the outskirts. Given that travellers live on the outskirts of society – even symbolically –, they encapsulate this notion of peri-urbanity. That said, we live in an era where everyone is both mobile and sedentary. So, for me, nomadism is a label that doesn't really have any meaning...



A. L

They are effectively on the fringes, but these can also be internal ones. Neo-nomads, or travellers, are on the edge, the frontiers of urban and peri-urban life; and that includes the social frontiers.



Arnaud Le Marchand

Special in the sense of extreme; to some people, they represent a version of urban mobility taken to the extreme – those who live in lorries. Others, who live in yurts for example, are fleeing cities and their modern architecture, which can indeed bring them closer to the urban fringes/periurban. However, they sometimes create a “town” in the middle of a field, during a gathering, or partake in the life of the vacant urban spaces in a discreet way - furtive yet real, - as is the case for fairground people and nomadic workers.

For some, there isn't really much of a choice; it's more of a lifestyle that's been imposed as the result of some form of rupture (family breakdown, job loss, etc.). For others, like young people -though not exclusively - it's an opportunity to find themselves and their place in a travelling world, and also a way of life based on a cultural background.



F. V

In Europe, society is really falling behind relative to the migrant's place in society. Security policies are largely responsible for this – defining a migrant as someone who must conform in order to be “integrated” into society. And yet, this idea can also be turned on its head, so that a migrant – whether nomad or neo-nomad – becomes a cause for renewal. Thus the migrant is no longer seen as someone that must adapt to conform to the norms of the society, but instead is seen as a potential source of the change a society needs to transform itself in order to move forward.

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Aspirations
- Cars / motorcycles
- Living environments
- Diversity of lifestyles
- Futures
- Housing

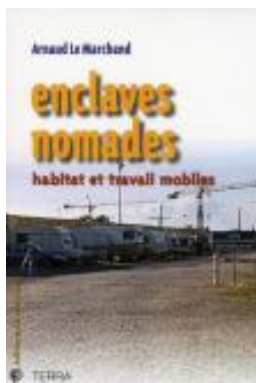
- Work
-



Ferjeux van der Stigghe

Photographe-voyageur

A photographer at Libération at 17 and then on set for director François Reichenbach, Ferjeux Van der Stigghe has exhibited his work in France, Switzerland and Mexico. In 1989, he trained in multimedia design at Paris VII, whereupon he moved from film to video and advertising. He graduated from the IEP, where he later taught a course there on "the semantics of images." Since 2008, he has been following and photographing "travellers" and "neo-nomads." This work was presented at "Visa pour l'Image" in Perpignan and Arles in 2010. In 2012, he initiated the creation of the Noland's Man project collective.



Arnaud Le Marchand

Économiste

Arnaud Le Marchand is an economics lecturer at the University of Le Havre. His research focuses on urban economies in the context of globalization, port cities, mobile employment, minority groups and the mobile habitat. He contributes to Multitudes magazine and is a member of the TERRA scientific network. He is also the author of Enclaves nomades – Habitat et travail mobiles, published in 2011.

Ferjeux van der Stigghel et Arnaud Le Marchand (22 May 2013), « Nomadism and neo-nomads », Préparer la transition mobilitaire. Consulté le 09 May 2025, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/crossed-questions/764/nomadism-and-neo-nomads>



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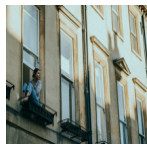
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Mobile Lives Forum

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