

Alternatives to individual car travel: an environmental attitude?

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In view of the three major environmental issues — pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and an ever-waning supply of fossil fuels — we face here in the 21st century, the use of the automobile is being called into question. And yet, for the time being, the automobile, upon which we have become more or less dependent, remains an integral part of modern lifestyles. This dependence appears to be linked in part to a philosophical attachment to the car as a symbol of freedom (Abidi, 2008; Clochard, 2008); this attachment, on the other hand, is, practically-speaking, pragmatic, resulting from wide-spread use of the “automobile system” on the global scale (Dupuy, 1995; 1999).

Large-scale statistical surveys taken at both the local and national levels highlight the propagation of the automobile. Up through the end of the 1990s, both multi-motorization and the percentage of travel done by car increased exponentially (Orfeuill, 2000). While the recent hikes in gas prices have affected this trend to a slight degree, use of the automobile as a preferred means of locomotion nonetheless prevails. Moreover, the majority of automobile use still tends to be individual; a recent Household Transport Practices Survey taken in Lyon, France shows that the average occupation rate for cars was 1.37, a rate that falls to 1.03 on the home-to-work commute.

For environmental reasons, we are today faced with an imperative to change our habits. Our addiction to the automobile, however, will not be an easy one from which to break free. The goal of this paper is to shed light on some of the mechanisms that will allow us to liberate ourselves – even partially – from our reliance on the automobile.

Position and methodology

In this study we chose to focus on individuals whose modal uses differed from this norm. We felt a qualitative method would allow us to better “apprehend the ‘singularities’ – the ‘specific’ cases (but not necessarily models)” (Lahire, 1995: 14). The goal of this methodology is not to be representational but to better understand the mechanisms at work in certain social behaviors, however small their minority. In this study, we looked specifically at a group of individuals known as ‘altermobilitists,’ who have in common the fact of using alternative means of transport. The neologism ‘altermobility’ (borrowed from S. Chevrier and S. Juguet), takes on quite a different meaning in our research than the one attributed it by its authors; while Chevrier and Juguet define it as a “mobility which takes its time” (Marzloff, 2005: 131), for us it refers to the collection of alternatives to the individual car, with no presumption of their substance. Thus, altermobility is essentially an explorative term; practically speaking, it is a way naming the commuting practices (altermobilities) and the individuals who use them (altermobilitists) we will be examining throughout this work.

Our research focuses on three types of altermobility: public transportation, the bicycle and carpooling, the latter to better explore the collective rather than individual use of the car. The individuals interviewed were regular users of one or another of these transportation modes for at least one their journeys between home and work.

The home-to-work commute was used as a baseline criterion for recruitment insofar as it was a structuring motive of daily mobility of active participants (Boulaïbal, 2001). Although the percentage of work-related car travel appears to be in decline according to national statistics in France, it nonetheless represents a quarter of the total number of all car travel according to the latest National Transportation Survey (1995-1996); depending on the method of calculation used, the home-to-work commute represents between 24 and 27.1% of all travel (Madre, Maffre, 1997: 20). Quantitatively speaking, the home-to-work commute is extremely important in the daily lives of active households. The data provided by INSEE (National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies) for 1999 shows that roughly 70% of home-to-work travel was done by car in the five agglomerations (Lyon, Grenoble, Nîmes, Toulouse and Chambéry) on which our research focused.

Roughly 50 semi-structured interviews of working men and women aged 32 to 62, whose residential locations varied (city center, close suburbs or far away), and whose family situations were equally diverse (single or living in a couple, with or without children) were conducted in France. The interviews were conducted in a comprehensive and inductive manner, utilizing the life-story method (Bertaux, 1997) and thus allowing us access to

longitudinal data on transportation modes. These interviews proved to be extremely rich in terms of the data they provided: they allowed us to account for effects of lifecycle, generation, type and context while at the same time allowing us to deconstruct the decision-making process that led to the adoption of the altermobilitist practice on the home-to-work commute. As they were also apt at capturing different stages of the individual's life, they also offered access to information regarding the stability and breakdowns in the individual's life; this enabled us to put the modal change into a context (notably the family and professional structures). It is from this wealth of information that we propose to elaborate upon the decision-making process leading to the use of altermobilities.

Effects of life stage on modal use: making the first decision.

The qualitative method used here allowed for an inductive analysis of the data gathered in the field. Contrary to the hypothetico-deductive method, which puts forth a hypothesis and attempts to validate or invalidate it using field analysis, the inductive method strives to reconstruct the theory based on the data. Even if the researcher attempts to “abandon his preconceptions” (Durkheim, [1895] 1963: 34) before undertaking his investigation, he is never truly free from insights that are likely to be invalidated by the data collected: thus did we expect to encounter changes of modal habit in the life course of altermobilitists. One of the biggest surprises of this survey was precisely that: not merely the modal change itself but the continuity of use of the alternative transportation mode throughout the entire life cycle.

The strong effects of life stage in terms of modal uses came to light particularly during childhood, youth and young adulthood. We thus observed a diversity of practices and experimentation in terms of transportation modes during adolescence and youth. This period can be described as a period of trial and error, reminding us that youth is a time of transition during which the identity of the young adult is formed (Pugeault-Cicchelli *et al*, 2004). This trial and error period, however, is also linked to the meeting of two opposing logics of choice that occur during this stage in life: on the one hand, a strong desire for autonomy that tends to idealize ‘automobility’ and on the other, the economic constraints encountered by young people, students and those who have not yet established themselves professionally.

By the time they reached adulthood, however, we saw a ‘crystallization/sedimentation’ of habits; this diversity of practices among young people was gradually replaced by the dominance of a very specific means of locomotion. Two main profile types came to the foreground. Firstly, in the majority of the surveys taken, the crystallization occurs in favor of the individual car, implying a change in practice later in life. Secondly (and somewhat

surprisingly) this crystallization can favor altermobilitist modalities such as the bike, public transportation or carpooling.

The act of obtaining a driver's license appears decisive in the adoption of altermobilitist practices upon adulthood. Those who do not take this particular step become altermobilitists by default. For those, on the other hand, who learned to drive out of obligation, we often observed the adoption of strategies to avoid driving in adulthood. This was particularly the case for young women who passed their driving tests because of parental pressure yet without and real desire to do so, and who, as a result, had come to see driving as a constraint. For others still, learning to drive was a collective action from the start—like for one woman, who was the first in her family to get a driver's license and thus got used to driving her parents and siblings around from an early age. When we met her, she was still carpooling to and from work.

Whether a question of learning or socialization, different motives and reasoning can be used to explain altermobilitist practices during young adulthood. Whatever the hypothesis, the biographical aspect of our study shed light on the fact that altermobility would, for some, be a permanent fixture throughout the course of their lives. Altermobilitist practices, it appears, do not originate from a radical change in modal uses over the course of a lifetime but rather crystallize through constant use upon adulthood.

Analysis of the modal change: three change processes highlighted.

It seems, however, that for the majority of individuals, adulthood is synonymous with the rooting of motorist habits. Nonetheless, all of the individuals surveyed practiced altermobility for at least one of their journeys between home and work, meaning that their locomotion habits had changed during the course of their adult life. We analyzed the reason for modal change on the home-to-work commute: in this case, the reason for travel had very specific constraints that invariably affected the user's choice of transportation (by 'constraints' we mean in terms of social and material pressure). The very fact of living in society implies the inevitable existence of forces that regulate and organize social life: we call these constraints. These must not necessarily be interpreted as negative because, in some cases, they can be resources for action. To avoid categorizing these forces as positive or negative *a priori*, we will from this point on use the notion of 'imperatives' (Meissonnier, 2001: 153).

Several imperatives bore on home-to-work travel. To begin, the distance between the home and place of work directly influenced the choice of transportation. Distance was correlated to yet another imperative as well – commute duration – which itself is linked with

schedules, both in the personal and professional domains. The adding on of other activities from the basis of the home-to-work commute likewise constitutes a strong imperative in terms of modal choice. Finally, certain advantages or professional demands influenced modal choice¹. The ensemble of these imperatives thus creates a system in which modal choice for this journey is embedded. The systemic dimension of choice of transportation mode we observed here implies an implicit link between each element. As such, modification to any one of the imperatives can have repercussions on the entire system and thus modal choice. Nevertheless, more than any other factor, it was stability that presided over the system in the organization of daily life, because without major modification, the system is not likely to change and routine practices proliferate.

Change in transportation mode on the home-to-work commute is at the crux of the issue surrounding the transformation of routines. Sociologists have brought attention to the power of routines and habits that lead to a nearly unconscious reproduction of the same gestures that act as “internalized proof” (Kaufmann J-C., 1997: 124) in many of our daily activities. Inertia of routine has been emphasized in the field of mobility as well (Kaufmann V., 2000; Flamm, 2004a). Change of habit implies a veritable upheaval of pre-established routines. Given this, we sought to understand under what specific conditions such a profound re-examination of engrained habits took place.

Modal change is a complex process that simultaneously calls into play a biographical context favorable to change, a willingness to adopt altermobilitist practices and finally, trigger elements that cause the individual to take action. Modal change fits firstly into a biographical context wherein a re-examination of routines takes place. This re-examination can take a variety of forms: a shocking event that affects an individual’s life (a death, the decision to cohabitate, a separation, etc.), for example, or a simple modification of one of the system imperatives (a move, change of job, etc.): in short, a more or less unforeseen event that affects the course of an individual’s life and prompts a re-examination of his routines (Grossetti, 2006). The individual must also be predisposed (in any number of ways) to changing modes. Notably, in the literature on modal choice we find the idea of an “erosion of automobile use” (Goodwin, 1985), which can be linked to a burgeoning awareness of the costliness of commuting by car, weariness of enduring traffic congestion or the gradual build up of negative perceptions regarding automobile use. Predisposition can also manifest itself as an attraction to another mode of transportation, or even reflexivity on forms of locomotion that

¹ For example, it would seem that the issuing of a company car or the benefit of a company parking space encourages the use of the private car.

might be dissonant with the individual's burgeoning or set environmental values. Finally, a triggering event is necessary to prompt the individual to take action and change modes.

We thus identified three main types of triggers: imperatives, commitments and opportunities. In change processes triggered by imperatives, change resulted from the obligation to use another mode of transportation to get to and from work (a broken-down car, inability to drive, etc.). Nevertheless, the imperative can be more subtle; a gradually increasing driving budget that, once it reaches a certain level, becomes difficult for the household to assume financially, for example. Processes related to commitment are rather processes of reduction of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957): an individual who has become involved in civic and/or ecological activism naturally aligns his transportation practices with his personal philosophy. Finally, in opportunist processes, the change is triggered by an individual's direct encounter with an automobile alternative. Such changes typically result from the implementation of Corporate Transportation Programs². In the changes observed, it seemed apparent that it was the combination of all three factors (favorable biographical context, disposition to change and trigger elements) that caused the change. Triggers, however, play a crucial role in all change processes; because of them, the individual finds himself locked into a concrete change of practices. For this reason, it is important to emphasize the necessary role that alternative offers play, without which opportunist changes could not take place.

The role of environmental values in the change process.

We were particularly interested in the role of environmental consciousness in the change processes described here. Environmental awareness was indeed for some participants the path that led them to change their practices. In our observations, however, the link between environmental awareness and habit was neither obvious nor mechanical, because even favorable opinions regarding environmental conservation were an insufficient match for such engrained habits. We observed three types of attitudes here:

To begin, it was primarily in sworn modal changes that environmental values functioned as the change trigger. Activists expressed strong convictions regarding the environment that complimented and reinforced their associative and civic commitments: these convictions gave them the strength to adapt their practices to their beliefs.

Apart from this very specific population, values rarely came into play in the

² Corporate Transportation Programs, also called Mobility Programs, are programs set up by companies, managements or public establishments to encourage the site's users to use transportation other than private car.

participants' rhetoric; when they did appear, they tended to be unoriginal recycled speeches, not actual structuring components of daily practices. Environmental awareness in terms of altermobilitist commuting practices seemed to serve primarily as a justification *after the fact* that could be summed up in the phrase: "And what's more, what I'm doing is good for the environment!" Environmental values were invoked as one factor among others having influenced the decision to adopt altermobilitist commuting practices, but not necessarily as the trigger. Moreover, the opinions gathered here clearly show that the application of environmental convictions seemed only to occur insofar as the latter agreed with the practicality of the transportation mode. This second stance, which consisted in using environmental values to justify a change in habit, appeared to be predominant. Though we could assert this for methodological reasons with regard to our body of interviews, these findings in fact reflect the trends illuminated by large-scale surveys on the environment – surveys that show a near consensus of values and opinions in support of the environment but only a small population actually engaged in respectful practices of the environment on a daily basis (Bozonnet, 2006). Thus, while these values may truly exist as a part of an individual's personal philosophy, they come into play very little in terms of practices.

Finally, a third and relatively surprising stance was also observed consisting in putting the role of environmental values aside, going even as far as to deny the existence of environmental issues altogether. One of our interviewees made it clear that the environment was one topic she did not wish to broach. What is more, she felt personally affected by neither environmental problems nor environmental issues linked to the automobile. In this third scenario – where environmental values were negated by the individual herself – change in transportation practices could be entirely attributed to imperative.

Thus, faced with a system of imperatives and the routines described above, the role of values was a relatively weak factor in the change process. The integration of pro-environmental values and the development of ecological awareness alone did not appear sufficient enough to trigger a change process leading to the adoption of altermobilitist practices, except for activists. Nor did they seem essential to the change process, being sidestepped – even denied – by some. While environmental values are neither necessary nor sufficient to trigger a change process, they can nonetheless affect an individual's desire to change transportation modes. What is more, they are likewise determinant of an individual's desire to carry on with the new practices. Positive ecological values bring about an awareness that translates into a re-examination (not in practice but in thought) of motorist habits. Moreover, they are likely to facilitate the durability of new practices at the end of the change

process by bringing them together with a system of consenting values in our society.

Conditions for sustainable altermobilitist practices.

Home-to-work altermobilitist commuting practices become sustainable based on three key factors: the appropriation of commute time, social legitimization of the new practice and time of use.

Drivers-turned-altermobilitists had the feeling they were wasting time in their cars. Alternatively, even when their commute time by bike or on public transportation was longer in terms of actual time needed to get from point A to point B, participants did not see this time as wasted; on the contrary, it was time *fulfilled* — re-appropriated for other activities that obeyed logics of productivity, relaxation, sociability and even evasion (Flamm, 2004b). The logic of productivity consists in using commute time for working. In the logic of relaxation, the individual takes advantage of his commute time to rest, sleep, relax, etc. Travel time can likewise become a social opportunity; this was most notable in the case of carpooling, where the carpoolers – friends, colleagues or neighbors – spent their commute time chatting, sharing information about their personal lives and building relationships (Vincent, 2008). This time can also be an opportunity for parents to strengthen ties with their children, as was the case for one father who used his train commute to spend time with his children. Finally, commute time can also be a time of evasion, like for those who use this time to learn a new language, or cyclists who use their commute as a way to stay physically active.

At the same time, new practices must be legitimized by the individual's circle of peers in order to facilitate their sustainability. When the significant other (Berger, Luckmann, 2006), for example, does not legitimize the new practice, the individual might eventually seek out other 'significant others' (within associative milieus, for example) who *will* legitimize them, so as to reinforce his choice. Finally, as time passes, new practices eventually become rooted in daily routines by repetition; each subsequent modification to these practices, however, becomes more difficult to integrate.

Further altermobilitist practices: broadening motility.

While the individuals we interviewed demonstrated sustainable altermobilitist practices on their commute between home and work, they had not renounced automobile use altogether. By enlarging the view to include all motives for travel, we observed several attitudes vis-à-vis automobile use and ownership. One group of altermobilitists made no attempt to limit use, though some did express feelings of guilt for not doing so. Others tried to

rationalize use, some going even so far as to give up certain journeys requiring use of a car. In terms of ownership, it appears few altermobilitists were willing to abandon their vehicle definitely; those who did part with their cars did so either for important financial reasons or as a conscious commitment to the environment. The majority of those interviewed had not given up ownership, however. For those who attempted to limit use, the fact of owning a car offered them continued freedom of modal choice. Rather surprisingly, it seemed that merely owning a vehicle reinforced alternative choices by giving altermobilitists the sense that the choice of transportation was *theirs*. What is more, they could still commute to work by car from time to time should the need arise.

Our observations lead us to imagine further links between automobility and altermobility in the future. Altermobilitist practices offer a broadening of possibilities as far as mobility, or, a broadening of “motility” (Kaufmann, V. et al, 2003). The ‘alternative’ nature of the mobilities studied here can be called into question, but in our opinion the bicycle, public transportation and carpooling greatly widen the range of alternatives to the individual car insofar as they provide an escape from “automobile dependence” (Dupuy, 1999).

Conclusion

In the end, we were able to distinguish four main types of processes that led individuals to adopt of altermobilitist practices on their commute for home to work, or vice versa. The first was rather unexpected; without the biographical component of our data-collection process, it would very likely have gone unnoticed. This process can be defined in terms of constancy of use beginning at adult age and throughout adulthood. Habits formed during this stage of life, which are formative as far as adult commuting practices, are *not* solo habits but altermobilitist habits. The other three are processes of change; as observed on the home-to-work commute, they can be seen as complex processes triggered either by imperatives, commitment or opportunity. They also, however, necessitate a biographical context that is conducive to a changing of routines as well as a predisposition to alternative modes of transportation. Ultimately, it is these four main types of decision-making processes that led to the use of alternative modes of transportation.

Sustainability of new uses is a process as well; it plays a part in social legitimization and pastime, but also – and most importantly – in the appropriation of commute time, the various means of doing which are, for us, the cornerstone of understanding modal choice. Finally, among the modal uses, the individual car does not seem to be in opposition with other modes of transportation; more accurately, they should be thought of as complementary, as it is

their combination that makes the realization of the ensemble of daily activities possible.

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