# Formative Trip

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Whether it's undertaking a pilgrimage, going on a round-the-world trip or travelling to discover new ways of life or practices, many people embark on journeys that will forever change their lives. Formative journeys have offered true initiation experiences throughout history, combining a break with everyday life and self-realization, and connecting mobility to the core transformations within each and every one of us. Alexandre Rigal shows what's at stake in these journeys.

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## Short definition

A formative trip is a journey made for non-financial purposes that transforms, in an irreversible way, the lifestyle of the individual or group of people who make it. Whether its meaning comes from the journey itself or from the destination, the formative trip implies an exceptional break with normal life, unique in its duration, its preparation and the personal commitment of the one who performs it.

## Long definition

Michel de Montaigne travelled often for his diplomatic duties and hobbies. With his brother, he travelled from Bordeaux to Rome, telling the story in his Travel Journal (Journal de voyage). While the original purpose of his trip, during which he made regular stops in spas, was therapeutic, Montaigne called it a "humanist pilgrimage" [1]. Travelling through lands he knew of from his readings, being educated by important figures, he learned Italian and earned Roman citizenship. Montaigne wrote that he used his journeys to "rub and polish his brain against that of others [2]". In his *Essays* , he reveals a method to make the most of a travel companion: "learn something from the information of those with whom I confer […] and put my company upon those subjects they are the best able to speak of" (1965, p. 75) – and he further notes that when traveling, he never forgets his books (1965, p.827). For the philosopher, all trips are an opportunity to learn and so this educational goal can be the trip's motivation. This example shows that the formative trip is a historically entrenched practice that doesn't fit inside regular fields of study like daily mobility, residential mobility or migration. It involves a physical trip, far from home and without any daily return, often several weeks long, following an itinerary that has special qualities or will end at a place perceived as extraordinary. This is not a migration, an exile, or a financially motivated trip, but a journey with a return. It is a trip that upsets one's existence, breaking routines, leading to the learning of new skills or establishing conversational routes. During these travels, the individual acquires radically new competences (new knowledge, new skills, new name...) that endure. As a result, if one refers to a synthetic typology of mobilities (Gallez, Kaufmann, 2009, p. 46), this kind of journey is close to tourism, but what makes it unique is that its purpose is to transform the lifestyle of the person who makes it. While a tourist enjoys a moment outside of his daily life by travelling and accessing a specific and often exotic destination (Levy, Lussault, 2003), the experience of tourism isn't meant to require change upon return, rather it allows a temporary, remote change that is easily reversible. During the formative trip, the journey and the destination aren't lived as a parenthesis, but as an important time of transformation of habits, in order to lead a different life upon return. More than tourism, with which it shares some qualities, the formative trip is different from the trips performed by commuters or expats whose respective experiences are, here again, highly reversible in their effects. Commuters leverage the means of communication and motor transport so that they don't have to move homes or change their social, linguistic or cultural context - thus maintaining their lifestyle (Kaufmann, 2008, p. 20). They are the opposite of travelers who seek radical change. Similarly, expats are seen as people who look to stay together amongst themselves, who have little linguistic and cultural integration, and whose temporary residential mobility only marginally changes their lifestyles (Redon, 2010). In addition, mobilities performed for educational purposes have a long history within travel practices and have also had a strong civilizational influence - think of pilgrimages, or the successful Erasmus program that has contributed to building the European spirit, or woofing that promotes an environmental cause. These are three examples studied in this article. It appears therefore that through a change of scenery or culture, or through the radical change that is sought, travel can be a way of learning new practices (see Peyvel, 2019). The different kinds of formative trips that have been performed and imagined show the educational aspirations driving groups of people at a given time or individuals at a specific moment in their life.

The topic of the formative trip is particularly interesting for research on mobility because it introduces a new dimension: it questions the meaning of life. As a transformative personal experience, the formative trip changes the traveler's life forever.

## Development

### 1. The common origins of the trip and of the formation

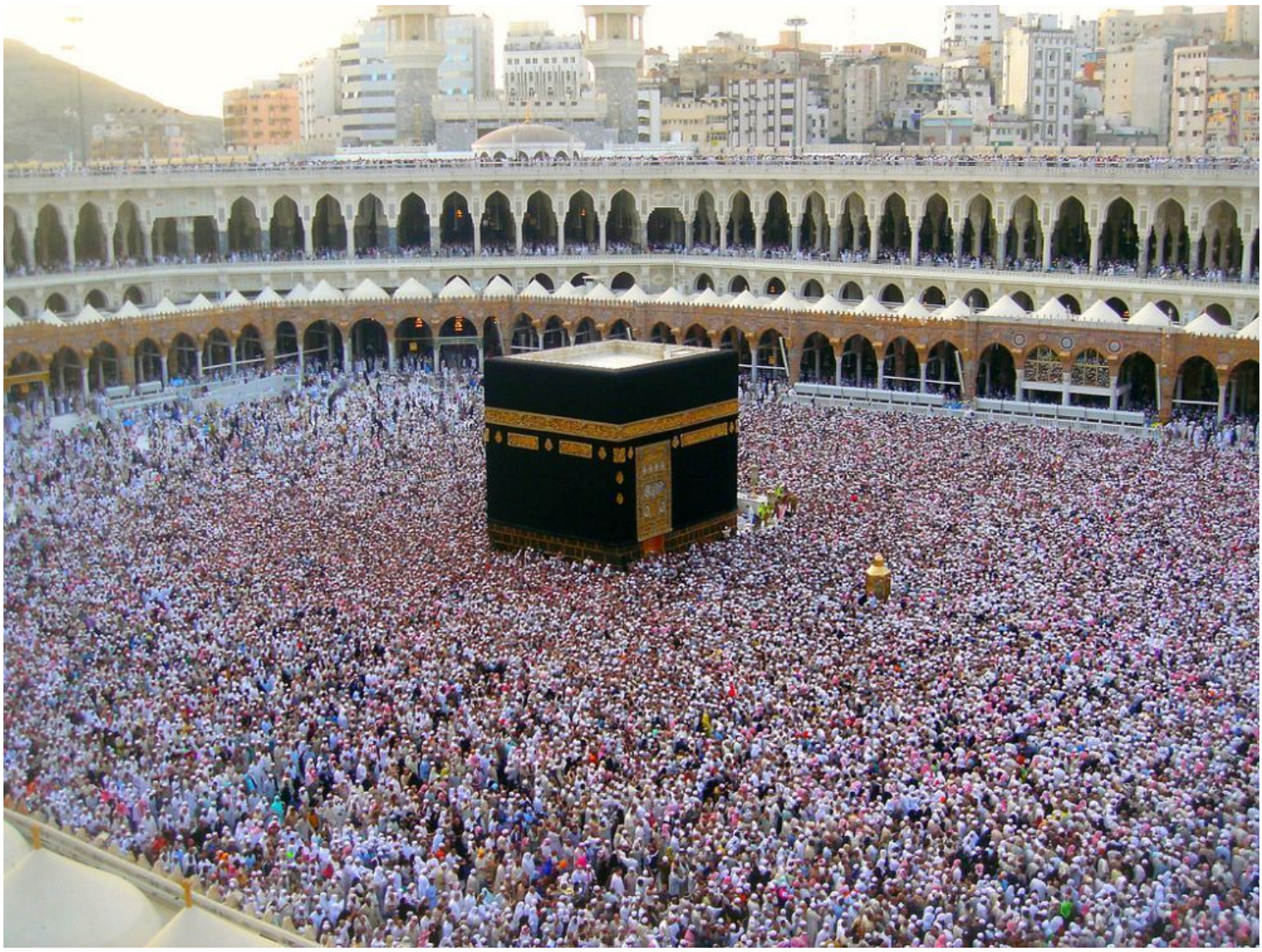
The etymology of the keywords of learning and change shows how deep the relationship is between travel and formation. For instance, it's striking to notice the origins of words like "pedagogy," from the Greek word paidagogós (the slave whose job it is to accompany children), or "method," from the Greek word méthodos ("pursuit of a path"), or "conversion," from the Latin conversio ("movement of the stars"), which before taking on a religious connotation was used by the Stoics to mean a change of lifestyle [3] (Hadot, 2014, p. 133-134). The importance of travel in the religious sphere is also illustrated by tales of conversions that are at the root of major traditions and collective imaginaries, such as St. Paul on the road to Damascus, or Buddha leaving the gilded walls of his Palace during an important walk, or the collective conversion that came from the Exodus.

### 2. Past and present critics

Despite these longstanding intellectual and historical roots, some major proponents of life changes claim that travel can be a source of malformation. Epictetus (50 - c. 125) mocked pilgrimages that he thought were distractions from what really matters, i.e. existential questions (1937, II, 24). Seneca (c. 1-65) was disdainful of repeated trips that he viewed as the peculiar practice "of a sick mind" (2014, p. 39). The founder of western monasticism, St. Benedict (c. 480-547) was strongly opposed to the gyrovagues, the wandering monks who travelled from monastery to monastery (Humbert, 1980, p. 31). Later still, Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380-1471), famous for his Imitation of Christ, had no qualms claiming that "they who undertake many pilgrimages seldom become holy [4]." Some pragmatic critics of the Grand Tour, a journey for upper-class young British men, started recruiting chaperones for their offspring as early as the sixteenth century, to keep them away from the courtesans of the cities in southern Italy. Today, some students and teachers are critical of Erasmus trips, citing their superficiality [5] or academic

quality [6]. Another example is the many Westerners who return from India with the so-called "traveler's syndrome," their personality having shifted as a result of the disorientation caused by the intensity and novelty of their perceptions. Similar phenomena have been observed among travelers to Jerusalem, or Japanese tourists in Paris, destabilized by the discrepancy between an idealized vision of the city and their real-world experience there.

More generally, some contemporary critics postulate that the space for travel tends to disappear as urbanization homogenizes places that were once the most exotic and that travelling elites attend the same "non-places" (Augé, 2015; see Koolhaas, 2011), while others talk of an injunction to travel that some authors describe as "wanderlust" (Anders, 2002, p. 135). The latter claim that excess mobility is detrimental to the idea of a journey, as recurrent travel neutralizes what should make it exceptional. Excess travel hurts the formative journey because it annihilates its irreversibility (in terms of transformation) and takes on a hedonistic aspect, unless the repeated trips are organized according to a prolonged goal of self-improvement. In addition, instead of being confronted with the discovery of an other's existence, contemporary travelers focus more on staging a rehearsed version of themselves, through an archive of pictures, turning each journey into a museum exhibit (Desportes, 2005, p. 209). Other works highlight the socio-economic disparities, such as the fact that formative journeys are often only available to certain elites (Wagner, 2007).



## 3. Proposed typology of formative trips

The different kinds of formative trips find their meaning and effects in various ways. For example, the question of which travel mode to choose will be stronger in some kinds of formative trips than in others. This points to differences in how the body is considered: the formation will not be internalized in the same way. For walkers and cyclists, every step of the way shapes their muscles, while for those who travel by means of enclosed and motorized transport, the journey offers fewer learning opportunities than the destination. From there, three major types of formative trips stand out, according to three main dualities:

- journeying on a path / getting to a specific destination;
- reversibility / irreversibility through time of the changed practice;
- temporary change / total conversion of lifestyle.

### a. Learning through movement

The act of moving can be a preferred method of transformation, regardless of the destination and even sometimes without there necessarily being one at the end of the formative wandering. From Antiquity to present day, some solitary travelers have sought a change of mindset by travelling to unfamiliar places, precipitating their effort to remove themselves from routines - the xeniteia of Christian monks (Guillaumont, 1967). What matters in the final destination isn't the intrinsic qualities of the location, but rather its negative qualities: the goal is to get there because it is an unfamiliar place. When the new place becomes in turn a familiar one, then you move again. To a lesser degree, the phenomenon of temporary disconnection can also be seen among backpackers (Lachance, 2014). As such, the goal is sometimes more to wander along a defined path, rather than to reach a final point. Travelers experience a change of scenery as well as the physical and moral challenge of the journey itself. By the same token, choosing one mode of transportation rather than another involves specific approaches and training. Walking, for instance, is more conducive to reflection and the invention of ideas, at least when walking relatively slowly (Kahneman, 2011, p. 40). It has long been considered a preparation for conversion. Socrates walked alone or with disciples, and the peripatetic school - the school of those who liked to wander, gathered around Aristotle and his successors - was designed to convert men to philosophy. Today, the Seuil association [7] that helps troubled teens, centers its educational philosophy around the act of walking. Each teen in the organization takes part in a training program during which they undertake a 100-day hike between point A and point B, under the supervision of an accompanying adult. Removed from their original environment, these teens go through foreign lands, encounter their hospitality, and discover new languages and customs. By making them walk thousands of kilometers, the purpose of the organization is to allow them to experience something extraordinary that can initiate change, to teach them a certain kind of perseverance and to improve how they appear to others and how they view themselves. The physical effort required to perform the hike becomes a kind of test that reveals certain abilities or vulnerabilities. And thereby, it is a journey of self-discovery.

### b. The educational virtue of the destination

Depending on the type of formative trip, the mode of transport will be more or less important. As we saw, with active mobilities, it is the journey that matters. But when the trip is mainly performed by car, train or plane, the desired formative experience will really be related to a specific location. When you are heading abroad for an Erasmus program, what does it matter if you go there by train or by plane? By the same token, volunteering in a developing country is a way of experiencing a foreign environment, often to temporarily pursue an ideal and acquire new virtues. For such projects, the kind of transport used to get there is usually not of great importance. The same logic applies for young people seeking to gain some independence by spending a year abroad as an au pair or on a gap year. In these kinds of trips, the location in which the formative experience takes place is more important. In late antiquity, we know of the many wanderings of philosophers and mystics who travelled to be with their masters and acquire learning (Brown, 1998, p. 141-142). The deserts of Egypt, Palestine and Syria (Guillaumont, 1975) were prized locations to meet elite monks whose teachings were sought after to grow one's faith, and they remain so to this day (Humbert, 1980). In modern times, we could cite the case of European activists who travel to the Zapatista region of Chiapas (Melenotte, Marie, 2010). Those who travel there can then experience an alternative political reality and learn an activist lifestyle. In the same vein, the formative experience can consist of living in an ecovillage (Liftin, 2014), a community where you are trained in permaculture or meditation. In each of these instances, the traveler is directed towards a goal: reaching a place of learning and experiencing another reality. Meanwhile, residencies at the Academy of France in Rome highlight the long-standing attractiveness of some great places of learning and, more generally, of the Eternal City. Since the seventeenth century, the Academy, now at the Villa Medici, has welcomed all kinds of artists so that they can complete their training. Originally, the purpose of the residency was for painters to acquaint themselves with the perennial models of antiquity and the Renaissance, institutionalizing a trip performed since the 16th century by many French painters [8]. Now, the Academy offers residencies to all artistic disciplines and serves as a research center. In this instance, while the means of transport have greatly evolved since the time when the first painters travelled there, all the way to the present day when musicians and videographers make the journey, the formative nature of the trip itself has scarcely changed, and what matters is not the journey but the destination itself.

### c. "Hitting the road": a life experience

Finally, for some formative trips, while the destination remains important, the journey itself is an important source of learning. In the early modern era, the Grand Tour, for instance, was a way for upper-class men to complete their education: they travelled to satisfy their curiosity, to perform a pilgrimage to Rome, to attend schools, to learn a foreign language, or even to master the arts of war (Brizay, 2006 p.12; Boutier, 2004). Popularized by young English travelers in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Grand Tour is based on a model of traveling, praised especially by philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) [9], that passes through France and finds its inspiring conclusion in Italy. Today, the same curiosity and existential quest is what drives some backpackers to move around in pursuit of foreign experiences, whether it is meeting wise monks in India or Nepal or living out Kerouac's On the road by heading for the West and South of the United States. In all of these cases, "hitting the road" means putting oneself to the test, first prior to traveling in methodically planning the trip, then subsequently by adapting to recurrent changes in daily life, prompting a radical shift in a person's life story, creating a before and an after as the person overcomes the test by virtue of self-discovery (Lachance, 2013). Here, both journey and destination have unquestionable value.

## 4. Three contemporary formative trips

In this last part, we offer three modern-day examples of formative trips, which are all avenues worth studying within the research on mobility about controversial topics: the European project, ecology, and religious practice.

### a. The Erasmus program: acquiring a common identity

One formative trip that has gained much importance in recent decades is the European mobility program called Erasmus (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students), which covers twenty-eight Member States of the European Union, the other states of the European Economic Area and European Free Trade Association, as well as States currently joining [10]. In Europe, mobility is used for the emergence of a common identity (Kaufmann, Audikana, 2016, p. 17). As such, since 1987, the program has allowed nearly four million students to travel [11]. In 2017, 725,000 new students discovered a foreign country, at a cost of 2.2 billion euros [12]. This kind of program follows in the footsteps of international trips once reserved for a smaller elite (Wagner, 2007), although its reach is still limited today (Ballatore, 2009) [13]. With an average age of 23, Erasmus students spend 6-to-12 months abroad, a specific time in which new and intensive training is possible (Cicchelli, 2012, p. 115). Removed from their regular spaces and forced to adapt to an unfamiliar environment - where they usually participate in formal or informal student groups (the Erasmus Student Network had 13,000 members in 2018 [14]) as well as local groups outside of school – Erasmus students find themselves in the necessary conditions for this transformation. While these trips allow students to pursue their studies, they have an objective: discovering a foreign culture, integrating a European culture, and developing a cosmopolitan mindset (Cicchelli, 2012). While some students, when exposed to difference, will close up and have a “defensive” attitude, others will instead seek to adapt, to acquire the language of their temporary place of residence and even socialize internationally. Finally, some students will change course following their Erasmus experience [15]. This example shows how youth is a favorable period of life for formative trips, extending a daily life that revolves around learning, especially in school (Réau, 2009). In terms of its effects, according to the European Union, the Erasmus program increases students’ curiosity, their ability to solve problems, their adaptability and their self-confidence. In particular, this formative trip seems to bear fruits later when students look for work [16]. As part of the Erasmus program, it isn’t the journey but the foreign destination that gives the whole trip meaning. The reversibility of the trip, since the student returns home after a defined period, is offset by the irreversibility of the acquired skills.

The subsequent lifestyle changes differ depending on the students, the countries involved and the experiences there.

**b. Woofing: learning an eco-friendly life**

To learn how to live and cultivate land in a more sustainable way, a new phenomenon has appeared: woofing. Since 1973, the WWOOF Organization (World-Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) has generalized a model previously tried and tested by seasoned travelers, permaculture pioneers and alternative communities: allowing motivated people to get work experience for a relatively short period of time (usually one to several months) on organic farms that are part of a registered network. In exchange for their working hours, travelers (called woofers) receive a presentation of the farm, training in the farm's activities, as well as bed and board. In March 2019, the French WWOOF website listed more than 1760 host farms [17]. Worldwide, there are 60 countries with a dedicated association and 55 others with at least one host farm [18]. In 2010 alone, there were 80,014 woofers, proponents of an eco-friendly cosmopolitanism. The original purpose of the WWOOF was to provide some time in the countryside to city dwellers. Ever since she moved to London, Sue Coppard, founder of the movement, longed to reclaim one day the rural life she had known in her childhood. To reconnect with farm work, she began posting classified ads looking for host farms and got many responses, quickly developing an exchange network between city dwellers and farmers. Today, the WWOOF website claims that the main goal of the organization is to train people in "organic farming, biodynamics and permaculture [19]." The goal of transmitting knowledge is therefore clearly stated. On top of this, participants come with a diverse range of other ambitions: experience a community lifestyle, test the prospect of becoming an organic farmer and learn to be self-sufficient in food production [20]. Behind these goals, we can see once again how a change of scenery is powerful for transforming lifestyles [21] and acquiring new skills. Woofing is therefore a practice that is based on the search for a particular place. The irreversibility of the skills acquired seems weaker, due to the shortness of the stay and the difficulty of reapplying rural skills to an urban context. However, the temporary change in habits and practices is quite radical, unexpected in their details and dependent on the host, the season and the tasks required.

**c. Pilgrimages**

Pilgrimages have proved to be resistant to the diversity of beliefs, changes made to places and evolutions in modes of transport. They are the archetypical formative trip, although they are now also performed for tourism. Whether it is to Delphi, Haridwar, Mecca, Rome or Jerusalem [22], or even to secondary pilgrimage sites such as the mouleds of Upper-Egypt (Mayeur-Jackson, 2005), travelers arrive in droves. Among the great pilgrimages are Mecca, the Camino de Santiago or the World Youth Days, attracting regularly more than 3 million participants [23]. Aside from religious pilgrimages, there are also historical pilgrimages, such as those to Auschwitz and Oradour-on-Glane, or political ones such as those to Colombey-Les-Deux-Églises, or Jarnac, or Franco's tomb and Lenin's mausoleum (for secular forms of pilgrimage, see Chantre, D'Hollander, Grévy, 2014). Pilgrimages involve the human body according to a predefined circuit. This can mean hiking a signposted path - such as the Camino de Santiago - or performing circumambulations around an holy site - such as in Mecca. The effort of walking is so strongly associated with pilgrimages that some authors call them "religiously-motivated walks" (Vicaire, 1980, p. 18). In any case, the physical effort goes hand in hand with the religious effort - except of course when back in the Middle Ages, a court condemned an individual to perform a pilgrimage (Huchet, 2015, p. 34-35) that could then be carried out by proxy by a professional traveler (Dossat, 1980).

Depending on beliefs and objectives, the effects one hopes to produce are different. It may be to seek a cure or the remission of sins, or to give thanks for a Saint's benevolence (for Egyptian Muslims and Christians: Mayeur-Jaoen, 2005). Other pilgrims seek to strengthen their faith, break their routines, pray, bring a blessed item, fulfill religious-legal obligations. Aside from conversions initiated by the presence of holy sites, pilgrimages temporarily transform daily practices (food, sleep, hygiene) because of the unfamiliar environment and the rules for performing them (for example, fasting). At the same time, they confer on pilgrims, who complete the journey, a form of irreversible common identity, sometimes signaled with an identifying name: Hajj, muqaddas, miquelot, etc. These names mark the passage from one state to another in an individual's life, defined by having accomplished the pilgrimage. The pilgrim is thereby defined by a state of movement, having left his/her familiar environment and habits, and having discovered an extraordinary place (Vicaire, 1980, p. 18-19) - mountains and headlands are favored locations for a large number of pilgrimages (Huchet, 2015, p. 56). It involves the acquisition of irreversible characteristics, since it marks the end of a penance, allows the realization of a wish to a Saint, fulfills religious-legal obligations, etc.

## Conclusion

Bruno Latour insists that "when it comes to mobility, we always forget to specify that we're only ever talking of a certain ratio between transformation and transportation" (2009, p. 8). In this article, we have described the transportations that potentially lead to the greatest transformations. While these are important realities of mobility from a historical standpoint, they matter from a sociological one too because of the sheer volume of people who engage today in transformative travel. Pilgrimages, Erasmus experiences, woofing and other kinds of journeys mobilize tens of millions of travelers each year. The difference between these trips is whether they focus on the destination, the journey, or both at the same time. Formative trips are the purest example of experiences that aim to transform one's whole lifestyle, regardless of how prepared one is. Formative trips are a kind of education that shapes people forever, through travel, through "the harsh asceticism of the road" (Humbert, 1980, p. 20). The present attempt to define them reminds us that learning does not merely mean "to accumulate information. We understand that real learning implies something of a conversion" (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 492), especially when it involves travel.

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**Notes**

2 https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Montaigne_-_Essais,_Musart,_1847.djvu/111 (accessed in March 2019).

3 For example: “XLVII. Contemplate the course of the stars, as if you were going alongside them. And constantly consider the changes of the elements into one another. Because such thoughts purge away the impurity of life on earth.” (Aurelius, 1943, p. 119).

4 https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Page%3ACorneille_- *Imitation_de_J%C3%A9sus-Christ%2C* %C3%A9dition_1862.djvu/182 (accessed in March 2019).

5 https://www.lemonde.fr/campus/article/2014/09/30/j-ai-eu-l-impression-qu-erasmus-m-avait-enferme-dans-un-moule-superficiel-et-standardise_4498099_4401467.html or https://cafebabel.com/fr/article/homo-erasmus-ou-la-nullite-des-echanges-5ae008b8f723b35a145e403e/ (accessed in March 2019).

6 https://etudiant.lefigaro.fr/article/erasmus-le-casse-tete-des-notes-et-des-equivalences_624571ac-d5bd-11e6-ab28-e18d41dc5bee/ (accessed in March 2019).

7 https://assoseuil.org (accessed in March 2019).

9 https://gallica.bnf.fr/dossiers/html/dossiers/VoyagesEnFrance/themes/Formation.htm (accessed in March 2019).

10 There are other similar academic exchange programs, such as: Erasmus mundus that allows European students to travel around the world, the Leonardo program for vocational training in Europe, the Eiffel scholarships, the Fulbright Program, etc.

11 https://www.lemonde.fr/campus/article/2017/12/12/les-bourses-erasmus-pour-partir-a-l-etranger-seront-plus-nombreuses-et-plus-elevees-en-2018_5228624_4401467.html (accessed in March 2019).

12 http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/statistics_en (accessed in March 2019).

13 See also: https://sms.hypotheses.org/11191 (accessed in March 2019).

14 https://esn.org/about (accessed in March 2019).

15 https://theconversation.com/partir-avec-erasmus-a-lecole-de-la-difference-98968 (accessed in March 2019).

16 http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/images/infograph/2016-erasmus-impact.jpg (accessed in March 2019).

17 https://app.wwoof.fr/hosts (accessed in March 2019).

18 https://wwoofinternational.org/media/media-file/ (accessed in March 2019).

19 https://www.wwoof.fr/notre-mission (accessed in March 2019).

20 See Sue Coppard’s interview, https://bestculturaldestinations.com/blog/sue-coppard-wwoof (accessed in March 2019).

21 See Vincent Rauzier, « Les alternatifs d’Ariège : « innovateurs par retrait » du monde rural montagnard ?”, https://unhiv.hypotheses.org/612 (accessed in March 2019).

22 The memorial strata deciding the Christian pilgrimage of the twentieth century were broken down by Halbwachs (2008).

23 https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hajj#Le_p%C3%A8lerinage_en_chiffres ; https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C3%A8lerinage_de_Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle#cite_note-55 ; https://croire.la-croix.com/Definitions/Lexique/JMJ/Les-chiffres-des-JMJ (accessed in March 2019).

## 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.

En savoir plus x

## Formative Trip

Whether it's undertaking a pilgrimage, going on a round-the-world trip or travelling to discover new ways of life or practices, many people embark on journeys that will forever change their lives. Formative journeys have offered true initiation experiences throughout history, combining a break with everyday life and self-realization, and connecting mobility to the core transformations within each and every one of us. Alexandre Rigal shows what’s at stake in these journeys.

En savoir plus x

## 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

## Residential mobility

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

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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**Associated Thematics :**

Lifestyles

- Diversity of lifestyles
- Leisure & tourism

Theories

- Concepts
- History

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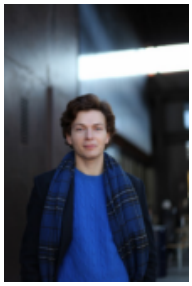

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Alexandre Rigal is a postdoctoral researcher at the Ecole Urbaine de Lyon and editor of the global media Anthropocene2050. As a sociologist, he works on social change, both in everyday life and during events, at individual, community, and global scales. He was a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley and completed his PhD at EPFL.

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