Becoming Altermobile

By
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Altermobilities (public transport, bicycle, car sharing, etc.) are sustainable alternatives to automobility for the home to work commute. What explains these changing practices in modes of transport?

While the car has become the dominant mode of transport in contemporary 20th century societies, its spread has brought with it a plague of negative consequences, including traffic congestion, the consumption of space, pollution and environmental problems. The rapid emergence of such aspects is now forcing us to monitor our use of the car. Obviously, in order to do so, it is important to know upon what basis drivers choose other forms of transport, and to think about how they can appropriate those alternatives. I call these other forms of transport 'altermobilities.' These include public transport, the bicycle, car sharing or any combination of these modes for example, riding a bicycle to a station and then taking a train to work.Research on altermobilities has focused on the home to work commute. The data used to obtain the results comes from qualitative interviews done in France using the life story method among a sample of approximately 50 people, all of whom were altermobile for their home to work commute.Why the life story method? Because it enabled me to get people talking about their lives and the different modes of transport they had used at different times, the elements that influenced various changes during their lifetimes, and to reconstruct periods of stability and ones of transition.

The modal 'trial and error' of young people

With regard to the stages of the lifecycle, two major periods are highly influential in structuring a person's life. The first is youth: childhood and adolescence. This is followed by a period, in some cases, during university studies when things are not yet completely stable in an individual's life. The youth phase is characterised by experimentation and a 'trial and error' approach to modes of transport, for example, taking the train, public transport, hitchhiking, possibly borrowing a car and sharing it with several people, borrowing a bicycle, etc. To some extent, it's a question of figuring it out for oneself. Of course, it's also linked to the economic constraints that young people who don't necessarily have enough money to buy a car and use it to get about face. We could call this period one of modal 'trial and error'.

Stabilising of the use of modes of transport

At what sociologists call 'adulthood', there is a sort of stabilising of the use of modes of transport, characterized by professional stability, typically when studies end and we start working, characterized by conjugal and family stability. This stabilisation is reflected in the crystallising of the use of transport

modes into two main categories:

1. First choice: the car

The top modal choice is the car. As soon as people get their driving licence and first car, they completely abandon the other modes of transport they used prior to that time in favour of exclusive use of their car. Finally, it is the first mode of stabilization of uses when moving into adulthood. This is particularly obvious in those generations that moved into adulthood during the 60s, 70s and 80s.

2. Towards altermobility practices

Another set of practices develops as individuals enter adulthood: altermobility practices. It's rather surprising. I must say that when I did this empirical study, I certainly didn't expect this result. In fact, there are people who, as their lives stabilise career- and family-wise, opt for alternative modes such as public transport, cycling or car-pooling. How can this be explained? Several factors come into play. Obviously, it can be linked to where people live, especially when their home is located in a densely-populated urban zone. There is also the influence of belonging to a particular social group. It's something we see very clearly among cyclists: they are often involved with associations or groups that are slightly alternative and citizen-oriented, where cycling is something that is highly valued. It is also linked to the effects of learning processes. For example, there was the case of a woman from a large family, whose parents didn't have driving licences, and who became the first member of her family to pass the driving test. So she learned to drive in a collective way, because she was always asked to take her family shopping or elsewhere. So, for her, car use was clearly linked to a collective usage, a habit which she kept as she grew older.

What processes of change favour altermobilities?

Let's now look at these processes of change, which I analysed for the home to work commute. These processes are relatively complex because they involve three types of elements. The first is personal disposition, i.e. a state of mind that makes people naturally disposed to changing their mode of transport. Secondly, there's the importance of a biographical context that is favourable to change. The third element is triggers. Let's now look at each of these elements in greater detail.

1. Negative or positive disposition

Let's start with dispositions, of which there are different types. There are negative dispositions as regards the car. These are people who are fed up with driving, who deal with traffic jams, parking issues, accidents, etc. on a daily basis and who, as a result, have negative feeling about the car and who think "I'd like to find a different mode of transport." Meanwhile, there are those with a positive disposition toward other forms of transport, like cycling proponents, for instance. These people think: "Between my job and my family, I just can't seem to find time in the day for sport, and I'd like to use the time I spend commuting cycling. It would be a way of doing a sporting activity." Finally, there is a third type of disposition, which is more of a reflexive intellectual analysis involving awareness of environmental and ecological issues and values. These people think that using their cars every day isn't very good for the environment or the planet, and that, ideally, they would like to find an alternative means of travel.

2. The biographical context

It should be made clear that these changes come into play systematically when there is a favourable biographical context. Here, we're talking about at all types of events that lead people to change their habits and routines. These could be significant biographical events, such as the death of a spouse, which leads to a complete reconfiguring of a person's daily life. They could also be linked to other events in an individual's life, such as the birth of a child, the decision to live with someone, a separation, grown-up children leaving the family home, etc. There are also much simpler events, such as moving house or changing jobs, which can also lead to a reorganising of the home to work commute.

3. Triggers: constraint, commitment or opportunity

Finally, in order for the change itself to take place, there must be a trigger. These, too, can be of very different natures. The most common among these is what I call the sudden or unexpected constraint, when an individual suddenly finds him or herself with a broken leg and is unable to drive, or with a car that's become immobilised either because of a breakdown or an accident, etc. Suddenly, the person is obliged to find an alternative mode of transport and thus, for example, must ask a colleague to take them to work, or use public transport. Faced with such sudden and unexpected constraints, people are forced to adapt, to find new solutions. The second type of trigger is what I called commitment. Here, in terms of profile, we are primarily talking about activist altermobilists - individuals who, through a change in transport modes, put their values and actions in line. Their environmental and civic values are very important to them, and they therefore feel obliged to change their mode of transport, so as to keep them coherent with their personal values. The third and final type of trigger is opportunity, i.e. that individuals change their mode of transport because they 'encounter' an alternative to the car for their home to work commute. I use the word 'encounter' here deliberately, as the change could result from an encounter with someone willing to carpool, or encountering a public transport alternative following the introduction of a new infrastructure or transport service. So the "encounter", this new possibility, actually triggers a change in the choice of travel mode. What needs to be said about this aspect, which also involves the element of opportunity, is that it's precisely the sequence we find with changes in travel modes that follow the introduction of mobility plans by companies. about the various travel alternatives. As a result, people discover that there are reasonable alternatives available to meet their transport needs for getting to work.

How can mobile practices be made to last?

The question we can ask, once the reason for the change has been understood, particularly when it's linked to a sudden and unexpected constraint, is why people continue to use the new mode. Once the broken leg has healed, or once the car is back from the repair shop, I can get back into my car as before, and my altermobility experience will have been nothing but an aside, an experiment. In reality, however, that's not exactly how it happens, or at least not for the people I met, because they were long-term altermobilists. In reality, the continuation of altermobility practices is based on several factors.

1. The feeling of saving time

People who use these alternative modes find that their travel time gives them something they didn't get from their car journeys. In other words, whereas they felt they were wasting their time before, they suddenly have the feeling they're saving time, and that they actually are gaining extra time with their home to work commute, whether it's through carpooling, public transport or cycling. It's time that they can use for relaxing, talking, meeting other people, reading, etc. If we look at carpooling in particular, the time factor is critical. In fact, very often, before trying out carpooling, people told us, "For me, one of the attractive aspects of carpooling is saving on the cost of journeys." But in reality, when you talk to people who actually practice carpooling, that factor is almost completely forgotten, compared to the

conviviality they find in journeys shared with other people. And it's really this conviviality that makes carpooling a lasting practice.

2. Giving legitimacy to new practices

The second important element for understanding what makes these practices sustainable in the long term is the issue of their legitimisation. The idea here is that we feel we must legitimise the things that we do every day. When these new practices are altermobilities, they are more or less legitimised by the fact that they are born of environmental values that are widely shared among the population. However, sometimes we need other sources of legitimacy, i.e. other people, other places, other spaces in which these practices can be legitimised, especially when it comes to bicycle use. Even a decade ago, the bike had a relatively negative image. Cycling was a mode of transport for the poor or slightly mad eco-warriors. Cyclists, however, had a real need to feel they weren't on the margins of society and to legitimise their use of bikes. So they became involved with cyclists' associations, where they could share their experiences and thus legitimise their practice.

3. Creating new routines and habits

The final factor when it comes to making these practices sustainable is, of course, the creation of habits and routines, because the more you do something, the better you become at doing it: you know how something functions, you know how it works, there's no need to ask yourself a thousand questions and, suddenly, it all becomes easier. And in any case, we no longer have the energy to change and start all over again doing

something else. Home to work commutes… and the others?

If we take a step back from these changes in modes of transport, two questions nevertheless remain: first, why do we travel for? Because not all of our travel is between our home and our workplace. There is, in fact, a wide range of altermobility practices for reasons other than going to work. This is particularly the case when a person has public transport pass that is also valid for weekend travel.

The car as a 'safety net'

The second issue concerns the car-object itself. "Actually, I don't use it for commuting anymore. So, do I need to keep it?" Here, again, we did make a very interesting and surprising finding: most of the altermobilists I met had kept their car as a kind of safety net. By holding on to it, it's still there, and they can still say to themselves "If I use another mode of transport, it's because I've made the choice to do so, not because I'm a prisoner of these other forms of travel. If needs be, I've still got my car." In some ways, keeping a car actually contributes to the sustainability and longevity of these new transport practices. In conclusion, what we can say is that there is no binary opposition between altermobilities and automobility, but that altermobilities are, in fact, a broadening of the possibilities for transport practices. The relationship between the two practices on a daily basis is a complementary one .

Altermobilities

Altermobilities represent all the alternative behaviours to an exclusive use of the private car for travel. They also imply a certain right to be slower, and pre-suppose that geographical and social spaces will be organised in ways that take into account a more limited use of cars.

En savoir plus x

Car sharing

Car sharing is the pooling of one or several vehicles for different trips at different times. Three types of car sharing exist: commercial car sharing, peer-to-peer car sharing and "informal" sharing between individuals.

En savoir plus x

Hitchhiking

Classic hitchhiking, an informal mode of transportation, has been supplanted by widespread car ownership and the development of carpooling. "Local" hitchhiking, which has been developing since the mid-2000s, is a safe variation of classic hitchhiking for short daily trips.

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

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Alternative mobilities
- Change in practices
- Diversity of lifestyles
- Work

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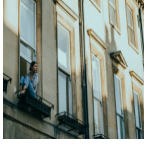Slowing down: Yes, but why, what and how?

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