

## 1. Crossed Perspectives



# Neo-nomads and highly mobile people

Between Stéphanie Vincent-Geslin & Emmanuel Ravalet (Sociologue et socio-économiste)  
And Maude Reitz & Yves Pedrazzini (Ethnologue et sociologue)

24 February 2015

Four researchers assess the traits and similarities of and the differences between the subjects of their respective fields of study: neo-nomads, the focus of the 'noLand's man' research project, and high mobility as studied in the framework of the JobMob investigation.

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## 01. Are neo-nomads like other highly-mobile individuals?



Stéphanie Vincent-Geslin & Emmanuel Ravalet

Let's consider highly mobile individuals as people who travel frequently, for long periods and over great distances. The JobMob research focuses on job-related reversible mobilities. Two main conclusions can be drawn: 1) Such situations are part of complex decisions that combine personal and/or family-related issues with job-related preferences; 2) The reversibility of work-related travel (long-distance commuting, overnighting, etc.) is actually based on having a relatively stable principle residence.

While the choices of neo-nomads clearly fall into the first category, their nomadic habitat distinguishes them from the latter. Thus, their mobility is at the interface of irreversible forms of work-related mobility (moving or migration) and reversible forms in that they seem to return regularly to the same places.



M. Y

This analysis of highly-mobile people, though clear and relevant, doesn't apply to the neo-nomads that we interviewed. While, as point 1 says, neo-nomads must also make complex choices to respond to personal concerns (the notion of 'family' raises other issues that we cannot discuss here), we can't talk about preferences relative to work in the same way since, because of their mobile habitat, they can reconcile 'family' and 'work' spatially speaking. Point 2 strikes us as completely relevant.



Maude Reitz & Yves Pedrazzini

First of all - and this may seem paradoxical - neo-nomads are not actually highly mobile, or at least their mobility is not 'high'. In fact, it is limited or, to put it a better way, it differs from the mobility of highly-mobile people in two ways: it is not an acceleration, and only partially answers the question that arises for highly-mobile people and which leads them to adopt particular mobility practices; namely, 'How do I get from Point A (usually home) to Point B (usually work) in the most efficient way possible (in terms of time/distance)? Bear in mind too that there can be multiple Points A and Points B.

The studies conducted by the JobMob team clearly shows there are indeed highly mobile individuals, but they do not form a homogenous class, social group or even 'family' in terms of their use of space and transport. If you extend this observation to neo-nomads, we can say that some of them have mobility practices similar to those of certain highly mobile people, despite what was said above. For example, neo-nomads who have several 'homes' – pieces of land where they can set up camp – and go from one to the other either by working or for work.

However, the majority of neo-nomads are not highly mobile, or at least not like the others. In fact, they themselves are not very mobile at all; it's their 'homes' – the buses, trucks, vans and mobile homes they

rebuild, furnish, decorate and live in – that are highly mobile. Meanwhile, in the current climate of job insecurity – for self-employed and salaried workers alike – the decision to live in a lorry is the result of compromises as regards work, housing and more or less restrictive lifestyle choices. It's perhaps in this sense, at least in this crisis period, that a comparison can be made between neo-nomads and the highly mobile.



S. E

Contrary to what is stated here, the highly mobile are not really on a rational quest to reduce their travel times and distances. The challenge of their mobility is rather the occupation and use of travel time.

Apart from that, we agree with Yves and Maude on the fact that there is a wide variety of highly-mobility situations and that the JobMob survey only looked at certain aspects related to work. Nevertheless, whether they are commuting daily between home and work, are overnighers or are in a long-distance relationship, highly mobile people do share some common traits. One of those is also shared with neo-nomads: they reflect a society looking for answers to spatial equations with several unknowns...

## **02. What roles do work and work-related mobility play in the lives of neo-nomads and highly mobile individuals?**



Stéphanie Vincent-Geslin & Emmanuel Ravalet

Work is only one part of what determines high mobility, even if it's work-related, because it's always linked to personal issues and is facilitated by the development of rapid transport systems. High mobility can be a period of transition early in someone's career, an aspect of the occupation itself or part of more complex, longer-term career development plans. For 62% of the highly-mobile people we interviewed in 2011, it was a way of either avoiding or recovering from a period of unemployment. During crisis periods, the need for a job appears to take precedence over family or personal preferences for highly-mobile people. The ultimate goal is ensuring that they remain socially and professionally active. This would probably not be the choice of neo-nomads in a similar situation.



M. Y

Indeed, at this level, highly mobile people and neo-nomads have nothing in common. However, the notion of 'career' – meaning a series of stages and phases – offers us a comprehensive approach to the mobility practices of travellers, both in terms of understanding their spatial continuity and the potential ruptures they reflect socially speaking.



Maude Reitz & Yves Pedrazzini

The personal histories of the working people and mobile individuals we studied point to two typical scenarios. While some base their choice of habitat on employment opportunities and, as a result, have decided to live in a modified vehicle, others have taken the opposite route and base their work – which is sporadic both temporally and spatially – on their itinerant way of life.

Depending on economic sector (industry, agriculture or services), their jobs have the commonality of being based on the seasons (tourist or agricultural seasons, or rope workers on construction sites), the academic year (organising social, cultural or sporting events), the creative process (artists, manual workers or entertainment industry technicians) and/or the needs of companies that periodically require additional personnel (carers, nurses, construction workers or agricultural labourers).

The free time created by the temporary and fluctuating nature of their work means that the itinerant lifestyle also lends itself to cultural, festive, creative, constructive, associative and training activities. Thus the importance of considering work above and beyond the salary dimension.



S. E

The place given to work by neo-nomads and highly mobile people would appear to be quite different. A central and time-consuming one for the latter leaves little opportunity for non-wage forms of work which, by contrast, seem very important to neo-nomads. What's more, the mobility of neo-nomads seems to be a way of adapting to the temporary and seasonal nature of their work, much more so than for highly-mobile people.

### **03. What role do attachments play – whether it's people or places – in the lifestyles of both neo-nomads and highly-mobile individuals? Are they obstacles to mobility or do they actually make it possible?**



Stéphanie Vincent-Geslin & Emmanuel Ravalet

Attachments and mobility are really two sides of the same coin. Attachments can be a driving force for certain work-related high mobilities, like long-distance commuting, because of strong residential or social ties.

However, attachments can also be facilitators of high mobility, whether it's 'support people' who take over when someone is absent, especially as regards domestic/family matters, or places where highly-mobile people have a connection and find their bearings. Some highly-mobile individuals develop

attachments to multiple places as a result of their work-related travel – a situation not unlike that of the neo-nomads...



M. Y

It's perhaps in their use of attachments as 'mobility facilitators' – for nomads: travelling, being itinerant – that highly-mobile people are most like travellers: both need footholds in a place in order to be 'on the move'.



Maude Reitz & Yves Pedrazzini

Attachment is necessary for people who aren't neo-nomads on a purely occasional basis. Attachment makes it possible to arrive somewhere – free of obligations and maintaining all possible itineraries – and to leave again. This is the very nature of being a traveller. However, growing roots is not necessary, even if it does not prevent people from being nomadic and that having roots – at least in our imaginary – is never pointless.

Longer stays at a given location require a degree of organisation that are reflected in an alternating yet complementary relationship between a primary lair (though these may be numerous) and secondary locations. These primary places – often called 'living places' or 'squats', are like base camps, complete with the infrastructures and facilities that make daily life more comfortable. They are places of refuge where we have built connections and can come back to on a regular basis to stop, rest, plan, store belongings or repair or make alterations to their lorry.

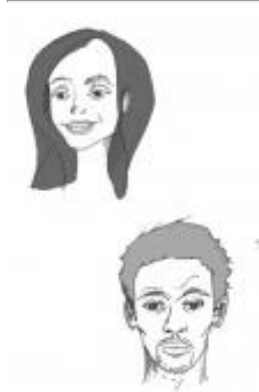
The people themselves, like the moving constellation of places where they live, maintain links of a physical, virtual or symbolic nature with other individuals (friends and family) in France and beyond. While most mobile people are skilled at creating such links (though sometimes remote or ephemeral), they also have a capacity for living in isolation. At the same time, ITC enable people with mobile habitats to keep in touch and share experiences with each other, as well as also maintain regular contact with these informal networks.



S. E

Regardless of the term used – 'attachment', 'roots', 'landmark' – their very existence contradicts the idea that highly mobile people and neo-nomads have a 'rootless' lifestyle.

The perennity of these situations is based the existence of breaks and 'breathers', which take place in specific, familiar places around which mobile people forge social bonds. However, a sense of solidarity is rare among highly-mobile people, unless they happen to have similar trips together on a regular basis.



Stéphanie Vincent-Geslin & Emmanuel Ravalet

Sociologue et socio-économiste

Stéphanie Vincent-Geslin, who holds a PhD in sociology from Paris-Descartes University, is a researcher at the Laboratoire d'économie des transports (LET) based at ENTPE in Lyon, France and a research associate at the Laboratoire de sociologie urbaine (LaSUR) at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL). Emmanuel Ravalet is an engineer and a senior researcher at LaSUR, and holds PhDs in Transport Economics and Urban Studies. They co-directed the JobMob research project at the LaSUR.



Maude Reitz & Yves Pedrazzini

Ethnologue et sociologue

Maude Reitz has an ethnology degree from Neuchâtel University and is working on a PhD in ethnology at the EPFL. She has been conducting research on contemporary mobile habitats and self-building in France since 2013. Yves Pedrazzini is a sociologist, a researcher at the LaSUR and a senior lecturer and the EPFL's school of architecture. He has been studying urban dynamics, cultures, spatial practices, violence and lack of security around the globe for more than 25 years.

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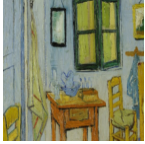


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