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Dealing with energy crises: Working and living arrangements in peri-urban France

Nathalie Ortar

LAET/ENTPE rue Maurice Audin, 69518 Vaulx en Velin, France

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to show how households living in peri-urban areas in France adapt their housing and commuting costs to the context of energy and economic crises, and what this reveals about the possibility of changing lifestyles. The article is based on the results of a study carried out in 2012–2013 when oil prices were at their peak. It examines the everyday life of individuals in order to gain some appreciation of the terms of the developments in the context of vulnerabilization of households in the peri-urban setting, and the accompanying obligation to change lifestyle. The conclusion discusses the implications of the results for public policy and the role of the employers to the adoption of alternative practices.

This article aims to show how households living in peri-urban areas in France adapt their housing and commuting costs to the context of energy and economic crises, and what this reveals about the possibility of changing lifestyles. The article is based on the results of a study carried out in 2012–2013 when oil prices were at their peak. We propose to examine the everyday life of individuals in order to gain some appreciation of the terms of the developments in the context of vulnerabilization of households in the peri-urban setting, and the accompanying obligation to change lifestyle. We shall return to implications of the results for public policy in the conclusion.

The home is a space of social production and reproduction, projection and symbolic creation. It is also a constructed space, physically anchored, which, by its structure and location, places constraints on specific energy consumption behaviors, insofar as these relate to the activities carried out within and beyond the four walls. In addition, in France, home ownership, particularly in peri-urban detached houses is an indicator of social status for the middle class (Jaillet, 2004; Ortar, 2015), the working classes (Rougé, 2005; Girard, 2009; Ortar, Goyon, 2009; Lambert, 2015) and the lower middle class (Cartier et al., 2008). The working classes and lower middle class have further benefited, since the 1950s, from a continuous aid policy for buying detached houses, in the form of zero-interest loans. One of the effects of this "all home-owner" policy has been the encouragement to buy houses in areas that are ever more distant from urban centers (Lambert, 2015). Hence, using the home as the starting point to explore commonplace uses of energy makes sense insofar as the home conditions the utilization of the various resources available.

In France, the social-professional categories "workers" and "employees" in the peri-urban environment correspond to what Pfefferkorn and Bihr (2004) refer to as the "stable salaried working class," which belongs to the lower middle class, although they exist within the context of a rise in inequality related to social class (Pfefferkorn and Bihr, 1999). This analysis is reinforced by a book edited by Bouffartigue (2004), which reveals the social fragility of the "new salaried middle classes," which refers to the upper "stable salaried working class", and has now become the "stressed salaried middle classes." This stress is partly linked to the upward trend in prices of consumer goods and energy, as demonstrated by the work of Nicolas and Verry (2012) on the daily movements of lower middle and working classes residing in peri-urban areas. In France, "fuel poverty" is considered to begin when spending on energy is more than 10% of income. For the French Environment and Energy Management Agency, ADEME (2008), "the poorest households spend 15% of their income on energy, against only 6% for wealthier households".[1] "Energy poverty" can be considered has having been attained when spending rises above 15% of income. Energy vulnerability applies to households for which energy expenditure is more than twice the median observed for that year in a given country (Cochez et al., 2015). This vulnerability is essentially addressed by Nicolas and Verry (2012) in relation to the budgetary compromises made to alleviate transport costs, in a context of high dependence on the automobile for both partners, due in particular to the high numbers of couples in France in which both partners work.[2] Studying this group

E-mail address: Nathalie.ortar@entpe.fr.

[1] See "ADEME et Vous, Stratégie et Études" 3, April 3, 2008.

[2] In France, the employment rate of women aged 25–49 years is 84.3%. Source: Eurostat, Press release August 4, 2010, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/3-04082010-BP/FR/3-04082010-BP-FR.PDF

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allows energy vulnerability coping strategies to be highlighted among those who were hitherto considered immune to the phenomenon and enables to study the impact of the on-going crises on this social category.

This article is based on a diachronic analysis of daily consumption practices of various energy resources such as electricity or hydrocarbons, apprehended by analyzing residential journeys and describing daily practices observed in the Lyon (France) region in 2012–2013. The employees interviewed live and work in the peri-urban areas of the city. All participants spend more than two hours each day commuting between home and work. We hypothesized that the length of the commute may be correlated with the population under the greatest financial constraints and that transformations currently occurring have been accelerated due to the context of the economic crisis in France that has persisted since 2008, requiring changes in behavior concomitant with rising energy vulnerability.

1. Energy vulnerability, housing and transport

To understand the effects of energy vulnerability there is a need to also comprehend what energy deprivation is. The constitution of energy poverty as a social problem emerged during the 1990s, and it was first recognized publicly as such in the United Kingdom and Ireland in a debate on poverty (Bouzarovski and Tirado, 2015). As Bouzarovski and Petrova (2015); Stefan Bouzarovski and Petrova (2015) have stated, “energy poverty is widely used to describe issues of domestic energy deprivation in many European countries, while the notion of energy precariousness has become enshrined in official policies and discourses in France.” Fuel poverty, a term adopted in the UK and in the Netherlands, addresses the scarcity of a single energy resource but both relate to the same phenomenon.

Fuel and energy poverty have essentially been addressed in terms of housing, with the ability to heat one’s home becoming seen as a right. In France, despite improving housing conditions, the number of people reporting to “have been cold during the winter,” rose by 3.9% points between 1996 and 2006, from 10.9% to 14.8%, a result explained by the fact that more households reported having restricted their energy costs at the expense of thermal comfort due to growing economic difficulties (Devalière et al., 2011).

Fuel poverty also impacts on mobility at a day-to-day level. Coutard and Dupuy (2004) showed that poverty is experienced differently in different areas of France, according local resources. Concerning employment, Bouzouina et al., 2016 (publication pending) show that, all things being equal, it is the poorest households that travel the greatest distances to access employment. Thus, even though there is a prevailing notion in the literature that the poorest are the least mobile (Jackson, 2012), much of the research points that poverty increases difficulty of access to the necessary means of transport, and most particularly for getting to the workplace. This is as true in France (Breton, 2008) as it is in Australia (Currie and Delbosc, 2011) or Germany (Gertz et al., 2015) to name just a few of the many examples in the literature. Access to mobility is also reduced by the housing opportunities available to poorer people, in that the poor most frequently live in those areas least well served by public transportation, as has been shown by Cervero (2004) in the United States, and Bouzouina et al. (2014) in France. In addition, energy insecurity hinders mobility by forcing restricted choice (or no choice at all) on households in outdoor activities related to leisure (Jouffe and Massot, 2013; Sibeni et al., 2017).

Literature addressing the issue of reduced car usage has questioned the choices of location made. Handy and Cao (2005) have shown that a correlation exists between valued modes of transport and the location of housing. The use of the car is associated with active lifestyles oriented toward family life (Van Acker, 2010). De Vos Jonas et al. (2012) show that distance to work and income earned also affect location choice and can impose a choice by default on people who may have preferred to reside somewhere else in order to make best use of the transport options available there. Finally, studies more specifically focused on transportation costs, placing them in the context of the forms of employment occupied, tend to show that for the poorest—those facing genuine economic crisis—part-time work or a handicapped person in the family can greatly exacerbate their dependence (Mattioli et al., 2016).

While published studies of mobility usually take into account the location of the home, there are few studies overtly combining housing and mobility. Nonetheless in France, as shown by Cochez et al. (2015), the two factors are cumulative—especially for households outside urban centers, which often face sacrifices if they are to be able to heat their homes or transport themselves adequately. Finally, the joint analysis of “energy consumption ‘at home’ and ‘outside the home’, that is to say, linked to housing and mobility” carried out by Xavier Desjardins and Lucile Mettelal (2013: 48) shows the importance of the relationship people have with their homes in peri-urban areas. The centrality of the house in the lives of these people makes it easier to understand the mechanisms underlying issues surrounding energy use. Indeed, the energy consumption of a household is a complex production of instrumental activities, self-representation and collective performance, that cannot be reduced to questions of individual rationality and choice. To describe the use of energy in everyday life, Shove (2003) relied principally on two concepts, comfort and convenience, which can be seen as the spurs to consumption. Comfort has standardized and evolved over time, based on arbitrary regulations and practicality of use for the individual, that very practicality being context-dependent. Individual consumption is thus determined by choices made at international, governmental and collective levels, over which the individual has little control (the way a large building is heated, for example), before any decision is made at the level of the individual, and which will then also depend on a range of equipment choices—insulation, vehicles, household appliances—and the norms of the family or social group (Subrémon, 2010). Taking this context into account offers keys for reading and understanding the observed behavioral modifications. Indeed, even though the population being examined for the purposes of this research is not always yet subject to energy vulnerability, it has nevertheless seen its living conditions deteriorate over the past decade due to stagnation or even decline in income on the one hand and the increase in living costs, including the cost of energy, on the other. Two conditions that appear interesting to examine the coping attitudes induced by the rising cost of energy. The cumulative effects of different vulnerabilities will be examined in this article, together with the different solutions that might be brought to bear in order to deal with them.

2. Methodology

The results presented emerged from wider research involving companies’ choices of location in peri-urban settings in a period of increasing energy costs. This led in particular to difficulties in recruiting employees who no longer had sufficient financial means to travel to these zones, which are poorly served by public transport. During this investigation, questionnaires were given to employees in order to ascertain what mode of transport they used (see Lejoux et al., 2014 for more details). This questionnaire offered the possibility of being re-contacted for an interview. The selection of interviewees was made according to the length of their journeys in time and kilometers, as well as their profession, gender and marital status. The aim was to question two-thirds of the workers and employees (couples, single people and divorcees), who are in principle most affected by the current changes, and also one third of the management staff, with the intention of analyzing how far the latter were affected by current changes. In practice, the number of upper middle class homes turned out to be greater insofar as the husbands of half the women questioned were executives. With two exceptions, the people interviewed belonged to