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## Toward low-carbon ways of life

### The cultural politics of contesting aeromobility

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# Toward low-carbon ways of life

## The cultural politics of contesting aeromobility

SARA ULLSTRÖM

LUCSUS | FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES | LUND UNIVERSITY



Cultural changes in everyday life are essential for mitigating climate change, especially among the global affluent who contribute disproportionately to consumption-based emissions. But how can such changes be enabled in the current high-carbon world? In this thesis, I address this question through an analysis of the cultural politics of Sweden's flight-free movement. Specifically, I explore how meanings of aeromobility are constructed, sustained, contested, and reformulated, and how future-oriented practices around low-carbon and flight-free ways of life are prefigured in the present. By showing how prefigurative movements can serve as a driver of cultural change around affluent overconsumption, this thesis highlights possibilities for the creation of desirable and more sufficiency-oriented ways of life in a warming world.



**SARA ULLSTRÖM** is an interdisciplinary researcher interested in climate action and low-carbon transformations, particularly focusing on cultural changes in consumption and lifestyle. She has a background in political science, environmental politics, and sustainability.

Toward low-carbon ways of life



# Toward low-carbon ways of life

The cultural politics of contesting aeromobility

Sara Ullström



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## DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Doctoral dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University to be publicly defended on November 29, 2024 at 14:15 in Ostrom, Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies (LUCSUS), Biskopsgatan 5, Lund

*Faculty opponent*  
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**Abstract:**

The need for demand-side climate solutions is increasingly recognized in science and society. Such solutions imply that demand for goods and services is targeted either via changes in the use of infrastructure and technology or via cultural changes in consumption and lifestyle among the global affluent.

In this thesis, I explore how to enable cultural change around affluent overconsumption through an empirical investigation of Sweden's flight-free movement, which I analyze as a case of cultural politics of contesting aeromobility. In particular, I conduct discourse analysis to examine how meanings of aeromobility are constructed, sustained, contested, and reformulated. Following that, I apply a lens of prefigurative politics to analyze how future-oriented practices around low-carbon and flight-free ways of life are enacted in the present.

The thesis includes three academic papers. Paper I uses travel magazines and digital media sources to trace the discursive development of holiday air travel in Sweden. Paper II builds on interviews with key actors in the flight-free movement to analyze how they prefigure alternatives to aeromobility. Paper III is a combined case study exploring competing discourses on the future of aeromobility based on interviews with actors in the flight-free movement and the aviation industry.

The findings show that aeromobility has been constructed as a desirable social norm in Sweden through the historical discourse "Aspirational luxury" and the contemporary discourse "Hypermobility", and this norm is sustained into the future through the industry discourse "Green flying". I also trace the emergence of an alternative discourse, "Staying on the ground", and show how it contests and reformulates the meanings attached to aeromobility. Staying on the ground gathers actors in the flight-free movement around storylines about a desirable, low-carbon way of life. These storylines are enacted in practice through prefigurative environmental activism focused on avoiding high-carbon consumption. Notably, the prefigurative politics of the flight-free movement extend beyond finding more sustainable ways of traveling to reflect a broader reconsideration of how to live well under climate change.

The thesis contributes to the literature on demand-side climate solutions by demonstrating how prefigurative movements can serve as a driver of cultural change through the enactment of alternative meanings and practices. Such a shift in culture is critical for reshaping the norms through which high-emitting lifestyles are sustained, and thus for achieving the demand-side solutions needed to meet global climate goals.

**Key words:** Climate change, demand-side solutions, flying less, cultural change, cultural politics, everyday activism, prefiguration, discourse analysis

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Sara Ullström



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*“I want to jump into the future and see, what is it like to live then? Is it possible to find a sustainable lifestyle? Does it exist? Is it desirable?”*

– Member of Sweden’s flight-free movement, interviewed in June 2022

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# Abstract

The need for demand-side climate solutions is increasingly recognized in science and society. Such solutions imply that demand for goods and services is targeted either via changes in the use of infrastructure and technology or via cultural changes in consumption and lifestyle among the global affluent.

In this thesis, I explore how to enable cultural change around affluent overconsumption through an empirical investigation of Sweden's flight-free movement, which I analyze as a case of cultural politics of contesting aeromobility. In particular, I conduct discourse analysis to examine how meanings of aeromobility are constructed, sustained, contested, and reformulated. Following that, I apply a lens of prefigurative politics to analyze how future-oriented practices around low-carbon and flight-free ways of life are enacted in the present.

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The findings show that aeromobility has been constructed as a desirable social norm in Sweden through the historical discourse "Aspirational luxury" and the contemporary discourse "Hypermobility", and this norm is sustained into the future through the industry discourse "Green flying". I also trace the emergence of an alternative discourse, "Staying on the ground", and show how it contests and reformulates the meanings attached to aeromobility. Staying on the ground gathers actors in the flight-free movement around storylines about a desirable, low-carbon way of life. These storylines are enacted in practice through prefigurative environmental activism focused on avoiding high-carbon consumption. Notably, the prefigurative politics of the flight-free movement extend beyond finding more sustainable ways of traveling to reflect a broader reconsideration of how to live well under climate change.

The thesis contributes to the literature on demand-side climate solutions by demonstrating how prefigurative movements can serve as a driver of cultural change through the enactment of alternative meanings and practices. Such a shift in culture is critical for reshaping the norms through which high-emitting lifestyles are sustained, and thus for achieving the demand-side solutions needed to meet global climate goals.

# Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning

För snart ett decennium sedan startade en intensiv debatt om flygets klimatpåverkan i svenska medier. I dess kölvatten har en social rörelse för minskat flygresande tagit form – flygfrittrörelsen. Den består av individer och organisationer som tillsammans engagerar sig för minskat flygresande, dels genom att delta i kampanjer och annat påverkansarbete, och dels genom att själva avstå flygresande.

Min avhandling undersöker hur Sveriges flygfrittrörelse utmanar och omformulerar idén om flygresande som en social norm, samt hur alternativ till flygresande föreställs, skapas, och sprids. Jag visar att flygfrittrörelsen exemplifierar en form av vardagsaktivism som fokuserar på undvikandet av överflödigt och klimatskadligt konsumtion, vilket flygresande ses som ett uttryck för. Denna aktivism sträcker sig bortom att hitta mer hållbara transportsätt, och speglar istället en bredare omprövning av innebörden av ett gott liv i ett klimatförändrat samhälle.

Flygfrittrörelsen visar att kollektivt agerande för mer klimativänliga sätt att leva på kan bana väg för kulturell förändring i omställningen till en hållbar framtid. Sådan förändring spelar en viktig roll i arbetet med att uppnå Parisavtalets mål att hålla den globala uppvärmningen under två grader. Forskare har betonat vikten av klimatlösningar på efterfrågesidan för att snabbt minska utsläppen i linje med detta mål. Sådana lösningar inkluderar både förändringar i användningen av infrastruktur och teknik, och kulturella förändringar i konsumtion och livsstil. Förändringar i konsumtion och livsstil är särskilt viktiga för välbeställda grupper och bör riktas mot aktiviteter med höga utsläpp, såsom flygresande.

Min avhandling bidrar till forskning om klimatlösningar på efterfrågesidan genom att visa hur vardagsaktivism kan ge upphov till alternativa och mer hållbara levnadssätt för att undvika överflödigt konsumtion. Sådan aktivism kan därmed fungera som en drivkraft för de kulturella förändringar som behövs för att uppfylla globala klimatomål. Avhandlingens resultat kan även användas av grupper och organisationer som engagerar sig i vardagsaktivism kring miljö- och klimatfrågor genom att visa på dess utmaningar och möjligheter.

Avhandlingen bygger på tre vetenskapliga artiklar. Den första artikeln använder resetidningar och digitala mediekällor för att spåra utvecklingen av semesterresande med flyg i Sverige. Den andra artikeln bygger på intervjuer med nyckelaktörer i flygfrittrörelsen, och analyserar hur de föreställer sig samt praktiserar alternativ till flygresande. Den tredje, och sista artikeln, är en kombinerad fallstudie som utforskar konkurrerande idéer och antaganden om flygets framtid baserat på intervjuer med aktörer inom flygfrittrörelsen samt flygindustrin.

# List of Papers

## *Paper I*

**Ullström, Sara**, Johannes Stripple, and Kimberly A. Nicholas (2023)\* From aspirational luxury to hypermobility to staying on the ground: changing discourses of holiday air travel in Sweden, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 31(3), 688-705, DOI: 10.1080/09669582.2021.1998079

## *Paper II*

**Ullström, Sara** (2024) Contesting aeromobility, constructing alternatives: the prefigurative politics of staying on the ground, *Environmental Politics*, 33(6), 1087-1108. DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2024.2328502

## *Paper III*

Christley, Emily\*\*, and **Sara Ullström\*\*** (2024) Desired or contested futures? Competing discourse-coalitions for sustainable aviation in Sweden, *Critical Policy Studies*. 1–22. DOI: 10.1080/19460171.2024.2402785

\*This paper was first published online in 2021.

\*\*Both authors contributed equally to this work and share co-first authorship.

## Author's contribution to the papers

### *Paper I*

I led the conceptualization of the paper with guidance and contributions from JS and KN regarding design, structure, and framing. I carried out data collection, analysis, and wrote the manuscript. JS and KN provided feedback on the writing and contributed to revising the manuscript.

### *Paper II*

I wrote the paper as a single author.

### *Paper III*

Both authors contributed equally to the paper.



# Introduction

Meeting the goal of the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to well below 2°C requires widespread cultural change in consumption and lifestyle among the global affluent (Whitmarsh et al., 2021; Wiedmann et al., 2020). I refer to cultural change as changes in the practices, norms, meanings, and values that make up a way of life (Bulkeley et al., 2016), and that increasingly are associated with high-carbon consumption in wealthy societies (Wiedmann et al., 2020). Around two-thirds of total global greenhouse gas emissions are linked to household consumption (Ivanova et al., 2016), either directly through the use of energy at home or in transport, or indirectly in the form of emissions embedded in purchases of goods and services (Koide et al., 2021). Household consumption emissions are unequally distributed across and within countries, with emissions rising as a function of increasing income (Ivanova & Wood, 2020; Oswald et al., 2020). Luxury forms of consumption (i.e. consumption associated with higher incomes) tend to be more energy-intensive and elastic, resulting in high-income groups often having disproportionately large carbon footprints (Oswald et al., 2020).

While consumption is one of the main drivers of emissions (Jorgenson et al., 2019), climate mitigation efforts have rarely been directed toward high-carbon lifestyles (Stoddard et al., 2021). Notably, consumption practices with the highest climate impact, such as air travel and food, receive particularly little policy attention (Dubois et al., 2019). Rather than targeting demand, political efforts to reduce emissions tend to rely on technological supply-side solutions, such as energy efficiency improvements and shifts to alternative energy sources (Stoddard et al., 2021). Technological advancements undoubtedly play an important role in meeting the temperature goal of the Paris Agreement (Gambhir et al., 2023), but needs to be complemented with high-impact behavior and lifestyle changes to effectively reduce emissions (Whitmarsh et al., 2021; Wiedmann et al., 2020). As argued by Ian Gough (2023):

a great deal [of emissions reductions] can be achieved by technological, supply-side improvements that improve the carbon efficiency of production. But without radical transformations of demand, the achievement of a safe climate, let alone environmental sustainability, is a fantasy (Gough, 2023, p. 17).

Demand-side climate solutions are increasingly discussed in literature about climate mitigation (e.g. Creutzig et al., 2018; Gough, 2023; Mundaca et al., 2019), which is

one of the key challenges that the interdisciplinary field of sustainability science grapples with (Spangenberg, 2011). Such solutions have also gained attention in the assessments of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) who included a chapter on “Demand, services, and social aspects of mitigation” for the first time in its latest report, concluding that demand-side climate solutions have the potential to reduce emissions by 40-70% by 2050 (Creutzig et al., 2022). The IPCC categorizes demand-side solutions according to the Avoid-Shift-Improve framework, where “Avoid” refers to solutions that reduce unnecessary demand, “Shift” options are focused on replacing the remaining demand with less energy-intensive alternatives, and “Improve” refers to efficiency advancements in end-use technology (Creutzig et al., 2022). Avoid solutions generally have high mitigation potential and are critical for achieving radical emissions reductions in line with the Paris Agreement. To enable such solutions, cultural change in consumption and lifestyles is needed (Creutzig et al., 2022), especially among the global affluent who disproportionately impact emissions (Nielsen et al., 2021) and drive overconsumption (Wiedmann et al., 2020).

I understand overconsumption as consumption that does not satisfy any human need, but rather is related to luxuries and excessive wealth. This understanding draws on literature about consumption corridors, which refers to a space between minimum standards of consumption that satisfy basic human needs, and maximum consumption standards that respect planetary boundaries (Fuchs et al., 2021). Others have referred to similar ideas as a space of sufficiency (Gough, 2023) or a safe and just space for humanity (Raworth, 2012), defining a sustainable society as one where all people can live a good life within ecological limits (O’Neill et al., 2018). Creating such society implies both improving the living standards for people who lack access to necessary resources, and limiting resource use “associated with high-consumption cultures that trash the planet while contributing little to improving people’s lives” (Pirgmaier, 2020, p. 274) which is characteristic for affluent overconsumption. Importantly, efforts to reduce overconsumption and move toward more sufficiency-oriented lifestyles should target high-emitting and high-income groups (Gough, 2023), and should especially focus on high-impact mitigation actions that substantially reduce emissions (Whitmarsh et al., 2021). I now turn to discuss the tensions around cultural change and overconsumption in relation to air travel, the consumption practice of focus in this thesis.

## The problem of aeromobility

A notable example of a high-impact mitigation action that addresses overconsumption, and which mainly targets high-emitting and high-income groups, is reduced air travel (Ivanova et al., 2020). Air travel is the most carbon-intensive form of consumption and a marker of high-emitting lifestyles, with one long-haul

return flight causing approximately 1.7 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per person (Ivanova et al., 2020). To achieve the 2°C target, annual per capita CO<sub>2</sub> emissions should not exceed 2.1 tonnes by the year 2050 (Girod et al., 2014), which makes frequent flying incompatible with a sustainable lifestyle. For people who fly, air travel makes up a large share of their total emissions, constituting up to 40% of the carbon footprint for high-emitting households in Europe (Ivanova & Wood, 2020). People who fly generally have high incomes (Chancel & Piketty, 2015), meaning that air travel is an unequal form of consumption that many people are excluded from (Oswald et al., 2020). Previous research suggest that only 11% of the world population flew in 2018, and that 1% of the world population is responsible for 50% of aviation emissions (Gössling & Humpe, 2020). While these numbers show that flying is an elite form of mobility globally, it has become an increasingly routinized and normalized consumption practice in Western society (Gössling et al., 2009; Griggs & Howarth, 2023). Approximately half of all air travel takes place in North America and Europe (Gössling & Humpe, 2020), where the majority of the world's high-emitting and high-income<sup>1</sup> people live (Kartha et al., 2020).

The climate impact of global aviation is substantial. Air travel has caused 4% of the total human-induced global warming so far, accounting for both CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions and non-CO<sub>2</sub> effects (Klöwer et al., 2021). These non-CO<sub>2</sub> effects include nitrogen oxide emissions and contrail formation, the latter referring to increased cloudiness caused by jet engines that contribute to atmospheric warming (Lee et al., 2021). In 2019, the cumulative CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions from aviation were 33 billion tonnes (Klöwer et al., 2021), approximately the same as the country with the 10<sup>th</sup> highest cumulative emissions globally – Canada (Evans, 2021). Around half of these emissions have been generated during the past two decades as a result of rapidly rising demand for air travel (Lee et al., 2021). Between 2000 and 2019, global air travel activity increased by approximately 60% in total (IEA, 2020). While the Covid-19 pandemic caused a temporary reduction of aviation, global air traffic was back at pre-pandemic levels in February 2024 (IATA, 2024a). Taking the effects of the pandemic into account, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) projects air travel demand to grow at an average of approximately 3-4% yearly between 2018 and 2050 (ICAO, 2021), a scenario likely to double aviation's contribution to global warming (Klöwer et al., 2021).

Global efforts to decarbonize aviation largely focus on technological supply-side options that lack feasibility to rapidly and substantially reduce emissions (Sharmina et al., 2021). The International Air Transport Association (IATA)<sup>2</sup> has committed

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<sup>1</sup> At a global level, individuals earning more than \$38,000 yearly are considered high-income. This income group includes 10% of the global population and is responsible for 50% of global CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions associated with household consumption (Kartha et al., 2020).

<sup>2</sup> IATA is a trade organization for the world's airlines, while ICAO is a United Nations agency that coordinates planning and development of international air transport.



to achieve net-zero CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions by 2050 (IATA, 2021), but the emissions trajectory of global aviation is not in line with this target (Grewe et al., 2021). In contrast with other energy-intensive sectors such as road transport, there is currently no carbon-neutral technology for aviation commercially available at scale (Dray et al., 2022). IATA projects sustainable aviation fuels (both synthetic and bio-based) to achieve 65% of the emissions reductions needed to reach net-zero by 2050, but the supply of such fuels is so far very limited and represented only around 0.2% of global jet fuel use in 2023 (IATA, 2024b). To meet the projected demand of sustainable aviation fuels by 2050, an annual production of more than 450 billion liters is needed (IATA, 2023), which is 750 times more than the 600 million liters produced in 2023 (IATA, 2024b). There are major constraints to producing sustainable aviation fuels at such scale. For example, a large share of sustainable aviation fuels is foreseen to be produced from biomass and agricultural waste which are scarce resources increasingly demanded by all societal sectors (Becken et al., 2023).

Other technological options include electricity-powered aircrafts as well as aircraft powered by hydrogen fuel cells (Bergero et al., 2023). However, electric aviation will be limited to short-distance (and relatively low-emissions) routes unless radical advancements in battery technology are achieved (Schäfer et al., 2019), and is thus not likely to contribute substantially to reducing emissions which come overwhelmingly from long-distance flights. Similar problems exist for hydrogen-powered aircraft, which still are in an early stage of development and are unlikely to be scaled up swiftly (Sharmina et al., 2021), nor is it suitable for long-haul operations (Bergero et al., 2023). Besides technological and fuel-efficiency advancements, the ICAO has adopted a framework for carbon offsetting known as CORSIA<sup>3</sup> that aims to stabilize aviation emissions at pre-pandemic (2019) levels. However, CORSIA is not designed for achieving absolute emissions reductions (Larsson et al., 2019; Lyle, 2018) which makes it inconsistent with the Paris Agreement (Lee et al., 2018).

To align the aviation sector with global climate goals, researchers increasingly emphasize the mitigation potential of, and need for, demand reductions (Bergero et al., 2023; Bows-Larkin, 2015; Grewe et al., 2021; Sharmina et al., 2021). A recent study suggests that an annual decrease of 2.5% between 2024 and 2050 (resulting in 50% lower air travel levels by 2050) would stop aviation's contribution to further warming, thus "buying time to develop fully sustainable solutions" (Klöwer et al., 2021, p. 7) for the remaining demand. However, the aviation sector's business model is oriented around volume growth (Gössling & Humpe, 2023), which makes demand management a sensitive and largely unaddressed issue (Rayner, 2021). There are currently no international policies in place that target demand, and

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<sup>3</sup> The full name of CORSIA is "Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation".

national policies with the potential to influence demand (e.g. passenger aviation taxes) are ineffectively designed (Larsson et al., 2019). Moreover, flying has become so culturally embedded in norms (Schmidt et al., 2024), lifestyles (Aasen et al., 2023), and identities (Becken, 2007) that even environmentally-conscious air travelers tend to be unwilling to reduce their flying (Kroesen, 2013; Volden & Hansen, 2022).

The cultural embeddedness of flying is further sustained by the dominant discourses surrounding aeromobility. A discourse refers to the overarching ideas and assumptions that give meaning to social practices (Hajer, 1995). Discourses shape how flying is understood and represented in society, which is a key focus in this thesis. As shown in previous research, industry discourses present aviation as critical for society (Christley et al., 2024; Gössling & Peeters, 2007) and overstate the potential of emerging technologies to reduce the emissions from air travel (Peeters et al., 2016). The idea of aviation as societally critical is also apparent in policy discourses, which tend to depict air travel growth as inevitable considering aviation's importance for global competitiveness and connectivity (Griggs & Howarth, 2019). At the same time, hypermobile travel habits are often depicted as glamorous, high-status, and desirable on social media (Cohen & Gössling, 2015), thus reinforcing the normalization of aeromobility in affluent societies.

## Social mobilization against aeromobility

Despite the increased normalization of aeromobility, flying has become a contested practice because of its climate impact in recent years (Volden & Hansen, 2022). The contestation of flying takes place at various sites and through diverse forms of social mobilization. For example, an international academic flying-less movement has formed around a collective effort to institutionalize new practices around work-related travel in academia (Katz-Rosene & Pasek, 2024), where flying is deeply normalized and often assumed to be important for academic performance (Kreil, 2021). Flying is problematized on social media, where the Swedish phenomenon of *flygskam* (flight shame), which refers to a feeling of unease about the climate impact caused by air travel, has been widely discussed in countries with high levels of flying, such as the UK, Sweden, and the US (Becken et al., 2021). Airports have also increasingly become sites of contestation around aviation's climate impact, with environmental movements such as Extinction Rebellion protesting against airport expansion projects and coordinating actions aimed at disrupting flights (Young, 2020). In the UK, a country with a strong community of local anti-airport expansion groups, the planning and building of new runways, terminals, and airports is repeatedly challenged through both direct action (e.g. blockades) and legal disputes (Griggs & Howarth, 2023).

The contestation of flying has also been prominent in Sweden, where levels of flying are exceptionally high. The average number of airplane trips per person has doubled since 1990, and per capita emissions from air travel are approximately five times the global average (Kamb & Larsson, 2018). The vast majority of these emissions are related to international air travel (93%) for leisure purposes (80%), such as holiday trips and visiting family and friends (Kamb & Larsson, 2018). Trips to a warm and sunny climate, such as the Canary Islands or somewhere in continental Europe, constitute a particularly popular travel focus (Kamb et al., 2021), and have been an integral part of Swedish holiday travel culture ever since the 1950s (Kaiserfeld, 2010). However, norms regarding air travel are now being challenged in Sweden and the desirability and necessity of flying are increasingly put into question.

An intense public debate about the climate impact from flying started to take shape in Sweden around a decade ago. This debate, which took place in both conventional and social media, evolved into a trend to stop flying for climate reasons (Jacobson et al., 2020; Wormbs & Wolrath Söderberg, 2021), as well as the rise of a social movement advocating avoiding flying (hereinafter referred to as the flight-free movement). This movement consists of people pledging to stay on the ground to highlight the urgency of climate action, while also engaging in bottom-up initiatives to change norms regarding air travel. By targeting air travelers rather than the aviation industry or government actors, the flight-free movement draws on a different repertoire of action than, for example, the airport protest groups described above.

More specifically, the flight-free movement does not engage in the forms of collective action commonly described in social movement literature, such as protest marches, blockades, and other forms of direct political action aimed at institutional change (see, e.g. Della Porta & Diani, 2006, pp. 163–192). Instead, the goals of the movement are embedded in the daily life of its participants, who act out their vision of a sustainable future in practice. Such attempts to enact alternative practices around sustainability illustrate a form of everyday environmental activism increasingly described as prefigurative (Forno & Wahlen, 2022b; Schlosberg, 2019; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019; Skoglund & Böhm, 2022). Rather than directing demands about social and political change toward the government, prefigurative movements seek to create change from within (Yates, 2015b), specifically by embodying “alternative forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, belief systems and direct experience” (Monticelli, 2021, p. 112). Drawing on the literature about prefiguration, I propose an understanding of the flight-free movement as *an informal and diverse group of actors engaged in, and promoting, prefigurative environmental activism as a means for changing high-carbon consumption cultures*. I now turn to elaborate how my research explores this movement in both its discourse and its practices.

## Aim and research questions

Drawing on the case of Sweden's flight-free movement, the aim of this thesis is to show how cultural change around affluent overconsumption can be enabled, particularly for the high-carbon practice of flying. As mentioned earlier, previous research has identified avoiding flying as an especially high-impact demand-side mitigation action (Ivanova et al., 2020) for which cultural change is necessary (Creutzig et al., 2022). A few policy solutions with the potential to shift norms around flying (which might lead to cultural change) have been suggested in research, such as banning flight advertisements, removal of loyalty programs, and a progressive frequent flier tax (Gössling & Lyle, 2021). My analysis of the flight-free movement complements both this research and the literature on demand-side climate mitigation more broadly (e.g. Creutzig et al., 2018; Gough, 2023; Whitmarsh et al., 2021), by increasing the understanding of the role of alternative everyday practices as a driver of cultural change.

The flight-free movement is an interesting empirical example to study from a perspective of cultural change because it illustrates how a high-carbon practice supported by norms (Schmidt et al., 2024), policy (Larsson et al., 2019), and infrastructure (Dickinson et al., 2010) is increasingly contested – not primarily through demanding change from political institutions, but through living the desired change in practice. To understand this contestation and how it might open up for low-carbon ways of life, it is important to understand how contemporary cultures of aeromobility have come about in the first place, or as described by Cresswell (2010, p. 29), '[w]e cannot understand new mobilities ... without understanding old mobilities'. Thus, although the flight-free movement is a contemporary phenomenon, my analysis of it explores both past, present, and future aeromobilities.

Specifically, I analyze the flight-free movement through a lens of the cultural politics of climate change, a perspective concerned with the ways in which culture shapes and is shaped by the politics of climate change (Bulkeley et al., 2016). This perspective emphasizes how everyday practices and routines, such as driving, cycling, eating, and showering, "are implicated in both the causes and mitigation of climate change" (Goodman et al., 2020, p. 2). Such practices increasingly also include flying, which might not be done on a daily basis, yet "consumption of flying has for many become an integral part of their everyday enjoyment and routines" (Griggs & Howarth, 2023, p. 1) in high-income societies.

To understand how the flight-free movement manifests as cultural politics, I employ two distinct theoretical approaches. First, I draw on argumentative discourse analysis (Hajer, 1995) to explore the ideas and assumptions supporting aeromobility, and the ongoing contestation of these. This approach is focused on analyzing argumentative struggles over meaning (i.e. struggles over discursive

power) and pays attention to the social and political effects produced by discourses (Hajer, 1995). It thus enables me to analyze both the discourses through which the cultural embeddedness of aeromobility has come about, and the emergence of alternative and opposing discourses. Second, I apply Luke Yates' (2015b) framework of prefigurative politics, a perspective concerned with the enactment of future-oriented social and political alternatives in the present, to theorize the kind of politics that the flight-free movement engages in. Here it is important to clarify that I am focusing on a specific aspect of the political, namely the politicization of (alternative) everyday practices and the social mobilization around such practices. The thesis is guided by three research questions, focused on analyzing Sweden's flight-free movement:

- 1) *What historical and contemporary discourses have been dominant in constructing and sustaining aeromobility as a desirable social norm?*
- 2) *How are the meanings associated with dominant discourses on aeromobility contested and reformulated?*
- 3) *How are future-oriented everyday practices around low-carbon and flight-free ways of life enacted in the present?*

## Overview of papers

The research questions are addressed in three academic papers (Table 1).

**Paper I** draws on argumentative discourse analysis to explore the discursive development of holiday air travel in Sweden during the period 1950-2019. The motivation for this paper was to understand how holiday air travel has become a normalized practice in Sweden, and how the meanings attached to it have changed over time. Based on text and visual material collected from travel magazines, travel operators, and news media, the paper identifies and examines three discourses on aeromobility: Aspirational luxury (1950-1990), Hypermobility (1990-present), and Staying on the ground (2016-present). The first two have been dominant in making air travel a normal part of Swedish holiday culture, while Staying on the ground has emerged more recently to contest, and to some extent reformulate, meanings about holiday air travel as desirable and necessary. While not yet a dominant discourse, the paper shows that Staying on the ground increasingly challenges contemporary cultures of aeromobility, both by portraying flying as problematic and by presenting alternative practices as desirable.

**Paper II** employs a framework of prefigurative politics to examine how leading actors in Sweden's flight-free movement mobilize for reduced air travel. The motivation for this paper was to understand how the Staying on the ground discourse is enacted in practice, both through the everyday life of movement actors, and

through collective action such as campaigns and pledges. Based on interviews with 15 key informants from the flight-free movement and additional media sources, the paper shows that the flight-free movement engages in prefigurative environmental activism aimed at creating and diffusing new norms and practices around avoiding flying. This activism extend beyond experimenting with more sustainable ways of travel, to also focus on the creation of a different way of life in which the need or desire for high-carbon luxury consumption (e.g. long-distance travel) in itself is reconsidered.

**Paper III** draws on argumentative discourse analysis to explore competing discourses around the future of aviation in Sweden. The motivation for this paper was to understand how actors with conflicting interests and values imagine and engage with futures in their attempts to shape action in the present. Based on interviews with 19 actors in the aviation industry conducted by my co-author Emily Christley, and the interviews I conducted with 15 actors in the flight-free movement, as well as documentary material, the paper shows that the future of aviation is contested in Sweden. Promoting a “Green flying” discourse, the aviation industry argues that technological innovation eventually will make flying sustainable, thus postponing climate action to the future. The flight-free movement contests this claim by instead promoting “Staying on the ground”, a discourse highlighting that reduced air travel is critical for achieving sustainability, and prefiguring future-oriented alternatives to aeromobility in the present.

**Table 1. Overview of papers and the main research questions (RQs) addressed by them.**  
Research questions 1 and 2 are answered by synthesising the findings from Paper I and III. Research question 3 is mainly answered by drawing on findings from Paper II, with insights from Paper I and III.

|                                                                                                                                             | Paper I | Paper II | Paper III |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------|-----------|
| RQ1: What historical and contemporary discourses have been dominant in constructing and sustaining aeromobility as a desirable social norm? |         |          |           |
| RQ2: How are the meanings associated with dominant discourses on aeromobility contested and reformulated?                                   |         |          |           |
| RQ3: How are future-oriented everyday practices around low-carbon and flight-free ways of life enacted in the present?                      |         |          |           |

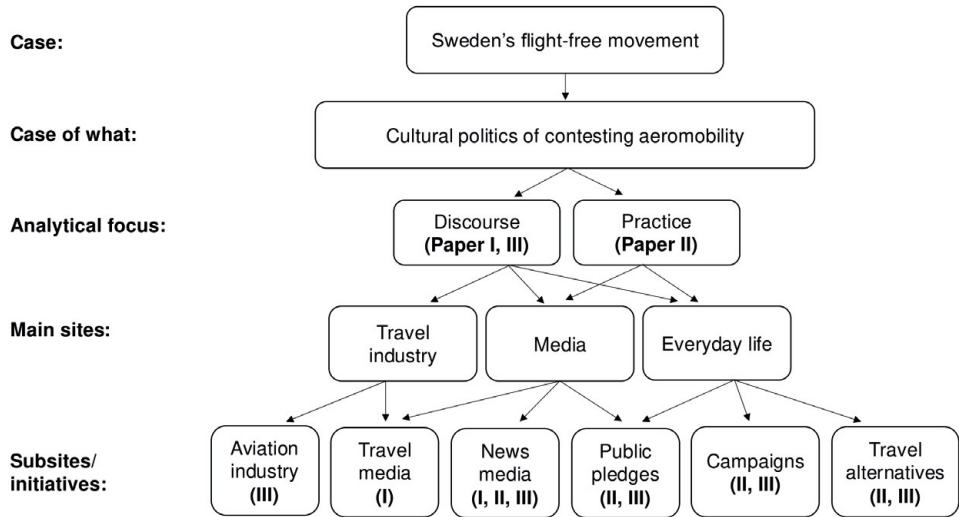
*Popular science contributions*

Besides academic papers, I have co-authored four popular science articles to disseminate and increase the societal impact of my research. These contributions include two opinion pieces for Swedish news media highlighting the need for personal and political action to reduce flying (Ullström et al., 2021; Ullström & Nicholas, 2020); one research summary article for The Conversation, reporting on

the changing discourse around holiday air travel in Sweden based on results from Paper I (Ullström & Nicholas, 2021); and one blog post for the LSE Impact Blog reflecting upon strategies for successfully conducting a flight-free PhD (Kreil & Ullström, 2022).

## Scope of analysis

To keep the scope of the research manageable, I have delimited the analytical focus and sites of empirical exploration (Figure 1). I explore the flight-free movement as a case of cultural politics of contesting aeromobility, and high-carbon ways of life more broadly. The analytical focus is two-fold, exploring both how the flight-free movement has emerged and evolved discursively (Paper I and III) and how alternatives to aeromobility are enacted in practice (Paper II), which is in line with Bulkeley et al.’s (2016) description of how the cultural politics of climate change manifests in society. The empirical analysis zooms in on the media, the travel industry, and everyday life, which all have been important sites for the rise and spread of the flight-free movement.



**Figure 1: Scope of analysis.**  
The analytical focus of the thesis is two-fold, exploring how the flight-free movement has emerged and evolved discursively (Paper I and III) and how alternatives to aeromobility are enacted in practice (Paper II).

A key motivation for the focus on media was to understand the broader cultural context within which the flight-free movement has emerged. The media plays a central role in everyday life and culture and enables analysis of both historical and



contemporary phenomena (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). Media representations help people interpret and make sense of complex issues, such as climate change, and can reproduce as well as critique dominant forms of political and economic power (Boykoff, 2011). The potential of the media to both sustain and challenge dominant discourses makes it a key site for the cultural politics of climate change, providing a means of communication between climate science, policy, and people's everyday life (Boykoff, 2011).

From the wide range of media, I focus primarily on news media and travel media. News media was chosen because it influences general public opinion and the perceived importance of specific issues through the amount and type of coverage provided (Hall, 2003), and has been a key site for initiating and circulating conversations around avoiding flying in Sweden. Travel media was chosen because it illustrates key ideas and assumptions about traveling and contributes to shaping people's travel choices, such as where to travel and by which means of transport (Fodness & Murray, 1997).

While I primarily focus on the cultural dimension of aeromobility, the travel industry plays a key role in shaping and sustaining norms around flying, for example, by presenting it as a desirable mode of transport (Gössling & Peeters, 2007). The inclusion of travel media, as mentioned above, was thus also important in the sense that it enables an analysis of how cultures of aeromobility are influenced by and entangled with the values and interests of the travel industry. I explore this relationship further through an analysis of how air travel is represented by actors involved in the aviation industry. This part of the analysis draws on data collected by my co-author for Paper III, Emily Christley, with whom I conducted a combined case study exploring competing discourses on the future of aeromobility.

Lastly, to understand the ongoing social mobilization against air travel in Sweden, I turn my attention to the realm of everyday life. I specifically look at three initiatives associated with the flight-free movement that illustrate prefigurative attempts to create alternatives to aeromobility and circulate arguments around the urgency of reducing flying in the public debate. These initiatives include: (1) public pledges to stop flying because of climate change, a trend that emerged at the end of 2016 when influential people such as journalists, celebrities, and academics initiated a media debate around the importance of avoiding flying to help reduce emissions (e.g. Anderson et al., 2017; Ernman, 2016; Liljestrand, 2018); (2) activist-led campaigns arranged by the environmental organization We Stay on the Ground, a group founded in 2018 to highlight aviation's climate impact and change unsustainable consumption norms, specifically regarding air travel; and (3) attempts to support people in choosing more sustainable travel alternatives, such as the Train vacation (*Tågsemester*) Facebook group which functions as an online community for people interested in traveling sustainably by train, often long-distance, for their holiday (see page 44-46 for a closer description of these initiatives).



## Conceptualizing aeromobility

The concept of aeromobility is associated with a range of overlapping meanings. Specifically, researchers in intersecting fields within the social sciences have used the term to highlight “the dominance of flying as the normal international mode of travelling” (Adey et al., 2007, p. 774), and the ways in which air travel shapes the contemporary global order (Urry, 2009). John Urry’s conceptualization of mobilities (e.g. automobility, aeromobility) as systems that structure the “economic, social, and cultural organization of distance” (Urry, 2007, p. 54) has been influential for the literature on aeromobility and inspired research on the societal embeddedness of air travel (e.g. Cwerner et al., 2009; Lin & Harris, 2020; Volden & Hansen, 2022). This literature draws on various disciplines and fields within the social sciences and humanities to advance the understanding for the relationship between air travel and modern social life, highlighting the centrality of aviation and air travel in the increasingly mobile and globalized world (Cwerner et al., 2009).

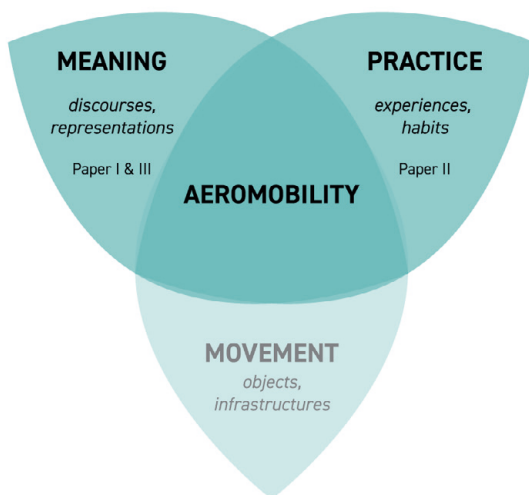
The literature on aeromobility is closely related to the new mobilities paradigm within the social sciences, also referred to as the “mobility turn” (Sheller & Urry, 2006). While research on traveling often has focused on patterns of movement, such as how often people move, where, and when, research in the new mobilities paradigm takes a more holistic approach to understand the social, cultural, and historical processes that shape and are shaped by mobilities (Cresswell, 2011). It does so by studying the movement of people, ideas, and objects (Sheller & Urry, 2006), while also paying attention to the meanings, experiences, governance, and justice implications of such movements (Bærenholdt, 2013; Cresswell, 2010; Sheller, 2018).

My understanding of aeromobility draws on this literature, specifically Tim Cresswell’s (2010) definition of mobilities as constellations of movement, meaning, and practice. This definition has parallels with Urry’s (2007) mobility systems, but pays more attention to the historical context within which mobilities have emerged and developed. More specifically, Cresswell (2010) refers to mobilities as “the fact of physical movement – getting from one place to another; the representations of movement that give it shared meaning; and, finally, the experienced and embodied practice of movement” (Cresswell, 2010, p. 19). Mobilities, thus, “have a physical reality, they are encoded culturally and socially, and they are experienced through practice” (Cresswell, 2010, p. 21).

Following Cresswell’s (2010) definition, I understand aeromobility as a constellation of interconnected elements, specifically encompassing (i) the discourses and representations through which *meanings* about flying are produced; (ii) the *practices* through which flying is experienced and habituated; and (iii) the objects, technologies, and infrastructures that enable flying as a form of *movement*. In this view, the practices associated with flying (e.g. booking a flight, going to the

airport, sitting on a plane) have both material and discursive dimensions that are “enacted and experienced through the body” (Cresswell, 2010, p. 20). Materially, air travel is an observable and measurable practice, facilitated by physical objects such as aircraft and airport infrastructure. Discursively, air travel is a socially constructed practice in the sense that the habits and experiences associated with it (e.g. going on vacation, visiting loved ones, exploring new places) are shaped by meanings and representations that have developed and changed over time.

In this thesis, I focus specifically on the elements of meaning and practice (Figure 2). While I acknowledge that these elements are entangled with the material fact of movement, my work does not explicitly focus on the materiality of aeromobility. Previous research has explored the materiality of aeromobility from various angles, including studies on the centrality of airports and airspaces in structuring global mobility and immobility (Adey et al., 2024; Kesselring, 2009), the technologies through which airspaces are managed and governed (Budd et al., 2009), and the impacts of low-cost aviation infrastructures on patterns of movement (Hirsh, 2017; Nilsson, 2009). I recognize the importance of these (and countless other) researchers’ work on the physical (re)production of air travel as a form of movement, which has been influential for how I understand and approach the problem of aeromobility. But as argued by Cresswell (2010), there is scope to extend the research on what specific mobilities “are made to mean and how they are practiced” (p.19), which I address by focusing on these elements in the context of aeromobility.



**Figure 2. Aeromobility in this thesis is studied through a focus on meaning and practice.**

Drawing on Cresswell's (2010) definition of mobility, I understand aeromobility as a constellation that encompasses the discourses and representations that give meaning to flying, the practices through which flying is experienced and habituated, and the objects and infrastructures that enable flying as a form of movement. In this thesis, I focus primarily on the elements of meaning (Paper I, III) and practice (Paper II). Image credit: Emma Li Johansson (emmalijohansson.com).

By exploring (contested) meanings and practices of aeromobility, this thesis adds to literature that pays attention to, either explicitly or implicitly, the discursive construction of air travel practices (e.g. Cohen & Gössling, 2015; Dickinson et al., 2010; Schmidt et al., 2024). Air travel has long been associated with meanings about freedom and modernity, enabling (some) people to move across the world quickly and smoothly (Cresswell, 2010). The exclusivity of air travel has made it a signifier of social status, with flying typically being glamorized in public discourse (Cohen & Gössling, 2015) and represented as a way to find adventure and excitement (Howarth & Griggs, 2006). These meanings trigger desires to explore the world (Becken, 2007) and normalize air travel by presenting it as a desirable practice (Cohen & Gössling, 2015). Notably, flying has become a habituated part of highly mobile lifestyles in affluent societies (Aasen et al., 2023), and is often seen as a practical choice for travelers considering aspects such as time and money (Dickinson et al., 2010; Volden & Hansen, 2022). Flying is also largely supported by social norms and expectations (Schmidt et al., 2024), which has given rise to a culture where people feel entitled to fly, often justified through claims about necessity or freedom of choice (Cass et al., 2023). I complement this research by demonstrating how alternative meanings and practices around avoiding air travel can challenge this culture, and open up possibilities for new ways of traveling, vacationing, and enjoying everyday life.

# Theoretical framework

## Situating the theoretical approach

There are various approaches to studying aeromobility as a climate problem. Researchers highlight diverse aspects of the issue and apply different theoretical perspectives to explain the ongoing attempts, failures, and opportunities in regard to the challenge of mitigating aviation's climate impact. One strand of research focuses on the political economy of decarbonizing air travel, including work on the regulation, management, and planning of aviation. For example, Rayner (2021) analyzes the current climate governance of aviation and highlights major barriers to decarbonization due to the management of the industry, ranging from the absence of fuel taxation to the lack of demand management. Young (2020) draws on Marxian value theory to analyze air travel as a product of capitalist social relations, arguing that “[t]rying to reduce the environmental costs of flying while leaving these capitalist social relations unchanged is treating the symptoms rather than the causes of flying” (p. 954). While such approaches offer valuable insights into the political and economic structures around the governance of aeromobility, they fail to shed light on the cultural dimensions – particularly the meanings associated with flying and the practices those meanings enable and are reproduced by.

Another common approach is to focus on infrastructural and technological aspects of mitigating the emissions from aviation. For example, recent studies have applied socio-technical transitions theory to analyze the pathways and barriers to accelerating low-carbon technologies, such as sustainable aviation fuels and electric aircraft (Kim et al., 2019; Lai & Karakaya, 2024; Urban et al., 2024). Such research tend to view technology as the main driver of low-carbon transitions, often highlighting the need for policies focused on supporting technological innovation (Kim et al., 2019). However, these studies overlook dynamics of demand and “the central role that practitioners themselves play in generating, sustaining and overthrowing everyday practices” (Shove & Walker, 2010, p. 476). As highlighted by several scholars, demand-side solutions are essential for mitigating the emissions from aviation in line with global climate goals (e.g. Klöwer et al., 2021; Sharmina et al., 2021).

From a demand-side point of view, a common approach is to apply psychological theories to analyze attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors in regard to air travel, such as the factors that motivate or constrain air travelers to fly less (Büchs, 2017;

Cocolas et al., 2021; Davison et al., 2014; Morten et al., 2018). These studies tend to assume that social change can be achieved at the individual level through behavioral choices, which often lead to policy recommendations focused on changing attitudes (Davison et al., 2014). However, they miss the broader cultural context within which particular behaviors are made desirable or normal in the first place and thus fail to understand the social dynamics of high-emitting activities. Social practice theory is sometimes suggested as a more comprehensive way of understanding how unsustainable air travel behaviors are produced and sustained, with researchers drawing attention to the practices in which flying is embedded (e.g. practices related to holidays, work, and celebrations) (Randles & Mander, 2009; Volden & Hansen, 2022). While these studies shift focus from individual behaviors to broader social systems, they tend to focus on the robustness of high-carbon practices while less attention is paid to how such practices can be changed.

What is lacking in these approaches, in my view, is a focus on the cultural politics of aeromobility; that is, the ways in which the meanings and practices associated with air travel shape and is shaped by politics. Drawing on the work of Matthew Paterson (2021), I understand politics in a three-fold way: as a site of public decision-making, as a question of power, and as a site of contestation. Politics, in this view, is not restricted to formal political arenas such as national governments, but is also embedded in the realm of daily life (Paterson, 2021). A cultural politics lens is helpful for drawing out the political dynamics of everyday life, specifically in the context of how cultural dimensions of climate change (e.g. desires for objects and practices that generate emissions, or contestation around these desires) enable or constrain climate action (Bulkeley et al., 2016). While several scholars have highlighted the need to understand air travel in relation to everyday life (Cwerner, 2009; Griggs & Howarth, 2023; Randles & Mander, 2009), a cultural politics lens has not, to my knowledge, been used to study aeromobility. Hence, by situating my thesis within the literature of cultural politics, I complement existing interpretations of aviation's climate problem with increased understanding of the often-overlooked role of culture in sustaining as well as addressing this problem.

## The cultural politics of climate change

Cultural politics is an approach focused on the intersections between lived experience and the political (Korf, 2020). It pays attention to the spaces where different actors seek to influence public understanding and action (Boykoff, 2011), including both the realm of the everyday and more formal sites of authoritative decision-making (Paterson, 2021). The concept of cultural politics has been employed broadly within the social sciences, such as in geography (Korf, 2020), development studies (Moore, 1999), media and communication (Boykoff, 2011), and environmental politics (Bulkeley et al., 2016; Paterson, 2007, 2021). However,

it is not as established as, for example, political economy, and researchers adopt different definitions of the concept. For example, Korf (2020) describes cultural politics as a particular way of conceptualizing “politics in society that recognizes ‘the cultural’ as a vital site for political struggles over meaning” (p. 111). Similarly, Boykoff (2011) refers to cultural politics as “dynamic and contested processes behind which meaning is constructed and negotiated” (p. 3). While these studies are mainly concerned with the creation and contestation of meanings, others highlight the need to also pay attention to the ways in which such meanings are materially constituted through specific objects and practices (Bulkeley et al., 2016).

Several researchers have employed a cultural politics perspective to analyze the cultural dimensions of climate change politics (e.g. Boykoff, 2011; Boykoff et al., 2009; Bulkeley et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2020; Paterson, 2007, 2021). These studies highlight the role of culture – whether conceptualized as a question of meaning-making (Boykoff, 2011) or as more materially embodied (Bulkeley et al., 2016; Paterson, 2007) – in shaping both the causes of and responses to climate change (Goodman et al., 2020). The work of Paterson (2007) has been influential for the literature on the cultural politics of climate change, specifically in regard to the societal embeddedness of automobility and its consequences for the environment. By bringing together political economy and cultural politics, he argues that the contemporary dominance of automobility needs to be understood both as a result of the developments of capitalism (i.e. the pursuit of capital accumulation), and the emergence of a particular car culture that produces automobile subjects (Paterson, 2007).

Other early accounts of the cultural politics of climate change include the work of Böhm et al. (2006), which also has an empirical focus on automobility. They do not explicitly refer to cultural politics, but highlight the need to understand automobility as constitutive of a particular culture where cars are viewed as efficient, convenient, modern, and liberating, and which is both politically sustained and contested: “[automobility] entails patterns of power relations and visions of a collective ‘good life’ which are at the same time highly contestable and contested” (Böhm et al., 2006, p. 4). In other words, automobility may appear universal and normal, but is also challenged in various ways, such as through protests against the construction of new roads (Böhm et al., 2006) and the promotion of cycling as an alternative to the car (Balkmar & Summerton, 2017; Bartling, 2016; Fincham, 2006).

While the cultural politics of climate change has received rising scholarly attention during the past two decades, it is not yet settled as an academic field or approach. Notably, different studies represent diverse, although overlapping, understandings of what a cultural politics analysis means in the context of climate change. For example, Boykoff et al. (2009) focus on the discursive level of cultural politics through an analysis of how climate change is represented in popular culture, and highlight that these representations politicize climate change by shaping how it is understood and acted upon. Bulkeley et al. (2016) widen the scope of where and

how the cultural politics of climate change manifests by focusing on both discourse and material practice. They have developed an approach which is concerned with the ways in which everyday practices (e.g. driving, flying, meat-eating) and their associated meanings shape and are shaped by diverse arenas of climate politics, such as the home, the workplace, and the supermarket (Bulkeley et al., 2016). This approach focuses both on cultural resistance to climate mitigation and the creation of low-carbon alternatives:

a cultural politics perspective is particularly valuable in coming to grips with precisely why our high-carbon world is so entrenched, so difficult to move – but at the same time it also provides important hints about the sites at which things might become less viscous and more open to possible low-carbon futures. (Bulkeley et al., 2016, p. 3)

My understanding of cultural politics draw particularly on the work of Bulkeley et al. (2016), which emphasizes the need to think about “the nature and workings of power as always and already cultural, and of culture – the meanings, artifacts and practices that animate society – as intimately political” (Bulkeley et al., 2016, p. 1). As mentioned above, this view on cultural politics focuses both on the meanings associated with everyday cultures and the ways these meanings are sustained or contested in practice (Bulkeley et al., 2016). To theorize these aspects in relation to aeromobility, I apply two theoretical approaches drawn from literature about discourse analysis and everyday activism. As I describe more in detail in the sections below, I employ argumentative discourse analysis (Hajer, 1995) to analyze how meanings around aeromobility are constructed, sustained, contested, and reformulated (Paper I and III); and prefigurative politics (Yates, 2015b) to analyze how low-carbon alternatives to aeromobility are enacted in everyday life and practice (Paper II).

Through this approach, I complement and deepen existing literature about the cultural politics of climate change, specifically by demonstrating the value of using prefigurative politics as a lens for theorizing cultural change. While the need for cultural change is highlighted in this literature (Bulkeley et al., 2016), scholars have mainly focused on the discursive aspects of cultural politics (Boykoff, 2011; Boykoff et al., 2009) and the ways in which the current high-carbon society is sustained (Mylan, 2016; Paterson, 2007). Some have analyzed low-carbon interventions and initiatives, but often with a focus on how such interventions are resisted by desires for high-carbon practices (Quitau & Hoffmann, 2016). By bringing together the literature on discourse analysis and prefiguration from a cultural politics lens, I contribute with increased understanding for how to enable cultural change around high-carbon consumption in practice.



## Discourse: Making sense of meanings

In Paper I and III, I explore how the cultural politics of contesting aeromobility manifests discursively through processes of meaning-making. Discourse analysis is broadly concerned with the ways in which language (spoken, written, visual) attributes meanings to phenomena, and the functions of these meanings in society at large (Paul, 2009). There are many different traditions of and approaches to discourse analysis which represent different ways of understanding what discourses are and how to study them. In general, discourse analytical approaches view knowledge as socially constructed, and emphasize that discourse (through language) actively shapes the social reality, rather than merely mirroring it (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). However, different approaches adopt diverse views in regard to the scope of discourse, and there is disagreement as to whether discourses are both constitutive of and constituted by the social reality (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In other words, is there an end to discourse, or is everything discursively constructed?

While some discourse analysts distinguish between discursive and non-discursive elements of social practice (e.g. Fairclough, 2010), others understand society as exclusively discursive (e.g. Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). For example, in critical discourse analysis, discursive practices are understood as the processes through which language is produced and consumed, while the wider social context within which these processes take place is not seen as discursive in itself (Fairclough, 2010). It is thus assumed that there is a social and physical reality “out there” which shapes discourses, while at the same time being shaped by these discourses (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). By contrast, post-structuralist approaches emphasize that all aspects of reality are discursive, and thus socially constructed (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). In this view, discourse is broadly understood as “specific systems of meaning which form the identities of subjects and objects” (Howarth, 2000, p. 9), meaning that discourse is seen as constitutive of society as a whole. This understanding of reality as inherently discursive does not, however, imply a denial of the existence of material objects, but rather that these objects are given meaning through discourse (Paul, 2009).

### **A post-structuralist approach to discourse**

This thesis is situated within the post-structuralist tradition of discourse analysis in the sense that I resonate with the idea that both social and physical phenomena are attributed meanings through discourse, and that these meanings shape ways of understanding reality (Howarth, 2000). My understanding of discourse and its functions in society is influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, who has been important for the development of post-structuralist discourse theory. Foucault pays specific attention to the relationship between knowledge and power, arguing that



knowledge is the product of power, while power simultaneously is shaped by knowledge (Foucault, 1975/1991). He thus adopts a relational view on power, meaning that power is understood in relation to the formation of knowledge, and is hence closely connected to discourse (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). More specifically, Foucault understands power as constitutive of particular kinds of discourses and subjectivities (ways of being), which Barnett and Duvall (2005) refer to as productive power. Productive power means that power is not controlled by specific actors but is rather understood in relation to discursive processes and practices (Barnett & Duvall, 2005).

This view on power as productive (or relational) is important in the context of my thesis. Specifically, it means that discourses on aeromobility shape what is considered to be normal practices of movement (e.g. ideas about where, how, and why to travel), and thus produce specific mobile subjects, such as globetrotters (Cresswell, 2010) and frequent flyers (Cohen & Gössling, 2015). These mobile subjects reproduce discourses on aeromobility through specific practices (e.g. flying), and thus reinforce the meanings that shape their actions and identities (e.g. meanings about flying as normal). The ways in which people think and act in relation to aeromobility is thus not merely individually determined; it is influenced by the discourses through which meaning is produced and reproduced, and through which specific mobile practices are constructed as desirable. In this way, discourses are real and performative; they “structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking” (Rose, 2016, p. 187).

While Foucault highlights the power of discourses in shaping knowledge, action, and subjects, he also pays attention to resistance toward and disruption of dominant discourses (Moussa & Scapp, 1996). More specifically, he focuses on discursive change rather than continuity and emphasizes that subjects may counter the dominance of the discourses through which they are being governed by expressing their desires, and thus creating their own discourse (Moussa & Scapp, 1996). To put this in the context of my thesis, people can resist dominant discourses on aeromobility by acknowledging the power of these discourses (e.g. their ability to construct flying as normal) and articulating a desire for an alternative lifestyle, thus redefining their subjectivity through an opposing discourse (e.g. Staying on the ground, see Paper I). In other words, discourses shape what is considered to be normal practices of movement, while also generating reactions that question those practices. This view on people’s ability to contest discourses, while at the same time being constituted by them, gives (at least some) agency to subjects in the context of (re)producing and transforming discourse (Hajer, 1995).

Foucault’s emphasis on discursive change has been important for my analysis of aeromobility, particularly in Paper I which traces key discursive shifts around holiday air travel in Sweden, but also in Paper III which analyses the contestation and conflicts across dominant and emerging discourses on aeromobility. To identify the moments when a discourse is being challenged or even disrupted, it is important

to pay attention to the practices through which discourses are produced and reproduced as well as how different discourses interact (e.g. overlap or compete) in shaping reality (Hajer, 1995). However, Foucault did not provide concrete tools or methods for how to approach these aspects analytically, nor for how to study the role of subjects in sustaining or contesting discourses (Hajer, 1995). In other words, Foucault has been influential for the development of post-structuralist discourse theory, but it can be fruitful to complement such theory with further discourse analytical approaches that offer more practical methods (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

### **Argumentative discourse analysis**

To identify and analyze discourses on aeromobility, I employ Maarten Hajer's (1995) argumentative discourse analysis. This approach draws broadly on Foucault's ideas about discursive practices but is more concrete as to the operationalization of the functions of discourse, specifically in the context of environmental politics. Hajer (1995) conceptualizes environmental politics as an argumentative struggle over meaning and pays specific attention to the ways in which discursive dominance is maintained or challenged. He adopts a Foucault-inspired definition of discourse as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices" (Hajer, 2006, p. 67). Discourse, in this view, must be understood in relation to the social practices in which it is (re)produced, or more specifically, the "embedded routines and mutually understood rules and norms that provide coherence to social life" (Hajer, 2006, p. 70). For example, going on vacation can be understood as a practice through which discourses about holiday travel (and aeromobility) are produced and reproduced. These discourses shape which travel practices are considered normal and desirable, which in turn influences people's travel choices and guides policy-making, thus producing specific social and political effects.

To make sense of discursive effects, Hajer (1995) provides the analytical concepts of "discourse-coalition" and "storyline". A discourse-coalition refers to a group of actors that shares the use of storylines to conceptualize a specific problem or phenomenon (Hajer, 2006). Storylines are condensed statements which actors draw upon to give meaning to social phenomena. They serve as a cue of more complex stories and provide actors with "a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding" (Hajer, 1995, p. 62). In this way, storylines reduce discursive complexity and allow actors with different backgrounds and experiences to understand one another and create a communicative network (Hajer, 1995). Through the use of storylines, a discourse-coalition can shift or maintain the way a problem is conceptualized and challenge or reinforce dominant discourses. Storylines thus function as a form of agency or mechanism through which a

discourse, or discourse-coalition, gains power in the sense of shaping how a problem is understood and acted upon (Hajer, 1995).

Power in argumentative discourse analysis is largely understood in terms of discursive dominance. According to Hajer (1995) a discourse can be considered dominant when it fulfills the criteria of discourse structuration and discourse institutionalization (Hajer, 2006). Discourse structuration occurs when the storylines associated with a particular discourse substantially shape the way in which a problem is understood (i.e. when they are used by many people, including key actors). Discourse institutionalization occurs when the storylines translate into concrete policies or organizational practices, and thus begin to shape institutional arrangements (Hajer, 1995). While these processes enable some discourses to become dominant, there are always other discourses that challenge this dominance by mobilizing actors around alternative storylines (Hajer, 2006). Discursive effects are thus the result of an argumentative struggle in which actors from different discourse-coalitions seek support for their definition of reality through the use of storylines (Hajer, 1995).

## Practice: Everyday life as a site of politics

In paper II, I explore how the cultural politics of contesting aeromobility manifests in practice through forms of everyday activism; that is, activism embedded in practices of daily life rather than explicitly oriented toward arenas of public decision-making (Forno & Wahlen, 2022a).

Scholarship on social movements has generally focused on organized forms of direct political action such as protests and strikes, while the realm of everyday life has been paid little attention (Mikael et al., 2023). This sharp distinction between political and everyday action is notable in the literature about contentious politics, which makes up the dominant theoretical paradigm of social movement studies (Tarrow, 2015). In the contentious politics literature, social movements are defined as networks of people that mobilize around contentious issues with demands about social or political change directed toward the state or government (McAdam et al., 2001). Political action, in this view, is understood as a collective struggle aimed at achieving institutional change (McAdam et al., 2001), while everyday life often is viewed as something more private and self-centered (Haenfler et al., 2012).

However, some researchers have stressed that many forms of activism do not fit neatly under the contentious politics framing and suggested to broaden the conceptualization of social movements (e.g. Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Snow, 2004). For example, David Snow (2004) provides an alternative definition of social movements as “collective challenges to an array of systems of authority beyond the polity” (p. 16), including in the organizational, institutional, and cultural domain.

This extended conceptualization recognizes that the state is not the only arena for political change and that social movements may target “other institutional and cultural spheres of social life” (Snow, 2004, p. 19), including at the everyday level (Yates, 2022). While the everyday “may appear familiar, ordinary, humble, banal and personal” (Yates, 2022, p. 145), it is increasingly recognized as an important site of political action in research about, for example, feminism (Schuster, 2017), consumption (Yates, 2022), and environmentalism (Forno & Wahlen, 2022a; Schlosberg, 2019).

## **Everyday environmental activism**

Everyday environmental activism is receiving growing attention in both research and society. Such activism is usually informally organized and embedded in practices of everyday sustainability rather than explicitly targeting political institutions (Forno & Wahlen, 2022a). However, this focus on everyday sustainability is not limited to individual behavior change. Instead, everyday environmental activism is often characterized by groups of people collectively engaging themselves in alternative consumption and lifestyle practices, while also seeking to spread these practices to wider networks as a way to change society from within (Schlosberg, 2019). Examples include environmental movements focused on specific pro-environmental practices, such as renewable energy (Wittmayer et al., 2022), locally produced food (Forno & Graziano, 2014), and zero-waste (Chertkovskaya et al., 2024), as well as alternative ways of organizing social and economic life, such as eco-villages (Casey et al., 2020) and transition towns (Schiller-Merkens, 2024).

While a growing number of movements engage in everyday environmental activism, the political effectiveness of such activism is debated in research (de Moor et al., 2021). On the one hand, some have argued that the focus on small-scale everyday actions individualizes responsibility for environmental problems (Maniates, 2001) and lacks potential to create broader societal change (Blühdorn, 2017). In this view, everyday activism is seen to de-politicize environmentalism by targeting consumer morality rather than challenging status quo (Thörn & Svenberg, 2016). On the other hand, recent research has highlighted the importance of everyday activism in the context of creating “an alternative and desirable ecological, sustainable society” (Forno & Wahlen, 2022a, p. 440). Specifically, such research argues that mobilization around everyday sustainability indeed challenges dominant power relations through the creation of alternative and transformative social and material relationships (Schlosberg & Craven, 2019).

The idea that everyday environmental activism can create broader societal change is central in the emerging literature on sustainable materialism (Schlosberg, 2019; Schlosberg & Coles, 2016; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019), also referred to as new materialism (Eckersley, 2020). This literature focuses on environmental movements

engaged in the creation of more sustainable practices around basic material needs, such as food, energy, and clothing (Schlosberg, 2019). According to Schlosberg and Craven (2019), these movements organize collectively to develop and participate in alternative material practices with the aim of “prefiguring new possibilities for more sustainable futures” (p. 24). This prefigurative element is understood as “a politics of embodied and constructed alternatives to current material systems and flows” (Schlosberg, 2019, p. 2), and is highlighted as an important feature that distinguishes these movements from more individualized consumer actions, such as lifestyle changes that only focus inwardly (de Moor, 2017).

The literature on sustainable materialism has been important for my theorization of the flight-free movement, specifically for turning my attention to the concept of prefigurative politics, which I describe in more depth in the following section. However, this literature has so far focused on replacing unsustainable practices related to basic material needs (Schlosberg, 2019; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019), which excludes some of the most high-carbon practices increasingly associated with affluent overconsumption, such as flying. By analyzing the prefigurative politics of the flight-free movement (Paper II), I increase the understanding for everyday environmentalism focused on avoiding, rather than just replacing, high-carbon consumption practices beyond material necessities.

## **Prefigurative politics**

Prefigurative politics refers to a political logic focused on “the attempted construction of alternative or utopian social relations in the present, either in parallel with, or in the course of, adversarial social movement protest” (Yates, 2015b, p. 1). Rather than directing demands about social and political change toward the state or government, prefigurative movements enact the future they desire in the here and now (Maeckelbergh, 2011). The concept of prefiguration has a long history and was originally part of conversations around revolutionary left strategy in the 1970s (Yates, 2021). Since then, the use of the concept has broadened and so has the phenomena labeled as prefigurative. Today, prefigurative politics informs various academic debates around collective and practice-based attempts to create social change, such as alternative organizing (Chertkovskaya et al., 2024; Parker, 2023; Skoglund & Böhm, 2020), protest camps (Reinecke, 2018), social and economic solidarity initiatives (Schiller-Merkens, 2024; Yates, 2015a, 2015b), and more recently also everyday environmentalism (Schlosberg & Craven, 2019; Skoglund & Böhm, 2022).

Prefigurative movements shift focus from dominant state-centric approaches in social movement scholarship (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; McAdam et al., 2001) to alternative ways of achieving social change (Monticelli, 2021; Yates, 2015b). For example, the Alterglobalization movement – which opposes the negative consequences of neoliberal globalization – has been labeled prefigurative because

of its focus on the “building of another world *and* the political structures needed to govern that other world” (Maeckelbergh, 2011, p. 2, emphasis in original). The specific goals of the movement are not predetermined, but developed through continuously trying out more inclusive, sustainable, and egalitarian ways of organizing a community (Maeckelbergh, 2011). Ecovillages are also commonly understood as prefigurative in the sense that they create alternative systems of production and consumption organized around principles of sustainability and self-sufficiency, thus challenging growth-oriented ways of structuring society (Casey et al., 2020). Similarly, local food and energy movements resist and restructure unsustainable norms around consumption by experimenting with alternative and more sustainable practices for meeting basic material needs (Schlosberg, 2019), such as community supported agriculture (Schlosberg & Craven, 2019) and collectively produced solar energy (Skoglund & Böhm, 2022; Wittmayer et al., 2022).

The literature on prefiguration conceptualizes social change as a continuous process “in which the means become ends, which in turn become the means to other ends” (Maeckelbergh, 2011, p. 15). In general, experimentation with future-oriented practices is seen as a central feature of prefigurative politics because it enables the creation of social and political alternatives (Maeckelbergh, 2011; Monticelli, 2021; Yates, 2015b). For such alternatives to persist beyond the present and spread to wider society, prefiguration scholars often highlight the importance of diffusion (Monticelli, 2021; Schiller-Merkens, 2024; Yates, 2015b). Diffusion refers to “the collective attempt, or at least the ambition, to circulate alternative practices, beliefs and values beyond the boundaries of the own organization or community” (Schiller-Merkens, 2024, p. 465). As argued by Yates (2015b), diffusion is key for demonstrating the existence of prefigured alternatives and thus for ensuring their political relevance. It often takes place gradually (Monticelli, 2021) and through various activities such as seminars, workshops, protests, circulation of alternative media, and informal events (Yates, 2015b).

To analyze how the flight-free movement is prefigurative, I draw on Luke Yates’ (2015b) approach to prefiguration which pays attention to the creation of alternative practices, perspectives, and conduct – through experimentation – and their diffusion to society at large. More specifically, I analyze the dynamics of four prefigurative processes drawn from this approach, including (1) collective experimentation with alternative and future-oriented practices, (2) development and critique of political perspectives and ideas, (3) creation of new norms and conduct, and (4) diffusion of the experimental practices, perspectives, and new conduct beyond the movement. The processes of experimentation and conduct are focused on living the desired change in practice and are key to differentiate prefiguration from more state-centric forms of activism. The process of perspectives is important for developing a shared purpose and vision, while diffusion is needed to ensure that the prefigured alternatives persist in the future and spread to wider society (Yates, 2015b). As I

explain in Paper II, Yates' (2015b) analytical approach also includes a fifth process, consolidation, which is focused on inscribing the prefigured alternatives in or around movement spaces. I excluded this process because the initiatives that I analyze (public pledges, flight-free campaigns, practices of slow and sustainable travel) are not explicitly concerned with interventions in material environments. However, Yates (2015b) argues that the processes of diffusion and consolidation have similar goals of ensuring the future relevance of social and political alternatives, and that one of these processes is enough to distinguish a movement as prefigurative.



# Methods and Material

## Research design

In this thesis, I employ a case study research design, which allows for in-depth explorations of a specific phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin, 2014). Case studies are common within social and sustainability science and are typically focused on exploring specific features of a phenomenon through a variety of methods and data (Yin, 2014). The purpose is to gain deep understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny, which usually also involves contributing to theoretical development or explanations that are relevant in other contexts similar to the one studied (Ridder, 2017). To assure the broader relevance of a case beyond the studied context, case study researchers should always reflect upon the question: *What is this a case of?* (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Lund, 2014). By defining what the phenomenon represents and theorizing its broader characteristics, it is possible to draw conclusions or hypothesize about more general patterns beyond the specific empirical observations (Lund, 2014). Theory is thus at the heart of case study research, not merely to make sense of specific phenomena, but also to transfer insights to other sites and settings (Ridder, 2017). Theorization, in this view, “is about moving from observation of empirical facts, *through* concepts, to be able to say something about the inherent qualities and dynamics in contexts *other* than the ones studied” (Lund, 2014, p. 229, emphasis in original).

The phenomenon under scrutiny in this thesis is Sweden’s flight-free movement, which I understand as a case of *cultural politics of contesting high-carbon ways of life, particularly through the construction and diffusion of alternative meanings and practices related to aeromobility*. This understanding has developed via retroduction, which is the process of moving back and forth between empirical observations and more abstract theoretical concepts (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011) such as culture, discourse, everyday politics, and prefiguration. By analyzing the flight-free movement as a case of cultural politics, I can explore the general tendencies of this phenomenon and its relevance in the wider context of demand-side cultural change. Specifically, employing a theoretical lens of discourse analysis enables me to understand how meanings around aeromobility have developed and transformed, and the role of these meanings for travel cultures and cultural change. And by drawing theoretically on prefiguration, I can better understand the political logic of the flight-free movement and the strategy employed by movement actors in their



attempt to achieve change. These insights are in turn relevant for studies on similar phenomena, such as analyses of other prefigurative environmental movements and attempts of fostering demand-side cultural change.

Before describing the research process in more depth, it is relevant to mention that my research began in September 2019, when the flight-free movement was gaining rising momentum in Sweden and the climate impact from air travel was widely discussed in public and political debates. Six months later, the ongoing and planned activities of the movement were suddenly halted by the Covid-19 pandemic which dramatically (yet temporarily) disrupted the aviation sector. On the one hand, the decrease in air travel caused by the pandemic was seen as an opportunity to achieve long-lasting changes in norms regarding air travel. On the other hand, the pandemic made it challenging for the movement to encourage people to stop flying for climate reasons, since very few flew at all during this time (personal communication, May 4, 2020). As stated by We Stay on the Ground, “[t]he aviation debate stalled completely when the pandemic broke out” (We Stay on the Ground, 2022b), highlighting how these unexpected and sudden changes in regard to air travel affected the movement’s momentum. As such, the pandemic also affected my research plan and process. During the first half of my PhD, when the pandemic affected all aspects of society, I mainly worked with archival material from the early decades of commercial aviation, as well as online material from the pre-pandemic years. This choice led me to a focus on certain aspects of the flight-free movement, specifically its emergence, discourses, key actors, and micropolitics, which I eventually found to be very useful for understanding the contestation of aeromobility, while excluding other aspects, such as the broader networks of the movement, its demographic composition beyond key actors, and parliamentary debates around flying in Sweden.

## Empirical context

An intense public debate about aviation’s climate impact has unfolded in Sweden during the past decade. It started in the end of 2016, when famous opera singer Malena Ernman (Greta Thunberg’s mother) published a story in Swedish news media, highlighting the need to change consumption habits and declaring her decision to stop flying (Ernman, 2016). Six months later, Ernman wrote an opinion piece together with seven other influential people, including academics, artists, and athletes, where they jointly pledged to stop flying to highlight the urgency of climate action (Anderson et al., 2017).

In January 2018, the journalist Jens Liljestrand gained attention both nationally and internationally after publishing a personal story about a family holiday to Kenya, depicting how they dived among colorless coral reefs that were dying because of

climate change. He described exotic vacations to far-away places as “a lifestyle beyond all idiocy” (Liljestrand, 2018), which spurred an intensified media debate about people’s responsibility for the emissions caused by their flying. Some journalists joined the pledge not to fly (e.g. Hadley-Kamptz, 2018; Hagen, 2018), while others criticized them for being moralizing and elitist (e.g. de Gregorio, 2018; Magnusson, 2019).

Also in January 2018, the environmental organization *Vi håller oss på jorden* (We Stay on the Ground) was founded with the aim to “reduce emissions, change the norm and lay the foundations for a strong climate policy” (We Stay on the Ground, 2022a). The organization is most known for the Flight Free campaigns, first organized in 2018 with the aim to get 100,000 people (around 1% of the Swedish population) to collectively pledge to take a flight-free year. While not reaching this goal (around 15 000 people signed up), the campaign attracted global media attention and spread beyond Sweden to countries such as the UK and the US (where it is still active). It was reintroduced in Sweden in slightly modified versions on a yearly basis until 2021. In 2022, We Stay on the Ground instead launched a new campaign under the name *Prata flyg!* (Let’s talk aviation!), aiming to inspire people to talk about the importance of reducing flying in everyday conversations.

Discussions about the need to reduce air travel have also taken place on social media. The hashtag *#JagStannarPåMarken* (*#IStayOnTheGround*) started to gain traction in the end of 2017 and was picked up by the prominent left-wing politician Gudrun Schyman in 2018. She declared to run a flight-free election campaign for the political party Feminist Initiative<sup>4</sup> and urged other political leaders to do the same, stating that: “After reading all the climate reports ... my conclusion is clear - *#IStayOnTheGround*” (Feministiskt Initiativ, 2018).

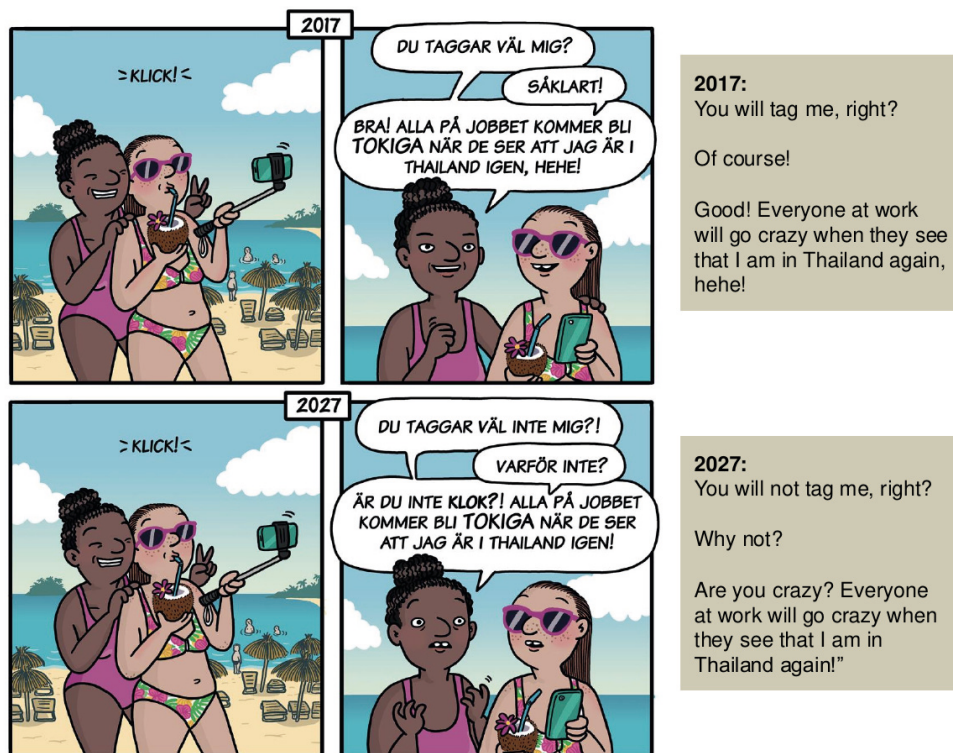
Discussions about flight shame, or *flygskam*, also took off on social media around the same time. It started with a Facebook post from the Swedish Consumer’s Association in November 2017, which predicted flight shame would become a new phenomenon (Figure 3). The concept spread internationally on Twitter in 2018 (Becken et al., 2021) and was picked up by global mainstream media such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* (Henley, 2019; Williams, 2019), placing Sweden in the spotlight as the country where people were cutting down on flying for climate reasons.

In 2018, The Facebook group *Tågsemester* (Train vacation) became influential in popularizing train travel as a sustainable alternative to flying and grew from a few

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<sup>4</sup> Gudrun Schyman co-founded Feminist Initiative in 2005, after having served as leader of the Left Party during 1993-2003. Feminist Initiative has never been in the Swedish Parliament (*Riksdag* in Swedish, which is the highest decision-making assembly in Sweden), but became the biggest party outside of the *Riksdag* in 2014.

thousand to more than 40 000 members in just a year (Somnell, 2019). The group has continued to gain popularity since and now has almost 250 000 members supporting each other in traveling sustainably by train. The growing interest in train travel gave rise to the concept of *tågskryt* (train brag) in 2019, coined by a Swedish journalist to describe how people were boasting about traveling long distances by train (Karlsten, 2019). In August 2019, the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) chartered a train from Stockholm to Venice with 350 of their subscribers as well as journalists, an initiative born out of critical reactions from readers who demanded less reporting on air travel (Wolodarski, 2019).



**Figure 3. Image that introduced the term *flygskam* (own translation to the right).**

The image was posted on Facebook by the Swedish Consumer's Association (Sveriges konsumenter) on November 27, 2017. The post accompanying the image speculated that *flygskam* (flight shame) was about to become a new phenomenon considering the rising awareness about aviation's climate impact. Image: © Ellen Ekman, Lilla Berlin, 2017. Reproduced by permission of Ellen Ekman.

Also in August 2019, the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg began a two-week sailing trip across the Atlantic to attend the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York, demonstrating a commitment to live in line with her values and highlighting the need to avoid high-carbon travel like flying. The sailing trip was widely discussed in global media and caused increased interest in sailboat

hitchhiking, with reports from both Swedish and international media on hitching a ride across the ocean (e.g. Kerpner, 2019; Murray, 2019).

The debate around aviation's climate impact has to some extent co-evolved with national and local policy changes to reduce flying and facilitate alternative travel modes (Figure 4). In April 2018, the Swedish government (at that time, a coalition between the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party) introduced a passenger aviation tax<sup>5</sup> after years of political debate (Frisk, 2018). In the 2019 spring budget proposal, the same government announced a 50 million SEK (approximately 4.7 million euro) investment in new overnight rail connections to European cities (Prop. 2018/19:19), followed by a decision the year after to introduce daily sleeper trains from Stockholm to Hamburg as well as from Malmö to Brussels<sup>6</sup> (Ministry of Infrastructure, 2020). At the local and organizational level, some companies have introduced extra vacation days for employees taking a flight-free holiday (e.g. Dagens ETC, 2020; Edge, n.d.; MTRX Express, 2018; Strängnes Bostads AB, 2022), which was described in the media as an upcoming trend in 2019 (Holmberg, 2019). The City of Malmö (Sweden's third largest city) implemented a new travel policy aimed at limiting flights in 2021 (Malmö stad, 2021), and the large non-profit fitness organization *Friskis&Svettis* decided to ban flying in their fitness holiday travel packages in 2022, replacing flights to Portugal and Mallorca for exercise and relaxation with nature-focused fitness retreats in Sweden (Friskis&Svettis, 2022).

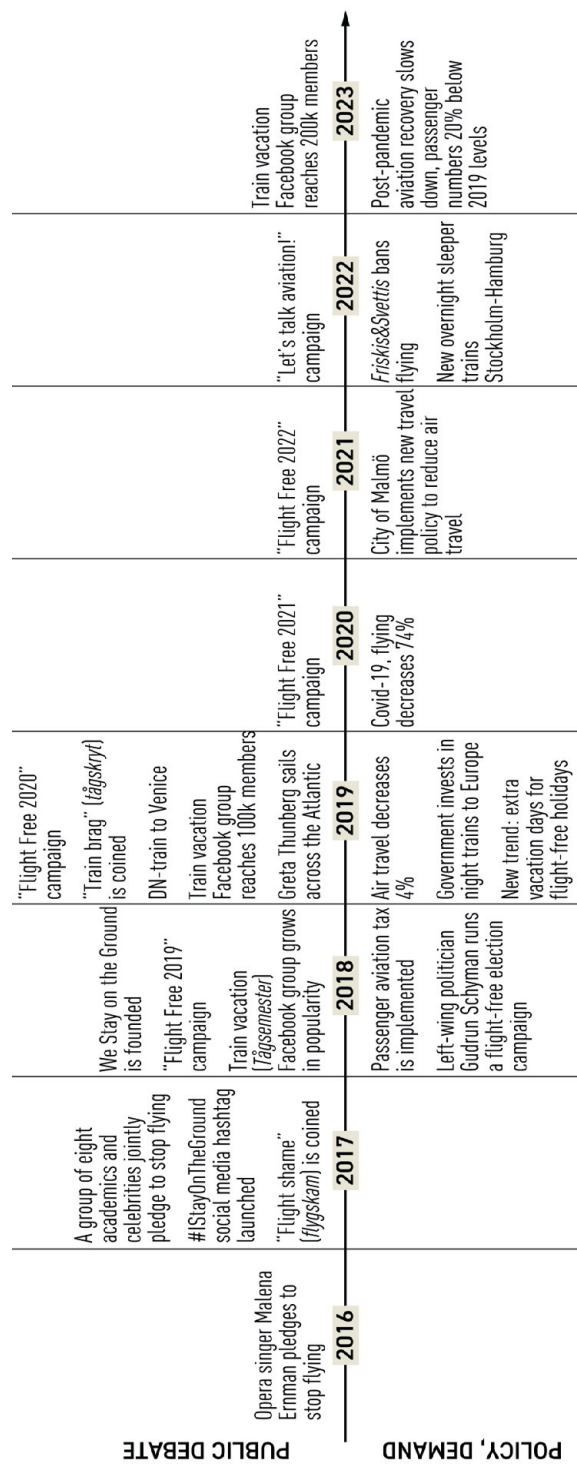
How these changes in public opinion and policy have affected the demand for air travel are difficult to evaluate because of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on aviation. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, in 2019, both international and domestic air travel decreased in Sweden by 4% compared with the previous year (Transportstyrelsen, 2020), which was the first time flying declined since the global financial crisis in 2009. While rising climate awareness as well as the newly introduced aviation tax were discussed as potential reasons to the decline (Trafikanalys, 2020), it could not be evaluated over time due to the dramatic reduction of air travel in 2020 caused by pandemic-related restrictions<sup>7</sup>. Air travel demand increased again during the following years, but in 2023 there were still 20% fewer passengers traveling from Swedish airports compared to 2019 (Swedavia, 2024). Globally, however, the demand for air travel is now back at pre-pandemic levels (IATA, 2024a), which makes Sweden's lower-flying pandemic recovery stand out in an international context.

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<sup>5</sup> The current Swedish government (a center-right coalition that collaborates with the far-right Sweden Democrats) has decided to abandon the passenger aviation tax starting July 1, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> The plans for an overnight train connection between Malmö and Brussels were later cancelled due to issues in the procurement process. The Stockholm-Hamburg connection was extended to Berlin in 2023.

<sup>7</sup> In 2020, aviation passenger demand decreased by 74% in Sweden (Transportstyrelsen, 2021) and 66 % globally (IATA, 2020) compared to 2019, the steepest decline in the aviation history.



**Figure 4. Timeline over changes in public debate (top row), and examples of new policies and demand changes (bottom row) in regard to aviation in Sweden, 2016-2023.**

Image credit: Emma Li Johansson (emmalijohansson.com).

## Data collection

This thesis builds on qualitative material (documentary sources and semi-structured interviews) collected and constructed from the media, the travel industry, and the flight-free movement. The material was gathered at different stages of the research process and serves different purposes. Some of it was used in multiple papers while some was collected for one paper specifically. Paper I and II builds solely on data collected by myself. Paper III is a combined case study which re-uses data from Paper II, while also drawing on additional data collected by my co-author Emily Christley. Table 2 provides an overview of the data that I collected, structured in four categories: travel media, news media, additional documents, and interviews. The additional data collected by Christley (16 interviews and one workshop with actors in the aviation industry, and documents such as industry reports and media articles) is described in depth in Paper III.

**Table 2. Overview of empirical material.**

| Type of material     | Description of material                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Travel media         | A sample of written and visual sources from two large Swedish travel magazines covering different phases of holiday air travel: <i>Vart skall jag resa?</i> (issues published 1950-1961) and <i>Vagabond</i> (issues published 1987-2019). <b>(Paper I)</b><br>Digital advertisements and images from airline and travel agency archives (Scandinavian Airlines and TUI). <b>(Paper I)</b> |
| News media           | 26 articles about aviation and climate from Swedish news media, published between 2016 and 2022 in highly circulated Swedish newspapers ( <i>Aftonbladet</i> , <i>Expressen</i> , <i>Dagens Nyheter</i> , <i>Svenska Dagbladet</i> , and <i>Göteborgs-Posten</i> ). <b>(Paper I, II, III)</b>                                                                                              |
| Additional documents | Documents and media produced by the organization We Stay on the Ground. <b>(Paper II and III)</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Interviews           | 14 semi-structured interviews with 15 key actors in the flight-free movement, including four people who initiated and led the trend to pledge to stop flying in Swedish media, five activists from We Stay on the Ground, and six people practicing and promoting alternatives travel practices. <b>(Paper II and III)</b>                                                                 |

## Documentary material

### *Travel media*

I began my data collection in 2020 by gathering sources from historical and contemporary travel media to gain an increased understanding of how the discourses surrounding aeromobility have shifted over time in Sweden, particularly in the context of holiday travel. I chose to focus on holiday travel because the majority of



global air travel<sup>8</sup> is for holiday and other leisure purposes (Dobruszkes et al., 2019). In Sweden, leisure flying causes 80% of the emissions from commercial aviation (Kamb & Larsson, 2018) and is thus the form of flying where change is most needed.

Following Gillian Rose's (2016) recommendation to gather a diversity of material involved in the production of discourse, I collected written and visual sources from travel magazines and travel operators. I particularly looked for sources that revealed discursive shifts, such as sources that demonstrated changing ideas, arguments, and assumptions about the role of flying in the context of holiday travel. The aim was not to collect an exhaustive sample covering every single aspect of holiday air travel, but rather to gather "enough material to persuasively explore [the] intriguing aspects" (Rose, 2016, p. 196) of different discourses.

I selected two Swedish travel magazines from the Lund University Library archive that represent different time periods in the history of holiday travel in Sweden, from the 1950s when flying started to become an integrated part of Swedish vacation culture (Kaiserfeld, 2010) to present time (I collected data until 2019). The first magazine in my selection was *Vart skall jag resa?* (*Where shall I travel?*), first published in 1933 and one of the oldest travel magazines in Sweden. I read issues published from 1950 to 1961, when the publication of the magazine ended. This was an important time period for the development of holiday air travel in Sweden, with several factors that made flying available to a broader social group evolving in parallel, such as longer paid vacation, more affordable flight tickets, and higher wages (Kaiserfeld, 2010).

The second magazine in my selection was *Vagabond*, currently the largest travel magazine in Sweden. I read issues from 1987, when the magazine was first published, to 2019. This time period captures the introduction of low-cost aviation in Europe in the mid-1990s, which further lowered the costs for air passengers and gave rise to new travel patterns of more frequent flying (Gössling et al., 2009). It also covers the more recent shift characterized by growing debate about aviation's climate impact. Based on extensive notes and photographs from the two magazines, I gathered a sample of text excerpts and images articulating central views and ideas about holiday flying during different points in time.

To add depth and nuance to the sample, I complemented the travel magazine sources with images and advertisements from two leading travel operators: Scandinavian Airlines (SAS), which is the flag carrier of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, and TUI, one of Sweden's largest tour operators. The material was collected from their

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<sup>8</sup> Dobruszkes et al. (2019) examined reasons for flying based on survey data across a sample of airline markets, such as the US which is the world's largest air travel market, and the UK which is the leading market in Europe. They found that leisure flying accounted for approximately 80% of all air travel within the airline markets included in the study.

webpages and archives, such as the SAS Museum's digital archive of historical images. I particularly looked for visual illustrations of the most central ideas identified in the travel magazines, as well as material that added new perspectives.

### *News media*

In all my papers, I have used news media as a source of data to gain understanding about the public debate around aviation's climate impact. In total, I collected 26 media articles about aviation and climate published between 2016 and 2022 in highly circulated Swedish newspapers, including *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, and *Göteborgs-Posten*<sup>9</sup>. Some of the articles were collected through keyword searches in the media archive database Retriever, and some were collected based on my own knowledge of the topic after following the debate closely over several years. I particularly looked for articles that illustrated arguments for avoiding flying, as well as contestation against these arguments. The majority of the articles in my sample are opinion articles (n=19) published either on the culture pages or debate sections of the newspapers. A full list of articles is presented in the Appendix.

### *Additional documents*

In addition to the media sources, I collected documents produced by the organization We Stay on the Ground to gain further understanding about the strategies and arguments used to advocate avoiding air travel. The report *We need to talk about aviation* presents information about the urgency of reducing flying and offers strategies for how to talk about aviation and climate in a constructive way. The guide also includes advice about how to respond to arguments that people often use to justify their flying, such as "it doesn't matter what individuals do" and "I do so many other things for the climate". The booklet *Let's talk aviation!* also offers advice and strategies for how to talk about the importance of reducing flying, but in a shorter version. The illustrated brochure *Join the movement!* presents key arguments for avoiding flying together with facts about aviation's climate impact in an easy and engaging way and is meant to support movement actors in talking about aviation and climate with other people.

## **Interviews**

While the media and document sources provided insights into both dominant and alternative discourses on aeromobility, interviews enabled me to gain deeper

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<sup>9</sup> All these newspapers are independent but cover a continuum of political perspectives: social democratic (*Aftonbladet*), liberal (*Expressen*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Göteborgs-Posten*), and conservative (*Svenska Dagbladet*). The newspaper *Göteborgs-Posten* was only included in Paper III.



understanding about the emergence of new meanings around avoiding flying, and the enactment of such meanings in practice. I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with 15 key informants (Table 3) who have played a central role in Sweden's flight-free movement, either by contributing to its emergence or by spreading views and practices around avoiding flying. The interviewees were selected through a method of purposive sampling, which also involved snowballing, where I specifically looked for actors engaged in organizations or groups advocating reduced air travel or in other ways promoting such views in the public debate. Four interviewees played a leading role in the trend to publicly pledge to stop flying in Swedish news media that begun in 2016, led by influential journalists, artists, athletes, and academics. Five interviewees were involved in campaigns and other activities led by the organization We Stay on the Ground. Six interviewees actively promoted and practiced sustainable travel alternatives, particularly train travel, for instance by engaging in conversations in the Train vacation Facebook group or in other ways advocating practices of slow travel in the public debate.

**Table 3. List of interviewees (key actors in the flight-free movement) for Paper II and III.**

| Interviewee | Description                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1           | Active in the Train vacation Facebook group and other initiatives promoting train travel as an alternative to flying.                                   |
| 2           | Founder of We Stay on the Ground.                                                                                                                       |
| 3           | Campaigner for We Stay on the Ground.                                                                                                                   |
| 4           | Active in the Train vacation Facebook group, advocates train travel as an alternative to flying in the public debate (e.g. blog posts, opinion pieces). |
| 5           | Campaigner for We Stay on the Ground.                                                                                                                   |
| 6           | Active in the Train vacation Facebook group, gives public talks about long-distance train travel.                                                       |
| 7           | Campaigner for We Stay on the Ground.                                                                                                                   |
| 8           | Climate activist with engagement in initiatives aimed at reducing flying and member of We Stay on the Ground.                                           |
| 9           | Leading role in the media debate around avoiding flying.                                                                                                |
| 10          | Leading role in the media debate around avoiding flying.                                                                                                |
| 11          | Leading role in the media debate around avoiding flying.                                                                                                |
| 12          | Leading role in the media debate around avoiding flying.                                                                                                |
| 13          | Engaged in an environmental organization, promotes and practice sustainable travel alternatives.                                                        |
| 14          | Founder of the Train vacation Facebook group.                                                                                                           |
| 15          | Former travel writer who stopped flying and started to promote and practice sustainable travel alternatives.                                            |

The interviews took place between June and September 2022, either in person (n=5), through video call (n=6), or over phone (n=3). They lasted 30–80 minutes (averaging around 1 hour) and were recorded and transcribed in Swedish. I used an interview guide with questions organized under three overarching themes. The first theme included questions about the informants' *motivations* to engage in collective attempts to reduce air travel as well as to avoid flying themselves. The second theme

focused on the *actions* they engaged in to influence change around flying (e.g. in norms and/or policy). The third theme focused on their *visions* and aspirations for the future of flying, as well as reflections on the role and potential of their engagement in the broader context of climate action. I did not follow the guide strictly but allowed for flexibility and progressive focusing, a recommended strategy for semi-structured interviews focused on refining the questions as the interview evolves (Bryman, 2016). Specifically, I asked follow-up questions when relevant, revised questions depending on what we had previously talked about, and encouraged the informants to talk freely about things they viewed as important.

## Data analysis

To process the data, I conducted qualitative analysis and coding using the data analysis software Nvivo 12. Both Paper I and III draw on inductive coding focused on identifying discourses and storylines, while the analytical approach in Paper II was deductive in the sense that I derived initial codes from theory rather than empirical data. In this summary document (the “kappa”), I have synthesized the previously separate results from the papers to provide a more comprehensive overview of the cultural politics of contesting aeromobility in Sweden. Below I describe the analytical approach adopted in each paper more in detail.

### *Identifying discourses and storylines*

As lead author of Paper I, I was responsible for the analysis which was based on Hajer’s (1995, 2006) approach to argumentative discourse analysis. The first step was to identify discourses on holiday air travel by looking for overarching ideas, signs, and symbols in the material. I then focused on the meanings produced by the different discourses through an analysis of storylines. Hajer (2006) does not provide an exact method for identifying storylines but highlights that it is an iterative process focused on gaining understanding about the key events, arguments, and positions structuring a specific discourse. Based on this guidance as well as Nielsen’s approach (2016) to interpret the core messages of recurring arguments and statements in the data, I derived codes for storylines (e.g. *rest and sun*) tied to the different discourses. I discussed the initial set of codes with my co-authors and together we identified five themes that re-occurred across the different discourses (vacation, the good life, time, mobility, and climate change). In my second reading of the data, these themes served as overarching analytical categories that allowed me to trace how the storylines evolved alongside the discursive shifts, and thus how the meanings of holiday air travel changed over time.

In Paper III, we also employed Hajer’s (1995, 2006) argumentative discourse analysis and a similar approach to identifying storylines as in Paper I. The paper is a combined case study where we brought together data from two cases in a joint

analysis of competing discourses on the future of aviation in Sweden. Each case represented a particular actor group seeking to steer the future of aviation in different directions: the aviation industry (data collected by Emily Christley) and the flight-free movement (data collected by me). We first derived codes of storylines for each case separately by analyzing how desirable futures for aviation were portrayed by the different actor groups, and the solutions they promoted to address aviation's climate impact. We then discussed and compared storylines across the two cases, after which we conducted a second reading of the data to refine the storylines.

### *Analyzing prefigurative processes*

In Paper II, I employed Yates' (2015b) framework of prefigurative politics to explore how alternative meanings around aeromobility are enacted in practice. As described in the theoretical chapter, I analyzed four prefigurative processes drawn from this framework, including experimentation, perspectives, conduct, and diffusion. I used these processes as predefined codes to which I assigned excerpts from the data, both in regard to the attempted construction and diffusion of alternatives, and the contestation against these alternatives by actors outside the movement. How alternatives are contested is not a key focus of Yates' (2015b) approach, but others have highlighted it as a critical aspect to explore in order to gain understanding about the potential of prefigurative movements to gain wider influence (Chertkovskaya et al., 2024).

## Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations play a critical role in research and are particularly important for research that involves the participation of humans (Yin, 2014). This research follows the Swedish Research Council's (2017) guidelines for ethical research and has been conducted in accordance with the Swedish Ethical Review Act (SFS 2003:460). The purpose of the Act is to protect individuals and the respect for human dignity in research. Most importantly, all research should strive to minimize risks or harm for the participants while maximizing benefits in terms of knowledge gains. In other words, research needs to contribute with some kind of new knowledge that is beneficial and relevant for the wider society (Alvesson et al., 2017), and potential risks must be balanced against those benefits.

As I reflect more upon in the Conclusions, this research generates knowledge about demand-side climate solutions that benefits actors in academia, policy, and civil society. Potential risks revolve mainly around the integrity of the research participants and have been carefully considered and assessed through relevant laws and guidelines. Before I conducted interviews, I received an ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority [approval nr: 2022-02193-01]. All

interviewees were provided a participant informant sheet with information about the research project and gave informed consent to participate in the study. I interviewed people who have spoken publicly about their views and opinions regarding flying and could thus not rule out that they could be identified in the presentation of the results, specifically by people with insights into the debate about aviation and climate. To reduce the risk that this would cause discomfort, the interviewees were offered the possibility to read and approve direct quotes before publication. Participation was fully voluntary and the interviewees were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time. I have communicated the results of my research to the participants by email and will send them this dissertation after its publication.



# Results and Discussion

In this thesis, I show how the cultural politics of contesting aeromobility manifests in Sweden both discursively and in practice. Firstly, I describe the overarching discourses supporting aeromobility in Sweden and the storylines they consist of, to show how the normalization of air travel has been brought about and how it is sustained (RQ1). Secondly, I trace the emergence of a new discourse around avoiding flying (Staying on the ground) and demonstrate how the storylines tied to it contest and reformulate dominant meanings of aeromobility as a desirable social norm (RQ2). Thirdly, I demonstrate how the flight-free movement enacts this discourse in practice through prefigurative politics, encompassing both experimentation with alternative and more sustainable travel modes and a broader reconsideration of what it means to live well under climate change (RQ3).

The answer to each research question is given in Table 4 and is presented in detail in the sections below (each research question is addressed in a separate section). Research question 1 and 2 are answered through synthesizing the findings from paper I and III. Research question 3 is answered mainly based on findings derived from Paper II, with additional insights from Paper I and III. I discuss the findings and interpret their meaning in the context of previous research throughout this chapter, while the contributions and wider implications of the findings are outlined in the Conclusions.

Table 4. Overview of main findings.

| Research question                                                                                                                           | Paper I                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Paper II                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Paper III                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| RQ1: What historical and contemporary discourses have been dominant in constructing and sustaining aeromobility as a desirable social norm? | The discourses Aspirational luxury and Hypermobility construct aeromobility as a desirable social norm by portraying flying as an evident part of Swedish society and holiday culture.                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | The discourse Green flying depicts a future in which aviation continues to be a dominant mode of transport and technology has overcome the climate impact associated with flying, thus aiming to sustain aeromobility as a desirable social norm.                                  |
| RQ2: How are the meanings associated with dominant discourses on aeromobility contested and reformulated?                                   | The emerging discourse of Staying on the ground works through the mechanisms of moralization (portraying flying as problematic in light of the climate crisis) and persuasion (emphasizing alternatives to avoid flying) to contest and reformulate dominant meanings of aeromobility as desirable. |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Actors in the flight-free movement draw upon the Staying on the ground discourse to depict a desired, low-carbon future in which air travel is no longer the norm, and promote alternative practices (e.g. traveling less, slower and more local journeys) to achieve such future. |
| RQ3: How are future-oriented everyday practices around low-carbon and flight-free ways of life enacted in the present?                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | The flight-free movement engages in prefigurative politics to experiment with and demonstrate the desirability of alternative practices around avoiding flying, and through which the meanings (Paper I), practices, and desired future (Paper III) of Staying on the ground are enacted. |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

## Constructing and sustaining aeromobility as a norm

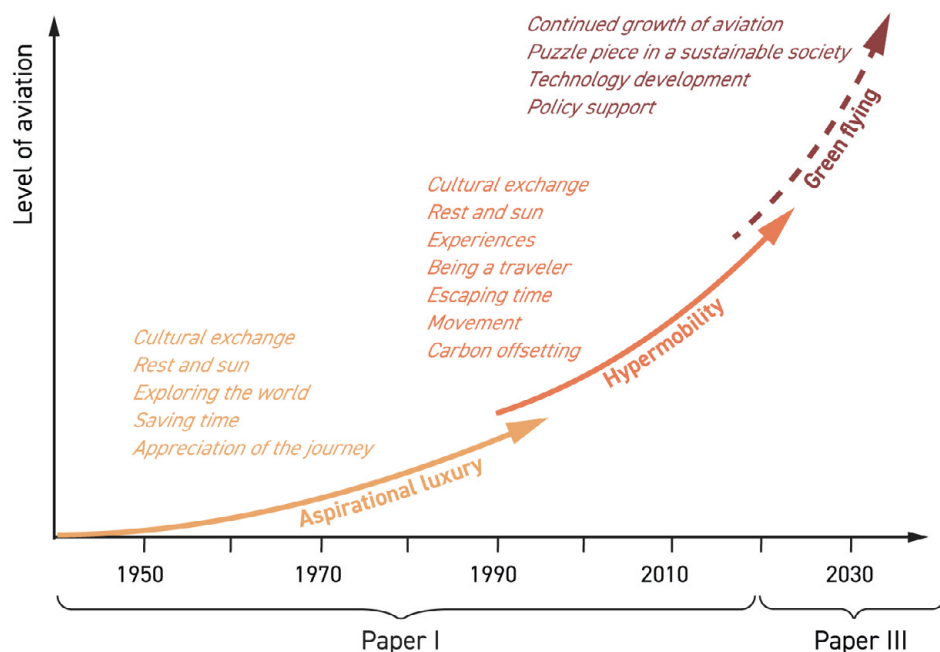
By employing Hajer's (1995) argumentative discourse analysis, this thesis demonstrates three dominant discourses through which aeromobility is constructed and sustained as a desirable social norm in Sweden (RQ1). "Aspirational luxury" can be traced back to the 1950s, known as the golden age of air travel and a time when flying was associated with luxury and glamour (Paper I). "Hypermobility" emerged in the 1990s with the introduction of low-cost aviation and turned air travel into a normalized and obvious practice for a larger group of people in Sweden (Paper I). "Green flying" has emerged during the past decade as a response to the debate about aviation's climate impact and complements Hypermobility with new meanings about the assumed possibility to fly sustainably in the future (Paper III).

These discourses are made up of storylines through which specific meanings are attached to aeromobility (Figure 5). For Aspirational luxury and Hypermobility, the identified storylines are associated with depictions of holiday flying in travel media, which was the empirical focus of Paper I. For Green flying, the storylines revolve around visions for the future of aviation (the empirical focus of Paper III) as articulated by actors in the aviation industry, and are associated with air travel more broadly without distinguishing any specific travel purpose.

The discourse of Aspirational luxury illustrates a shift in Swedish holiday travel culture that started in the 1950s. During this time, package tour tourism became increasingly popular in Scandinavia and the dominant means of transport for such tourism shifted from buses to airplanes (Kaiserfeld, 2010). Cheaper flights made package-tour vacations available to broader social segments, but flying for holiday was still perceived as an exclusive practice and symbolized a pursuit of happiness and leisure (Kaiserfeld, 2015).

As outlined in Paper I, I identified five storylines that make up the discourse of Aspirational luxury, specifically linked to meanings about air travel as a desirable practice. *Cultural exchange* presents air travel as important for society by connecting people from different parts of the world and facilitating understanding across cultures. *Rest and sun* is more concerned with the personal benefits of air travel, highlighting how flying enables people to escape the cold and gloomy Swedish weather by traveling to a sunny holiday destination offering relaxation and recreation. *Exploring the world* depicts flying as a way to experience new and unfamiliar things and articulates meanings about adventure and excitement. *Saving time* highlights how air travel makes it possible to reach far-away destinations much faster than with other modes of transport, thus making the world smaller and more accessible to people. *Appreciation of the journey* presents flying as a comfortable and enjoyable part of the travel experience, highlighting how the practice of flying is an adventure in itself rather than just a means of transportation.





**Figure 5. Three dominant discourses (arrows) and their constituent storylines (italics) identified to support aeromobility in Sweden.**

I have identified the discourses of Aspirational luxury and Hypermobility as dominant in constructing aeromobility as a social norm through storylines about the desirability and necessity of flying (Paper I). In Paper III, we show how Green flying sustains this norm into the future through storylines about fossil-free aviation. Image credit: Emma Li Johansson (emmalijohansson.com).

While some storylines of Aspirational luxury persist today, Paper I describes how the discourse largely was replaced by Hypermobility in the 1990s. Hypermobility refers to very frequent traveling, often by air and over great distances (Gössling et al., 2009). The Hypermobility discourse has played an important role in normalizing flying in Sweden through constructing meanings about air travel as an obvious part of life and society that continues to be reproduced today. As highlighted in previous research, flying is increasingly associated with various social practices such as celebrations, hobbies, work, and holidaying, and has thus (for some) shifted from a special and exclusive occasion to a more routinized part of life: “the increased frequency of opportunities to ‘get away’ has the effect of re-defining [flying], no longer as exotic and different, but rather as part of the fabric of life’s normal routines” (Randles & Mander, 2009, p. 104).

The Hypermobility discourse that I identified in Swedish media consists of seven storylines that illustrate how air travel has shifted from an exclusive practice to a more obvious social norm. The storylines *cultural exchange* and *rest and sun* continues from Aspirational luxury, demonstrating how aeromobility remains

associated with meanings about the desirability of flying for people and society. *Experiences* illustrates a broadening of the purpose of holiday flying and a desire among some travelers to engage in more activity-based travel focused on sports, culture or nature, rather than just relaxing in the sun. *Being a traveler* depicts frequent long-distance travel as a way of life and highlights how holiday air travel has become an internalized part of some people's lifestyle and identity. *Escaping time* presents flying as a means for getting away from the workaday time pressures at home by traveling on a relaxing holiday and taking the day as it comes. *Movement* illustrates how the meaning of the activity of flying has changed from an important part of the travel experience to merely a means of getting from one place to another, with flying being presented as a normal rather than luxurious travel mode.

Finally, a storyline about *carbon offsetting* emerges in Hypermobility in the 2000s as a response to the growing recognition of aviation's climate impact, suggesting that people can continue to travel without environmental worry by compensating for the emissions caused by their flying. However, previous research has stressed that carbon offsetting do not neutralize aviation emissions (Becken & Mackey, 2017) and might lead to behavioral rebound effects by justifying flying (Kerner & Brudermann, 2021), which makes it a striking example of reinforced carbon lock-in (see Seto et al., 2016, for more on the point of carbon lock-in).

From a lens of cultural politics, the discourses of Aspirational luxury and Hypermobility illustrate how high-carbon desires linked to holiday travel have become normalized in Sweden through depictions of flying as an easy, efficient, enjoyable, and expected practice. While these discourses construct aeromobility as a desirable social norm (Paper I), the discourse of Green flying (Paper III) aims to sustain this norm into the future. Green flying is a techno-optimist discourse associated with ideas about ecological modernization, meaning that environmental issues are assumed to be overcome through technological innovations and market-based solutions believed to modernize (and green) the economy (Hajer, 1995). While such an approach has been criticized for delaying climate action by avoiding transformative changes of current economic and social systems (Lamb et al., 2020), it is deeply established in policy (Machin, 2019).

In Paper III, we identified four storylines tied to the discourse of Green flying in Sweden, which actors in the aviation industry draw upon to reproduce the dominance of aeromobility. The first storyline argues that *continued growth of aviation* is non-negotiable and presents the aviation sector as societally critical in terms of providing jobs, economic growth, and connectivity now and into the future. This storyline aligns with and reproduces one of the discourses identified by Gössling and Peeters (2007) more than 15 years ago, presenting air travel as too socially and economically important to be restricted. The second storyline we identified depicts the aviation sector as a *puzzle piece in a sustainable society* through the anticipated development of fossil-free aviation, thus constructing the aviation sector as important in the context of Sweden's ambition to reach net-zero

emissions by 2045. However, several researchers have stressed that the idea of fossil-free aviation relies on uncertain and often misleading claims about changes that are assumed to happen in the future rather than now (Griggs & Howarth, 2023, pp. 153–155; Peeters et al., 2016), which is problematic considering that the aviation sector urgently needs to start reducing emissions to contribute to the temperature goal of the Paris Agreement (Dray et al., 2022).

The third storyline of Green flying suggests that fossil-free aviation will be achieved through *technology development*, which is presented as the solution for overcoming the climate concerns associated with air travel. However, there is currently no commercially available, scalable technology that can reduce the emissions from aviation (Dray et al., 2022), and the technologies that are being promoted are all associated with challenges: sustainable aviation fuels are expensive and the supply is so far very limited, and both electricity-powered and hydrogen-powered aircrafts will most likely only operate on short-distance, and thus relatively low-emissions, routes (see p. 20 for a more detailed description of these challenges) (Bergero et al., 2023). This storyline thus overstates the realistic potential of future technologies to make aviation sustainable, which previous research has highlighted hinders necessary climate policy for aviation (Peeters et al., 2016). While industry actors in Sweden requests *policy support* to facilitate a climate transition, which we identified as the fourth storyline in Green flying, the actions they demand revolve strictly around enabling technological innovation (e.g. through investments in fossil-free fuel production). But as highlighted in previous research, policy solutions that reduce demand (e.g. a carbon tax or maximum flight quota) are critical for aligning the aviation sector with global climate goals (Gössling & Lyle, 2021; Sharmina et al., 2021), and could likely also be aligned with economic profitability for airlines under a new business model (Gössling & Humpe, 2023).

## Contesting and reformulating the meanings of aeromobility

While air travel largely is presented and perceived as a social norm in Swedish society, this thesis shows that the meanings through which this norm is upheld are being contested and reformulated (RQ2). Notably, a new “Staying on the ground” discourse has emerged during the past decade and has started to change the way air travel is portrayed in Swedish media – from a normal part of very mobile lifestyles to a contested high-carbon practice (Paper I). This discourse mobilizes actors in Sweden’s flight-free movement around an attempt to redefine the future of aeromobility, highlighting the importance of avoiding air travel and creating new meanings around alternative, low-carbon practices (Paper III). By challenging

established meanings of aeromobility, Staying on the ground illustrates a cultural politics of contesting high-carbon practices and imagining low-carbon futures.

In paper I, I identified six storylines that make up the Staying on the ground discourse, and through which new meanings around avoiding flying are produced. *Living one's values* emphasizes the need to think beyond the personal enjoyment of travel experiences and adopt lifestyles in line with ecologically sustainable values to avoid unnecessary emissions. *Urgency* stresses the acuteness of the climate crisis and the importance of avoiding flying to rapidly reduce emissions in line with global climate goals. *Moral responsibility* contests high-carbon travel norms by highlighting the importance of caring for the planet and taking collective responsibility for addressing climate change. *Exploring new values and experiences* reshape meanings about the purpose of vacation by shifting focus from long-distance travel toward finding enjoyment closer to home. *Appreciation of the journey* reshapes older meanings about flying as a comfortable luxury into promoting grounded travel as a sustainable and exiting alternative to flying, while also articulating a desire to slow down the pace of life.

Paper I shows how the storylines associated with Staying on the ground contest and reformulate established meanings of aeromobility. Specifically, the storylines *living one's values*, *urgency*, and *moral responsibility* work through a logic of moralization to portray flying as problematic in light of the climate crisis, thus challenging dominant meanings of aeromobility as a desirable social norm. Moralization refers to a “process by which an issue is imbued with moral value—ideas about right versus wrong behavior that carry implications for how one *should* behave” (Salomon et al., 2017, p. 16, emphasis in original).

Previous research has highlighted that climate decision-making, including at the consumption level, largely is based on moral values (Lau et al., 2021). Moral messages can motivate individuals to adopt more sustainable behaviors, especially when highlighting the effectiveness of pro-environmental actions on reducing emissions (Salomon et al., 2017). For some individuals, moralization seems to be an important motivational factor for avoiding air travel, with two previous case studies in Sweden demonstrating that people who have stopped flying because of climate change often feel a moral responsibility to mitigate climate harm (Jacobson et al., 2020; Wormbs & Wolrath Söderberg, 2021). Specifically, these studies found that those who stay on the ground frame climate change as a moral issue that “force or invite them into new patterns of meaning” (Wormbs & Wolrath Söderberg, 2021, p. 316), and manage to internalize climate awareness in a way that evokes action (Jacobson et al., 2020).

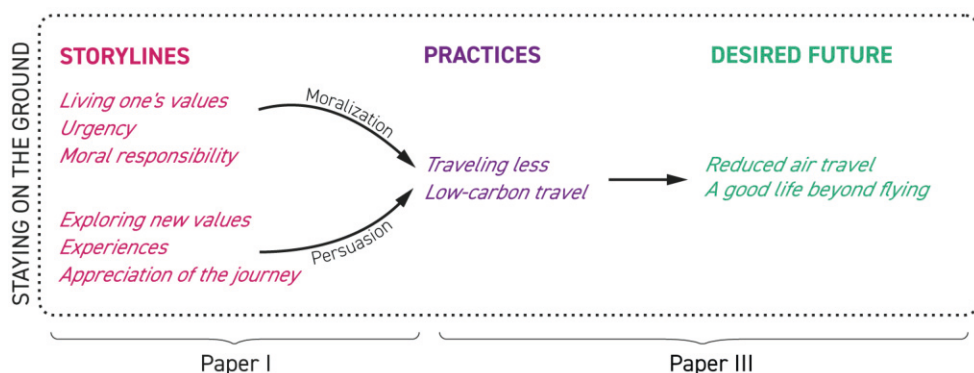
The storylines *exploring new values, experiences*, and *appreciation of the journey* instead work through persuasion to depict alternative practices around avoiding flying as desirable, without an explicit emphasis on morality. These storylines thus

complement the moralization of flying as ethically wrong with a focus on positive alternatives, specifically highlighting the benefits of slower and more local trips.

Such an emphasis on alternatives has been highlighted in research as important for reducing leisure-related air travel. For example, Wormbs and Wolrath Söderberg (2021) found that the availability of alternative travel modes, and the positive framing of these alternatives, motivated some individuals in Sweden to avoid flying and pulled them toward traveling by train or vacationing closer to home. Kamb et al. (2021) investigated the emissions reduction potential from substituting high-emissions leisure flying from Sweden with alternative, lower-emissions trips, and found a readiness potential to reduce emissions by 26% through choosing a closer destination and/or changing the mode of transport. The Staying on the ground discourse may further enhance and realize this potential by shifting the meanings about what constitutes a good life under climate change, including what defines a good vacation.

While Paper I describes the storylines of Staying on the ground, as well as the logics underpinning them, Paper III demonstrates how these storylines are reproduced by actors in the flight-free movement, who gather in a discourse-coalition to challenge dominant discourses on aeromobility. Specifically, these actors draw on the storylines tied to Staying on the ground to depict a desired, low-carbon future in which flying is no longer the norm and promote alternative practices for achieving such future (Figure 6). By doing so, they oppose the idea of aeromobility as a social norm and articulate an alternative discourse. Specifically, they advocate *traveling less* to highlight the need to change current travel norms and avoid unnecessary trips, and instead explore new forms of pleasure and adventure. They do not claim that everyone should give up traveling completely but stress the need to reconsider which trips are justified and necessary in light of the climate crisis as well as to enjoy *low-carbon travel*, such as traveling close to home and shifting from planes to trains. This focus on avoiding unnecessary trips as a first step, and then shifting to lower-carbon modes of travel, is in line with the Avoid-Shift-Improve framework adopted by the IPCC to identify suitable actions for reducing emissions associated with consumption (Creutzig et al., 2022).

Ultimately, the aim of Staying on the ground is to change the current growth-oriented and high-emissions trajectory of aeromobility and instead move toward a sustainable and low-emissions future. As shown in Paper III, actors reproducing this discourse imagine a future with substantially *reduced air travel*. They stress the high climate impact from flying and argue that avoiding air travel, as well as other forms of high-carbon luxury consumption, is essential to achieve climate goals and secure a good life for all, now and in the future. However, avoiding air travel is not only portrayed as desirable for society, but also as rewarding for the individual. More specifically, actors in the flight-free movement emphasize the possibilities of living *a good life beyond flying*, striving toward a future where slower and more local everyday lives are normalized and people feel good about staying on the ground.



**Figure 6. Overview of the Staying on the ground discourse.**

The Staying on the ground discourse contests and reformulates dominant meanings of aeromobility through six storylines (pink) that work through moralization and persuasion (Paper I) to promote alternative practices around avoiding flying (purple) and achieve the desired, low-carbon future (green) (Paper III). Image credit: Emma Li Johansson (emmali Johansson.com).

## Prefiguring alternatives to aeromobility: Toward low-carbon ways of life

In this thesis, I demonstrate that future-oriented everyday practices around low-carbon and flight-free ways of life are enacted in Sweden through prefigurative politics (RQ3). Specifically, Paper II shows how Sweden's flight-free movement engages in prefigurative environmental activism as a means for changing high-carbon consumption cultures, and by doing so, enacts the meanings (Paper I), practices, and desired future (Paper III) associated with the Staying on the ground discourse. In this section I focus particularly on the findings from Paper II, where I employ Yates' (2015b) processes of prefigurative politics (experimentation, perspectives, conduct, and diffusion) to analyze the ways in which the flight-free movement is prefigurative based on interviews with 15 key actors in the movement. As I outline in more depth below, actors in the flight-free movement **experiment** with alternative practices around avoiding flying, contest dominant **perspectives** of flying as a normal and necessary practice, and embody sustainability-oriented values as part of their identity and **conduct**. To **diffuse** their practices, they present the avoidance of flying as appealing and important and demonstrate the desirability of low-carbon and flight-free ways of life by practicing change themselves.

Prefigurative politics is grounded in the **experimental** practicing of utopian social and political alternatives (Yates, 2015b), which is driven by imaginaries of a what a desirable future could look like (Monticelli, 2021). Within the flight-free movement, experimentation takes place through the everyday lives of movement



actors, who collectively engage in alternative practices as a way to demonstrate and realize a low-carbon future. These practices involve experimentation with sustainable travel alternatives, such as shifting to low-carbon modes of transport and exploring holiday destinations closer to home, while also focusing on the creation of low-carbon ways of living more broadly, including traveling less overall. Actors in the flight-free movement specifically target flying because it is seen as an expression of high-carbon luxury consumption. However, they also explore a wide range of alternative everyday practices to promote sustainability across all aspects of daily life, ranging from installing solar panels and living car-free to engaging in the local community. Specifically, their experimental creation of alternative practices reflects a commitment to create more sufficiency-oriented ways of life, where avoiding flying and other high-carbon activities is seen as critical for a sustainable future.

To create a shared purpose and vision, prefigurative movements critique and develop political **perspectives** in support of their experimental practices (Yates, 2015b). Actors in the flight-free movement critique perspectives of flying as a normal and necessary practice which are central in dominant discourses on aeromobility (see Paper I). While acknowledging that some flying might be less of a personal choice, such as flying for work and visiting family abroad, they argue that the vast majority of air travel easily can be avoided. In particular, they highlight the need to shift perceptions of long-distance travel as a high-status and desirable practice considering the urgency of the climate crisis, and to rethink what constitutes a good life in a warming world. Moreover, they argue that changes in air travel norms and behaviors play an important role in creating support for and enabling more effective climate policies aimed at reducing the demand for aviation. In other words, they stress the role of alternative consumption and lifestyle practices in the context of broader societal change, which motivates their focus on prefigurative environmental activism.

Prefigurative movements establish new social norms and **conduct** through their experimental practices and perspectives, meaning that the alternatives they promote become internalized in the daily practices of movement actors (Yates, 2015b). Within the flight-free movement, this process focuses on embodying ecologically responsible lifestyles, which is expressed through the creation of new norms and conduct around living sustainably. In particular, movement actors express a strong motivation to live in line with their values and contribute to a more sustainable society, both by mitigating their own climate impact and by seeking to influence societal change. They view avoiding flying as the morally right thing to do considering the high climate impact from air travel and the values guiding their everyday choices and behaviors. In this way, low-carbon ways of living become embedded in their identity and conduct, carrying both personal and societal significance.

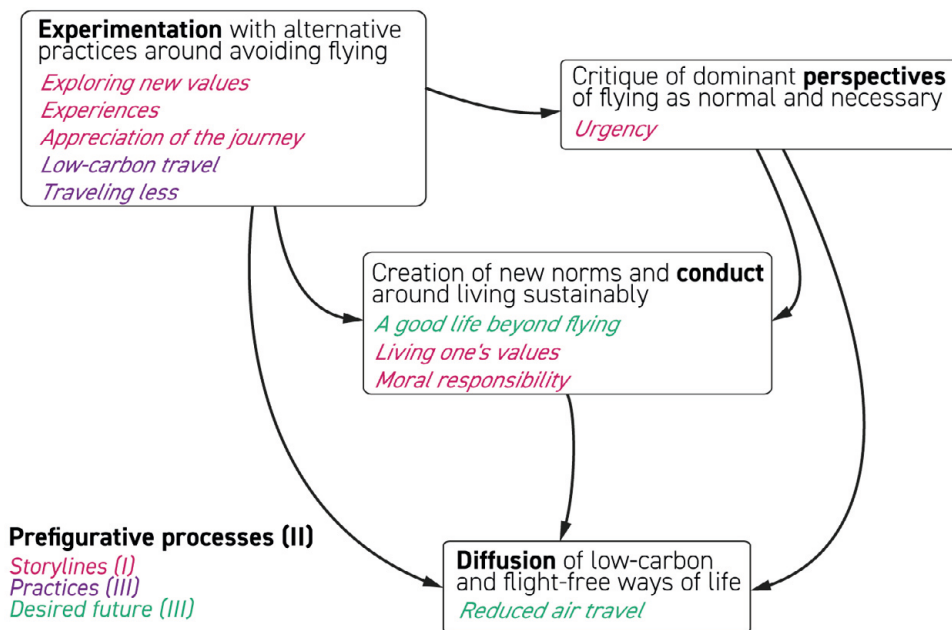
To gain broader societal influence, prefigurative movements usually seek to **diffuse** their experimental practices, perspectives, and new conduct (Yates, 2015b). I identified three main strategies for diffusion in my analysis of the flight-free movement. Firstly, actors in the movement uses social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to diffuse positive visions around low-carbon and flight-free ways of life. Specifically, they depict alternative practices around avoiding flying as appealing by highlighting benefits for both people and society, rather than critiquing or shaming people who fly. This focus on positive visions is important in the context of discussions around flight shame, a concept which has received widespread attention in international news media and on social media, where it often is associated with the flight-free movement (Becken et al., 2021). However, actors in the movement are critical toward this concept and do not intend to spread flight shame, but instead seek to encourage people to stop flying by connecting the avoidance of air travel to desirable imaginaries for low-carbon futures.

Secondly, the flight-free movement spreads awareness about the climate impact from aviation to highlight the importance of avoiding flying for achieving climate goals. Awareness-rising activities include circulation of informative pamphlets and brochures, social media posts, news media outreach, and campaigning, and have especially been carried out by the organization We Stay on the Ground. Thirdly, actors in the movement demonstrate the desirability of flight-free lifestyles by adopting such lifestyles themselves and sharing their experiences in public discourse. For example, We Stay on the Ground publishes flight-free stories on their webpage to demonstrate what it is like to live flight-free. Personal stories about adopting a flight-free lifestyle have also circulated in Swedish news media, with influential people such as academics, journalists, and celebrities publicly pledging to stop flying because of climate concern (e.g. Anderson et al., 2017; Ernman, 2016; Liljestrand, 2018). Moreover, the Train vacation (*Tågsemester*) Facebook group offers an online community where people can demonstrate their exploration with alternative travel practices as a way to inspire others to travel more sustainably.

Through these prefigurative processes, the flight-free movement enacts the storylines, practices, and desired future associated with the Staying on the ground discourse (Figure 7). Specifically, actors in the movement embody alternative norms and meanings around traveling, as well as around consumption more broadly, to model a low-carbon future in the present, thus demonstrating that a different way of life is both possible and desirable. As I argue in Paper II, the focus of the flight-free movement is not principally to replace flying with material alternatives, but rather to change the values and desires surrounding high-carbon practices. This focus on avoiding rather than just replacing high-carbon consumption practices distinguishes the flight-free movement from prefigurative groups and communities primarily concerned with the creation of alternative material practices for meeting basic needs, such as new food movements (Schlosberg 2019) and renewable energy cooperatives (Wittmayer et al. 2022). By constructing the avoidance of flying as an



alternative in itself, the flight-free movement opens up possibilities for the creation of cultural change, rather than just material change, in attempts to prefigure low-carbon ways of life. Such cultural shifts are essential to achieve emissions reductions in high-carbon consumption which is recognized as necessary for the climate transition (Ivanova et al., 2020; Whitmarsh et al., 2020; Wiedmann et al., 2020) but has so far rarely been demonstrated in practice.



**Figure 7. The prefigurative politics of Sweden's flight-free movement.**

Drawing on Yates' (2015b) prefigurative processes (bold), I show how Sweden's flight-free movement prefigures future-oriented everyday practices around low-carbon and flight-free ways of life (Paper II) by enacting the storylines I identified in media (pink, Paper I), and the practices (purple, Paper III) and desired future identified from interviews (green, Paper III) in the present. Image credit: Emma Li Johansson (emmalijohansson.com).

While the prefigurative politics of the flight-free movement illustrate possibilities for the creation of low-carbon ways of life, Paper II shows that the movement also provokes critique for being moralizing and elitist. This critique highlights that the focus on consumer habits, and specifically the avoidance of flying, is seen as controversial by some. That it is seen as controversial to avoid consuming something, in this case flying, illustrates the deep-rooted embeddedness of high-emitting lifestyles in contemporary consumer cultures. It also shows how difficult it is to envision low-carbon alternatives in a high-carbon world, where people tend to justify high-emitting lifestyles through arguments about freedom of choice (Cass et al., 2023). Such resistance of low-carbon alternatives demonstrates the dominance of high-carbon norms and desires in affluent societies (see Bulkeley et al., 2016;

Paterson, 2007), and the challenges prefigurative environmental movements face in achieving broader societal change. At the same time, the critique toward the flight-free movement shows that alternatives around avoiding flying are being recognized in Swedish society, which indicates that norms around aeromobility are being scrutinized and challenged. As argued by Chertkovskaya et al. (2024), the ways in “which the status quo opposes prefigurative arrangements highlights their vulnerability, but also their potential and their strength” (p. 314).



# Conclusions

## Summary of findings

This thesis has explored the cultural politics of contesting aeromobility through an empirical investigation of Sweden's flight-free movement. I followed Bulkeley et al.'s (2016) conceptualization of cultural politics, which focuses on the meanings associated with everyday cultures and the ways these meanings are embodied in practice. Specifically, I employed Maarten Hajer's argumentative discourse analysis (1995) to examine how discourses and meanings of aeromobility are constructed, sustained, contested, and reformulated. Following that, I applied Luke Yates' (2015b) framework of prefigurative politics to analyze how future-oriented practices around low-carbon and flight-free ways of life are enacted in the present. This approach has enabled me to identify and analyze the conflicting ideas and assumptions surrounding aeromobility in the context of climate mitigation, and to highlight possibilities for the creation of desirable and more sustainable ways of traveling, holidaying, and enjoying everyday life.

Through an analysis of travel magazines and digital media sources, I identified two discourses through which aeromobility has been constructed as a desirable social norm in Sweden (Paper I). The historical discourse Aspirational luxury originated in the 1950s and is associated with meanings of flying as an exclusive and glamorous practice. Some of these meanings continue today, such as the idea that aeromobility is important for society as a whole (*cultural exchange*) as well as for personal enjoyment (*rest and sun*), while others have been replaced by new meanings produced by the contemporary discourse Hypermobility. This discourse emerged in the 1990s with the introduction of low-cost aviation and has made air travel a normalized and routinized practice. In paper III, we identified a third discourse, Green flying, based on interviews with actors in Sweden's aviation industry<sup>10</sup>. This discourse has emerged during the past decade and aims to sustain the norm of flying through storylines about fossil-free aviation. By overstating the potential of technologies that lack feasibility to rapidly and substantially reduce emissions (e.g. hydrogen-based fuels and electric aircrafts), Green flying conceals

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<sup>10</sup> As previously explained (p. 27, 49), these interviews were conducted by Emily Christley, co-author on Paper III.

the urgency of addressing aviation's climate problem and postpones climate action to the future.

While these three discourses support aeromobility, I also identified an opposing discourse, *Staying on the ground* (Paper I, media sources), and analyzed how it is reproduced by actors in the flight-free movement (Paper III, interviews) as well as enacted in practice (Paper II, interviews). As shown in Paper I, *Staying on the ground* emerged in 2016 with the rising debate about aviation's climate impact in Swedish media. This discourse contests and reformulates the meanings associated with aeromobility through storylines about the importance of avoiding flying and the possibility to find similar experiences closer to home. Drawing on findings from Paper III, I showed that these storylines gather actors in Sweden's flight-free movement in a discourse-coalition seeking to redefine the future of aeromobility, specifically by imagining a desired, low-carbon future in which flying is no longer the norm, and promoting alternative practices for achieving such future. Based on findings from Paper II, and insights derived from Paper I and III, I showed that the flight-free movement prefigures alternatives to aeromobility by enacting the meanings, practices, and desired future of *Staying on the ground* in the present. Notably, the prefigurative politics of the flight-free movement extend beyond finding more sustainable ways of traveling, to reflect a broader reconsideration of what it means to live well under climate change.

## Research contributions

The contributions of these findings are both empirical and theoretical. Empirically, I trace the emergence of a new discourse (*Staying on the ground*) and show how it has started to shift the meanings attached to aeromobility and pave the way for prefigurative experimentation with alternative everyday practices around low-carbon ways of life (e.g. living one's values, enjoying slower and more local traveling). These findings are important because they demonstrate the possibility to challenge, and to some extent change, the meanings and practices associated with high-carbon consumption cultures in affluent societies. As highlighted by Pirgmaier (2020): “‘The good life’ in our societies ... means to be rich: to own (not just access) a house and a car, to afford multiple holidays a year – and to be willing to work hard for it” (p. 278). I have shown that the flight-free movement challenges this ideal by problematizing high-consumption lifestyles while also demonstrating the desirability of another way of life; one where the meaning of the good life is not defined by affluence or travel experiences, but rather is associated with sufficiency and sustainability. Such a focus on sufficiency is essential for fair demand-side climate mitigation which needs to target high-carbon luxuries (Gough, 2023) that large parts of the world population are almost or entirely excluded from (Oswald et al., 2020).

Theoretically, I demonstrate the value of using prefigurative politics as a lens to understand cultural change in the context of climate mitigation. Specifically, I have shown that prefigurative activism can play an important role in challenging high-carbon consumption practices even when the alternative is simply to do less, rather than doing something else instead. I thus complement the literature on prefigurative environmentalism, which so far has focused more on attempts to replace unsustainable material practices with new, more sustainable ones, such as everyday renewable energy actions (Skoglund & Böhm, 2022; Wittmayer et al., 2022) and alternative food practices (Schlosberg & Craven, 2019). In other words, this thesis moves beyond Schlosberg's (2019) view on prefigurative environmentalism as "a politics of embodied and constructed alternatives to current material systems and flows" (p. 2), to highlight the potential of prefiguration in enacting new meanings and practices around avoiding excessive and high-carbon consumption. This extended notion of prefigurative environmentalism is also important for the literature on cultural politics, which has stressed the need to study the contestation and transformation of high-carbon practices (Bulkeley et al., 2016) but not sufficiently theorized how to do so.

Through these findings and contributions, the thesis adds to recent discussions within and beyond sustainability science about the need to better understand demand-side solutions to climate mitigation (e.g. Creutzig et al., 2018; Mundaca et al., 2019; Sugiyama et al., 2024), particularly in the context of lifestyle and cultural change (Ivanova et al., 2020; Whitmarsh et al., 2021; Wiedmann et al., 2020). Specifically, I have highlighted the need to pay attention to the discourses and meanings surrounding everyday practices to understand why high-carbon consumption is so ingrained, but also how it can be contested through the articulation of alternative storylines. As argued by Hajer (1995), storylines are "the prime vehicles of change" (p. 63) in the context of transforming discourses because they hold a discourse-coalition together and strengthen its argumentative power. By further illustrating how prefigurative politics can serve as a driver of cultural change through the enactment of alternative practices, thus demonstrating that a low-carbon and more sufficiency-oriented way of life indeed can be desirable, this thesis provides important insights about how cultural change around affluent overconsumption can be enabled in times of a climate crisis.

Such insights are also of relevance for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, this research contributes to SDG 12, Responsible Consumption and Production, by demonstrating how prefiguration of alternative everyday practices may enable reduced overconsumption. It also contributes to SDG 13, Climate Action, by highlighting the need for demand-side solutions toward aligning the aviation sector, which is one of the most challenging sectors to decarbonize (Sharmina et al., 2021), with the 2°C (or below) global carbon budget.

## Future directions

While this thesis has focused on the demand side of reducing aviation's climate impact, there are valuable avenues to explore about the supply side of the cultural politics of aeromobility too. As argued by Bulkeley et al. (2016), the discourses and practices associated with low-carbon ways of life can both be supported and constrained by material devices and infrastructures, or "the particular objects, technologies and techniques ... through which everyday life in high-carbon, decarbonizing, and low-carbon societies is organized" (p. 9). Future research could look into the materiality of resisting and enabling cultural change in air travel by analyzing the provision of transport infrastructure, as well as the national and international politics surrounding that. Why have states been so traditionally invested in national airlines and air traffic infrastructure? How has the market liberalization of international aviation affected the supply of air travel, and with what implications for alternative forms of long-distance mobility such as rail? Such a focus would address what Cresswell (2010) refers to as the movement dimension of (aero)mobility (see Figure 2); that is, the material elements that enable, and in many cases favors, air travel as a form of movement.

Another important focus would be to explore the institutional politics of enabling or constraining reduced air travel in Sweden (and elsewhere). For example, future research could analyze parliamentary debates around flying to explore the opposition and support for reduced air travel. Such a focus is interesting considering the recent decision by the Swedish government (a center-right coalition that collaborates with the far-right Sweden Democrats) to abandon the tax on air travel that was implemented in 2018 by the former government (a coalition between the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party). Why is a rather low tax on flying, which is exempted from both fuel taxes and VAT on international flights (Larsson et al., 2019), so politically contested? What do these politics suggest about the broader possibilities for the flight-free movement to diffuse norms and practices around avoiding flying? The rise and fall of Sweden's air ticket tax provides an interesting case for exploring these questions further.

Despite the resistance among many politicians to restrict the demand for air travel, there are indications that the general public opinion in Sweden is supportive of reduced air travel, at least to some extent. In a survey from 2021, 73% of respondents reported a willingness to spend their vacation close to home instead of flying abroad, and 77% said they would consider shifting from planes to trains (Gullers Grupp, 2021). While it is well-known in research that pro-environmental attitudes do not necessarily lead to behavioral change (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002), a Swedish survey from 2020 found that 22% had avoided air travel at least once during the previous year because of the climate

impact caused by flying<sup>11</sup> (Falk, 2020). This number is very close to the social tipping point identified by Centola et al. (2018), who suggest that a minority group of around 25% of the population can change established social norms. In 2023, total air passenger numbers were 20% below pre-pandemic (2019) levels in Sweden and have not increased during 2024 (Swedavia, 2024), which might indicate the beginning of a long-lasting cultural shift in the meanings and practices associated with aeromobility.

While this research has focused on Sweden, aeromobility is also contested internationally through flight-free campaigns (Flight Free UK, n.d.), anti-airport expansion campaigns (Griggs & Howarth, 2023), and occupation of airports (Young, 2020). International media recently reported on a wave of actions across European airports, where activists used civil disobedience to ground flights and demand “that rich and polluting countries phase out fossil fuels” (Niranjan, 2024). Such direct political actions bring the material aspects of aeromobility into focus by forcing disruption of airport operations. They may also “serve to render the demands of their mainstream counterparts more palatable in the eyes of governments and the public” (Alberro, 2022), referred to in research as the radical flank effect (Haines, 1984). In other words, confrontational anti-aviation protests might make the more moderate prefigurative strategies of the flight-free movement seem reasonable, which could help the wider dissemination of practices around avoiding flying. A future study could explore the relationships between prefigurative and confrontational activism in the context of aeromobility to better understand how different groups can reinforce each other in their efforts to counter high-carbon practices and industries.

## Wider implications

This research may further support action for reduced flying by providing knowledge to policy actors and environmental organizations. Specifically, the findings can guide decision makers in designing more effective policies for demand-side climate mitigation, specifically targeting high-carbon consumption. As highlighted by Stoddard et al. (2021), one of the reasons why global emissions have continued to rise, despite three decades of political attempts to bend the curve, is because of the lack of mitigation efforts directed toward carbon-intensive practices and high-emitting groups. Such policies are urgently needed, and should primarily focus on

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<sup>11</sup> The survey question read: “In the past 12 months, have you avoided flying because of the climate impact of aviation?” Respondents could choose from the answers: “Yes, at several occasions”, “Yes, once”, “No”, and “Flying has not been relevant”. The percentage of people having avoided flying (22%) excludes the respondents who answered “Flying has not been relevant” (36%) (Falk, 2020).



avoiding demand for high-carbon practices in line with the Avoid-Shift-Improve framework used by the IPCC (Creutzig et al., 2022). In other words, reducing the emissions from overconsumption must start with consuming less and not just consuming different things, which alongside bottom-up cultural change (e.g. by prefigurative movements) needs to be supported by policy. In the case of flying, policies such as removal of loyalty programs and banning air travel advertisements could play an important role in supporting social norm change, while a frequent flyer levy or maximum flight quota would be an effective and fair way to address the most frequent flyers (Gössling & Lyle, 2021) who emit half of the climate pollution from flying (Gössling & Humpe, 2020).

The findings are also useful for groups and organizations in civil society engaged in prefigurative environmental activism, including the flight-free movement but also other prefigurative groups with similar characteristics, such as the zero-waste movement (Chertkovskaya et al., 2024) and groups promoting cycling as an alternative to cars (Balkmar & Summerton, 2017). In particular, the thesis provides insights into the potential and challenges of such activism to achieve broader cultural change. The deep-rooted embeddedness of high-carbon consumption cultures is undoubtedly a challenge, and the fact that some alternatives (e.g. avoiding flying) are viewed as controversial in the current high-carbon society might limit their wider dissemination. However, by acting out a different, low-carbon way of life and demonstrating that such a life is desirable, prefigurative movements can open up possibilities for the creation of new values, meanings, and identities around avoiding ingrained high-carbon consumption practices driven by wants rather than needs.

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# Appendix

**List of news media sources included in the thesis.**

|    | Article title (original)                                       | Article title (translated to English)                                        | Newspaper         | Date       | Paper      |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|
| 1  | Jorden behöver en överdos av godhet nu                         | The Earth needs an overdose of goodness now                                  | Expressen         | 18/12/2016 | I, II, III |
| 2  | "I den akuta klimatkrisen väljer vi nu bort flyget"            | "In the acute climate crisis, we opt out of flying"                          | Dagens Nyheter    | 02/06/2017 | I, II, III |
| 3  | Jag är trött på att visa mitt barn en döende värld             | I'm tired of showing my child a dying world                                  | Expressen         | 13/01/2018 | I, II, III |
| 4  | Jag ser deras resor och min avund vet inga gränser             | I see their travels and my envy knows no bounds                              | Expressen         | 16/01/2018 | I, II, III |
| 5  | Långresan har fått statusmässig konkurrens av att stanna hemma | Long-distance travel has gained competition by staycation                    | Dagens Nyheter    | 19/01/2018 | I          |
| 6  | Medelklassens debatt om flygvägran osar av klassförakt         | The middle-class's debate about the refusal to fly oozes with class contempt | Svenska Dagbladet | 23/01/2018 | II         |
| 7  | Därför kan flygskammen förändra flygnormen                     | Flight shame can change the norm of flying                                   | Dagens Nyheter    | 06/02/2018 | I          |
| 8  | Lindra din klimatångest – upptäck exotiska Sverige             | Alleviate your climate anxiety – discover exotic Sweden                      | Aftonbladet       | 08/10/2018 | I          |
| 9  | Nu får ni faktiskt sluta flyga med det samma                   | Now you actually have to stop flying immediately                             | Expressen         | 11/10/2018 | I, III     |
| 10 | Svenske Carl, 28, reste till Sydamerika – utan att flyga       | Swedish Carl, 28, traveled to South America – without flying                 | Expressen         | 23/02/2019 | I          |
| 11 | Flygskammen har bytts mot tågskryt                             | Flight shame has been replaced by train brag                                 | Göteborgs-Posten  | 25/02/2019 | III        |
| 12 | "Nej, att vilja förändra är inte klimatångest"                 | "No, wanting to achieve change is not climate anxiety"                       | Svenska Dagbladet | 14/03/2019 | I          |
| 13 | Flygbolag vill kompensera fort flygskam                        | Airlines want to offset flight shame                                         | Svenska Dagbladet | 15/04/2019 | I          |
| 14 | Hemester – nu vill vi semestra i Sverige                       | Staycation – now we want to vacation in Sweden                               | Aftonbladet       | 24/04/2019 | I          |

|    |                                                                         |                                                                             |                  |            |         |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------|---------|
| 15 | Greta Thunberg tar sabbatsår – åker till Amerika                        | Greta Thunberg takes a sabbatical - travels to America                      | Dagens Nyheter   | 31/05/2019 | I       |
| 16 | "Avstå flyg viktigt för att rädda klimatet"                             | "Abstaining from flying is important to save the climate"                   | Dagens Nyheter   | 31/05/2019 | I       |
| 17 | Vi har allt att vinna på att bromsa in                                  | We have everything to gain by slowing down                                  | Dagens Nyheter   | 2/07/2019  | I       |
| 18 | Nya trenden: Nu vill alla resa miljövänligt                             | The new trend: now everyone wants to travel environmentally friendly        | Aftonbladet      | 17/07/2019 | I       |
| 19 | Den duktiga medelklassen dödar klimatfrågan med sin "flygskam"          | The smug middle class is killing the climate debate with its "flight shame" | Dagens Nyheter   | 15/08/2019 | II      |
| 20 | Vi borde fokusera på kläderna som flyger runt jorden – inte människorna | We should focus on the clothes flying around the world – not the people     | Expressen        | 08/09/2019 | II      |
| 21 | Varför kan inte medelklassen prata om sitt flygande?                    | Why can't the middle class talk about their flying?                         | Dagens Nyheter   | 29/03/2021 | II, III |
| 22 | Alla har rätt att flyga på charter på sommaren                          | Everyone has the right to fly for a holiday in the summer                   | Aftonbladet      | 23/05/2022 | II      |
| 23 | Planeten har inte råd med våra charterresor                             | The planet can not afford our holiday flying                                | Aftonbladet      | 28/05/2022 | III     |
| 24 | Jag har knappt sett världen, men står inte ut med tanken på att flyga   | I have barely seen the world, but can't stand the thought of flying         | Göteborgs-Posten | 22/06/2022 | III     |
| 25 | Jag hade uppskattat venedig ännu mer om jag hade rest dit långsamt      | I would have appreciated Venice even more if I had traveled there slowly    | Dagens nyheter   | 28/06/2022 | II, III |
| 26 | Flyg kan inte längre vara ett alternativ                                | Flying can no longer be an option                                           | Göteborgs-Posten | 26/07/2022 | III     |