2. Theorizing the Immobility Turn

In this chapter, the authors recognize the importance of prior scholarship about the meaning of the multiplication of mobility, sometimes re-branded as 'mobilities' (Urry, 2007). We recognize the importance of expansionism during the pre-pandemic era, especially but not exclusively in regard to tourism. From a positive point of view, expansion meant the diversification of international mobility, opening up new possibilities for personal gratification in the leisure sphere, and more instrumentally, widening the potential field of opportunities for education, training and employment. This implies that the shift towards mobilities was not entirely superficial, especially when there were possibilities for life enriching social and cultural exchange to take place, echoing ideas from research on lifestyle migration (see, e.g., Benson and O'Reilly, 2009, 2016). Less well publicized was the negative impact made by mobilities on the natural environment, and the disruption to social life that could take place within host communities wherein visitor numbers had expanded to unmanageable levels (see also Urry and Larsen 2011).

On this latter point, and paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, we might say that there was a tendency for travellers to kill the thing they loved.[1] Tourism in particular had an unfortunate habit of homogenizing destinations, with the existing sense of place displaced by overcrowding and the erection of unsightly infrastructure; ugly new airports, carbuncle cruise ship terminals, noisy cafés and irritating pop-up bars. The desire to continue expansionism has nevertheless remained during the pandemic, albeit with a degree of adaptation. We have, for example, witnessed the emergence of hybrid forms of travel, with remote working from different destinations growing in visibility, suggesting closer alignment between tourism and labour migration among the highly skilled.

Summarizing this position, in acknowledging the positive and negative aspects of the expansionism of the 'mobility turn,' the authors argue in this chapter that in addition to higher levels of human circulation being economically and existentially important, there has been change in the consumption of mobility, to which vested interests became dependent upon an orientation viewed as desirable due its apparent profitability. We might even say that approaches to mobility, and the defence of a global system of maximized levels of population exchange, came to represent an integral aspect of capitalist development, but one that also globalized risk and precarity. The pandemic then threatened this position and created new vulnerabilities for travellers. Although the rapid spread of COVID-19 was not an intentional product of mobility expansionism, the virus was, literally, multiplied through the presence of millions of people in global transport networks, many of whom were engaged in various forms of non-essential travel to which they had developed an attachment. This can also be expressed in terms of sense of entitlement, with people paying for the privilege of travelling without restriction. The strength of this sense of entitlement meant that when access to travel was restricted in order to help stop the spread of the virus. This position created a temporary immobility imperative, giving changing the basic morality of mobility, moving away from being seen as a harmless pleasure towards being seen as problem, and something to be avoided. For this reason, it can be argued that the 'immobility turn' was not just a sudden drop in numbers of people circulating, but also a shift in the value, and values, attached to various forms of spatial circulation, shifting the emphasis away from its positive aspects, including profit and pleasure, towards some of the more negative associations, including the virus itself. We might then say that there was a clash between the pre-pandemic economically-oriented expansionist values and the temporary requirement to be immobile, inviting a challenge from proponents of the former to challenge the legitimacy of the latter.

Return to the mobility turn

Before we engage with this debate, the authors will return to ideas associated with the 'mobility turn,' referring to developments during the decades prior to the pandemic. In fact, if we were able to return to 2019, we would find mobilities in full swing, and while some reservations were noted by about certain aspects of expansionism, for example, the 'overtourism' phenomenon we discuss in the next chapter, there were no real signs of the travel industries slowing down. On the contrary, we would have witnessed the development of more, and more intensive forms, of tourism, with the statistics cited in Chapter 1 highlighting the growing popularity of holidaymaking in our Portuguese research context.

To make sense of this expansionism, we need to take note of the main social, political and economic imperatives that have made mobilities hard to let go of for many individuals and industries. Part of the 'problem' is fairly obvious. They have come to be seen as unproblematic aspects of social and economic life, and millions of people have grown deeply attached to travelling for work, study, training or leisure purposes, making visits to family members and friends or in search of a change of pace. At an individual level, such mobilities then come to be perceived as essential due to their importance for people's lifestyles and livelihoods, but this does not mean that they will necessarily be seen as vital by other people. We can however say that leisure-oriented mobilities tend to be encouraged for the economic reasons, particularly in terms of consumer expenditure. This explains why, in normal circumstances, such form of travel come to be regarded as politically unproblematic, especially as people are expected to return home once their economic resources have been expended.

There is also a kind of virtue attached to migration, especially the idea that people can move abroad to improve their financial situations and that migrants contribute to the economic standing of societies. While this may be a somewhat romanticized view, it still might be said that without capitalism there would be no migration, and vice versa, at least not on the same

scale (Messadra, 2001). Such perceived synergy means that labour migration is quite persistent, and deemed essential to many people to the point of being able to evade censure, even during times of restricted circulation. It is only considered a problem when its meaning is politicized or related to securitization processes - although during the pandemic this situation has grown more complex due to public health consideration - and some societies are also subject to pressures from nationalistic or xenophobic interests to keep certain people seen as undesirables out of their national territories, even if this is economically illogical (see Carlà, 2022; Dalingwater et al, 2022; Erayman and Çağlar, 2022).

Mobilities

The mobilities approach is very much focused upon forms of mobility that are non-migratory, with such practices tending to the preserve of demographers and economists. This might be said to be an attempt to theorize what has been happening among mobility consumers and how the range of possibilities open to then has grown, with a diversification of global interconnectedness facilitated by the emergence of new technology, more effective communications and faster transport links. The study of these 'mobilities' broadly reflects this focus, including studies from authors grouped together by the 'new mobilities paradigm' label, work by John Urry, Mimi Sheller, Peter Adey, Tim Cresswell and many others (see, e.g., Adey, 2006; Cresswell, 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2006). The paradigm is both a reflection of mobility expansionism and a critique, with problematic aspects noted by authors such as Urry, who was in fact quite vocal in regard to the environmental impact of aviation in particular. Despite this warning, mobilities and global inter-connectedness was generally seen as an opportunity to make oneself and the world more interesting through hybridizing identities and diversifying ways of spending money, rather than being seen as a problem.

The pandemic obviously threatens mobilities in a different manner, pathologizing non-essential travel and introducing rigid control to limit population circulation due to their role in facilitating the rapid spread of COVID-19 around the world, a point that mobilities scholars were quick to note (Cresswell, 2020; Lin and Yeoh, 2020). The associations international travel has with spreading and elongating the pandemic in fact lead to us ponder why mobilities have remained so popular in the public imagination, and seem to be returning even before the end of the public health emergency. One reason relates to the resilience of the positive associations non-essential travel acquired during the period of expansion, and the fact that during a pandemic there will be many people who are actively seeking respite from objectively miserable circumstances; we might describe this as a strange combination of nostalgia and escapism. Added these reflections is the incompleteness of many peoples' mobility projects, including unfinished education or training stages and employment experience. Having bought into the idea that a kind of synergy is produced by the simple act of moving to another country, with the hope of unlocking processes of social mobility (Urry, 2000, 2), such travellers are going to be reluctant to change their plans, and the same can be said of institutions and industries with significant sunk costs and a dependency on income extracted from enlarged visitor numbers. Such thinking makes continuing various mobilities appear not only logical, both to the consumer and stakeholders in the marketplace, but also near mandatory, even when to some people, it still appears unwise to travel.

The end of the mobility turn

These reflections take us to the turning point of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the prospect of a multiplication of risks posed to the traveller. It is important to state that international travel has always been potentially hazardous. There is of course the small chance that a plane will crash, train derail or cruise ship sink on route to the next destination, but more realistically,

moving abroad incurs emotional and economic costs. The authors have made this discovery in their prior research, especially in regard to internationalized higher education, with students often paying handsomely for the privilege of studying abroad (see, e.g., Cairns et al, 2018). Risks are also present among labour migrants, who may face racism and other forms of discrimination arising from restrictive policies and criminalization, a theme we return to in Chapter 5.

When we talk about risks arising from COVID-19, we need to acknowledge the basic threat posed to physical and mental health by continuing to be mobile, alongside existing issues arising from the process of de-rooting oneself from one nation state and moving to another, including the generation of precarity. For more affluent travellers, there can also be a peculiar sense of dissociation from reality and of losing one's place in the world. We observed this phenomenon in research conducted with international students during the first lockdown in Portugal, some of whom faced the prospect of contemplating a return 'home' to places they no longer identified with, as well as a struggle to cope with the emotional consequences of being suddenly cut-off from family members and other forms of financial support (Cairns et al, 2021a, 2021b; Malet Calvo et al, 2021). These are issues we return to in Chapter 4, but for now, we can say that what needs to be acknowledged alongside the environmental impact of expanded mobilities is the human impact of interrupted internationalization. There is a risk that, rather than becoming more connected with each other, people are internally disconnected by travel disrupting their sense of self, becoming socially cut off from old identities and networks in the attempt to forge new bonds.

Liquid migration

Expanded mobilities also created consequences for how travel is used during the life course, including an increase in its consumption. This may have had some benefits for travellers,

particularly where economies of scale and heightened competition lowered some of the financial costs of tourism, but with more young people moving abroad for education and work, short stays abroad became a normal aspect of life for many, who travelled not just once or twice but, intermittently, many times over a period of years or decades (Cairns and Clemente, 2021). This led to the establishment of a phenomenon that became commonplace in the decades prior to the pandemic, especially but not exclusively in the EU: the mass consumption of multiple forms of mobility across the life course, oriented around adventure and self-actualization rather than permanent settlement in a new society.

The people engaged in this practice might best be described as 'mobile subjects.' They are not migrants in the traditional sense of the word, and will not think of themselves as such, but it is hard to ignore the fact that they have been spending substantial amounts of time living in other countries. It is in fact the accumulation of mobility that suggests a form of migration is taking place, albeit disguised by having been broken up and frequently interrupted, along with the maintaining of close ties with the home country. Such people have become migrants incrementally, and while there are no statistical indicators that adequately capture this phenomenon so that we might gauge its popularity, it is highly likely that this form of 'migration' constituted another important aspect of the mobility turn, reflected in the European context by widespread use of expressions like 'free movement.'

Putting these reflections into more sociological language, this was a form of migration characterized by liquidity, with mobile subjects seeking to make their own migration trajectories using personal agency and resources, rather than cost benefit analysis or running away from existential threats or adverse economic circumstances (Engbersen and Snel, 2013; Engberson, 2018). This idea, of 'migration' as episodic and reversible, also mirrors broader theoretical recognition of the liquidity of social life, explored by authors such as Zygmunt Bauman (2000). Furthermore, this relates not only to the mobility decision-making of

individuals but also broader political developments, most notably, the opening-up of borders to enable greater numbers of people to move between countries on a temporary or circular basis (Favell, 2008: 705-6).

Although this phenomenon was seen as a positive development, especially in the EU, representing a kind of democratization of physical space, making migration intermittent also created many practical problems for those who engaged in it. There will obviously be emotional and economic costs arising from having to undertake successive dislocations, and people who 'fail' to settle in one place will lose out on many of the benefits that 'regular' citizens often enjoy, including access to free or affordable health and welfare services. We might then say that the 'liquid migrant' lacks the literal grounding in place offered by traditional migration processes, with the spectre of precarity emerging from the broken-up nature of the liquid migration experience, not to mention the lack of any 'real' connection to the places being visited. Such fragmented lives might not then be as desirable as we might think, particularly when people come to realize that certainty, and security, are not necessarily bad things.

The logic of immobility

The unsettling nature of the pandemic compelled us, practically overnight, to question the need for so many different forms of non-essential mobility. This is not only due to the epidemiological risks that are being generated, but also a degradation in the capacity of international travel to make a meaningful contribution to our sense of self-worth. Previously, the detrimental aspects of travel have been relatively easy to set aside, since there was rarely any immediate risk to the traveller. Most had no real qualms about the impact of aviation on the environment, perhaps thinking that a token financial contribution to an airline could compensate for their carbon footprint. But when there is an actual risk to one's health, in the form of a potentially deadly virus, it then becomes logical to be immobile. However, once the

first wave of the crisis had passed, some people obviously did continue to travel even though COVID-19 infection rates were often extremely high, suggesting that they had scant regard for their own health, or the well-being of fellow travellers.

People who engaged in non-essential travel during the pandemic can obviously be seen as selfish idiots, but there is a need to better understand, in less pejorative terms, why people would want to travel when it is logical not to do so. They may simply have decided that it was a risk worth taking, or the temptation was simply too hard to resist and the potential rewards on offer too great, particularly if already habituated to a certain amount of disruption. As mobility researchers, the authors are aware of the fact that people enjoy the experiential aspect of international travel; not so much the journey itself, but what happens after their arrival. That travelling is already quite arduous and uncomfortable means that existing problems might have intensified during the period during which sanitary procedures were being enforced, but not to the point of where the experience was unsufferable. The heightened personal gain of surviving the endurance test may even helped offset any potential qualms.

We might also take note that not everyone was against travelling, and there may have even been encouragement. The apparently transgressive behaviour of being a traveller during lockdown was in fact quite easy to overlook, especially when there was tacit endorsement from the aviation industry, concerned no doubt its own economic survival. This latter point can be extended to businesses in societies dependent on tourism, like Portugal, where there have been genuine concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the economy, especially in the hospitality sector. More significantly, the introduction of testing and vaccinations gave people a literal pass. As such, with the exception of the first wave of the virus, it was still possible to travel despite some practical obstacles, with the qualification of meeting entry requirements relating to negative COVID-19 test results and/or appropriate vaccination status.

Moral economy

This does not of course mean that travelling was taking place entirely with impunity or without sanction. While the legal restriction of mobility seems to have been somewhat lax, or at least became fairly east to circumvent, we cannot necessarily say the same about how pandemic era travelling was being received socially. While those undertaking non-essential voyages may have viewed their own actions as valid, the same cannot be said of people who were put at risk by the unwillingness of others to stay at home. This may in fact have led to a kind of COVID-19 'tourist gaze' (Urry and Larsen, 2011), with the presence of outsiders generating consternation especially when visiting people who had less freedom to circulate, to the point of being seen as a form of imperialism akin to the 'medical gaze' hypothesized by Foucault (Korstanje and George, 2021, 79). This suggests that a shift in the moral meaning of mobility took place, that while neither permanent or absolute, questioned the value of international travel to individuals and to societies. While much mobility is already morally suspect due the negative impact made on the environment, the more immediate and visible aspects of the pandemic were more effective in morally problematizing international travel.

At a more quotidian level, travel has always involved weighing up costs and benefits, although perhaps without the prospect of suffering a self-inflicted ethical injury. This position changes when international travel is effectively outlawed, making it easier for people to morally damage themselves. A related issue concerns the circumnavigation of ethical strictures, including attempts by travel dependent industries to remove legal restrictions as soon as possible, irrespective of the actual epidemiological situation. We can then see that there is common ground between determined travellers and certain parties in the travel-dependent industries, in both wanting the same outcome: a return to the skies as soon as possible, irrespective of the societal consequences.

To help explain how this particular scenario might work, we can draw upon the idea of 'moral economy,' popularized by the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson in his book, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), and developed further in an essay entitled, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century' (1971).[2] In addition to acting as historical accounts of civil unrest at this time, these influential works demonstrate how an economically oppressed class can generate its own moral values in reaction to social and economic conditions that are perceived as unjust. This involves forging cross-class alliances, even between groups who are diametrically opposed in other respects, most notably, their social and economic positions. The English peasantry could then align with landowners and influence government policy, since they had a shared interest in opposing the government of the day. Updating the principle, we can say that travel industries were able to ally themselves with frustrated travellers to defeat the authority of the state, which had temporarily ceded authority for public policy to medical science. This apparent rebellion becomes strengthens as sufficient numbers of people feel systematically deprived of a resource they see as economically and ontologically vital, namely access to international travel. The oppressed alliance then sees its protest actions as virtuous according to its own self-generated moral position – essentially creating a victim narrative - which is reenforced through appeals to the authority governments ordinarily obey, namely market forces. Policymakers and experts, especially those with responsibility for public health, are then given the unenviable task of trying to make decisions that cannot please everyone, and may result in themselves becoming targets for opprobrium from the protesters, thus furthering the cycle of moral indignation and victimhood.

Through adopting a moral economic perspective in regard to pandemic era travel, we are now able to explain the apparent perversity of policymaking in relation to the abrupt lifting of restrictions on travel, an issue that the authors will return to later in this book. For now, we can say that the approach was obviously successful, and as we move into the third year of the

pandemic, international travel has largely re-opened without any serious efforts being made to limit the spread of the virus. In fact, such was the rapidity of the policy reverse, airports were not even adequately equipped to manage the sudden return to expanded visitor numbers. This has inevitably created a huge mess, with overcrowding and cancelled flights, although the mobile subjects has arguably no one to blame except themselves.

Summary

As we move forward in this book, we will look at some concrete examples, relating to the clash of values hypothesized in this chapter. Significantly, we are able to update the 'moral economy' to reflect the norms and values of a mobility consumer society. While in its classical orientation, 'moral economy' was used to denote what was essentially a class struggle and alliances of different interest groups, certain vested interests – including members of the public aligned with economically important industries – are now able to exercise their entitlements to international travel, even when there may be negative consequences, including a potential prolongation of the period of disruption to mobility, the very thing that they are protesting against.

Reflecting on the preceding discussion, a significant amount of work clearly needs to be undertaken before societies can safely return to peak levels of visitor numbers, suggesting that wisdom has been lacking among those who want to travel again. Tourism in particular needs to prepare for the reactivation of its travel routes, and recognize that many people remain anxious by the apparent lack of care being taken, furthering their travel reticence. From a long term perspective, travellers might also take more notice of the problems their presence is generating, particularly in regard to problematic nature of their activities when practiced to excess, a theme the authors return to in the next chapter.