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# 6. Mobility after an Immobility Turn

In the final chapter of this book, the authors return to debates about the meaning of mobility, and how this changed after the freedom to move was suspended for long periods during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. This discussion includes acknowledgement of social, economic and political imperatives that possess the power to open and close mobility pathways, and the pursuit of sustainability in regard to balancing the positive and negative impacts of expanded levels of international travel. While determining an optimal level of circulation has always been difficult, the pandemic further complicated this process, extending to a need to work out how to keep mobility profitable while maintaining public safety and security.

To make sense of this situation, we return to the conceptual ideas introduced in the preceding chapters. In Chapters 1 and 2, the authors looked at the 'mobility turn' and the multiplication of 'mobilities' (Urry, 2007) that took place over the course of several decades, most intensively during the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century. This prolonged period of expansion led to maximized levels of human circulation in multiple forms, especially but not exclusively in international tourism. In these two chapters, we not only acknowledged of the importance of prior theoretical developments on this theme but also what seems to have been a largely unheeded critique of expansionism, something that could not continue indefinitely due to sustainability concerns. We will never know how the 'mobility turn' would have ultimately played out since the pandemic meant expansionism never quite reached its apogee, but the diffusion of mobilities attained was still extremely impressive in quantitative terms, even if the quality of the experiences often left a lot to be desired.

As implied in Chapter 3, another problem that emerged during the period of expansionism related to unregulated and/or mismanaged development of mobilities, resulting

in multiple forms of extractivism taking place, removing the meaningfulness of much travel through saturating host communities with over-entitled – and often annoying – visitors, creating an intensified variant of the 'tourist gaze' situation (Urry and Larsen, 2011). The mobilities looked at in Chapters 4 and 5 meanwhile appear to illustrate less problematic forms of mobility expansionism, that were nevertheless not entirely benign due to concerns regarding social inclusivity in student mobility and problems with supporting labour migrants, particularly at times of heightened stress, like the lockdown periods during the pandemic. What we can deduce is that societies need to take better care of their migrants, and to recognize that being a host involves taking on costs as well as reaping the benefits. This realization leaves us to ponder what will happen next after the 'immobility turn.' The discussion that follows in this chapter does not make predictions or draw conclusions in the traditional sense of reaching a point of closure, since the pandemic itself has not come to a neat and tidy ending, but the authors have identified a number of insights to help us understand what might happen after the period of flux has settled down.

## (Im)mobility in flux

As implied in the opening paragraph, the first of these concerns relates to the meaning of mobility, or rather the discourses on mobility that underpin these meanings, and the persistence of inherently flawed narratives, including the idea that sustainability can be nested within expansionism. Alongside this point is the issue of unpredictability surrounding international travel, something that has continued after the lifting of sanitary protection procedures, influenced by a wide range of factors including industrial unrest and the invasion of Ukraine. At a micro level, we might also say that the meaning of migration is subject to change according to needs and wants of various actors, and this may happen in regard to other forms of non-essential mobility. Certainly, during the pandemic, there were very obvious shifts in meaning:

from seeing international travel as a pleasure to realizing that it had become a bit of a pain. The 'moral economy' perspective hypothesized in Chapter 2 also brings to light some of the processes that legitimate and de-legitimate the freedom to circulate, with hegemonic discourses defining not only what is practically possible but also what can be considered societally acceptable. Using a Foucauldian framework, we argue that a temporary shift took place in mobility discourse, at least during the first year of the pandemic, but this change was temporary and unstable, and dispensed with rapidly and perhaps prematurely, meaning that many travellers' expectations could not be realistically met after the attempted re-opening of societies in the spring of 2022.

A second, more straightforward insight relates to a change of emphasis in the marketing of mobility, including the integration of sustainability discourse into international tourism. It is hard to ignore the fact that much pre-pandemic mobility was inherently unsustainable, given the problems generated in the most popular destinations by alleged 'overtourism' (see Chapter 3), and while an extractivist ethos may remain hegemonic in some corners of the tourist industry, the idea that 'more tourists' is an always a good thing is at least being challenged. Given the importance of marketing to our understanding of tourism, it is then interesting that the industry itself is re-thinking its ideas, or at least trying to offer visitors something different, including the rediscovery of 'digital nomadism.'

***Mobility discourses***

Among the public, reactions to immobility during the pandemic have obviously varied, with some people lamenting the loss of their entitlements more than others. Alongside nostalgia for the freedom to engage in relatively carefree travel, there was also relief at the end of unpopular commutes and pointless business trips. These are hard to quantify issues, but if we are being honest with ourselves, we might admit that while a holiday could be nice in principle, the reality

was often much different. International travel was in fact often arduous and uncomfortable, and that was long before it became a vector of potentially deadly virus transmission. And of course, not everyone could afford to travel, or to travel as frequently or as far as they would have liked. It therefore seems rather odd to completely forget about all of the old inconveniences and limitations, not to mention the huge carbon footprint that was being generated by aviation, and remember only the good times that did not actually exist for many people.

In trying to explain why a generally positive view of mobility has persisted, especially in regard to international tourism, certain pre-pandemic ideas seem to have survived the ravages of two years of disruption and disappointment. This is despite the fact that concerted state-endorsed efforts were made, especially during the early stages of the public health crisis, to convince people that practically all of their mobility was not necessarily – non-essential to use the jargon deployed at the time - and could therefore be easily dispensed with. At the same time, when circulation was permitted, the international travel experience was problematized as part of the efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19, with the establishment of a new mobility etiquette, including the observation of uncomfortable and inconvenient regulations. This move can of course be seen as a corollary of the more general pandemic era discourse on public health, aimed at reorienting human behaviour away from convivial activities and towards pragmatic insularity, the rationale for doing so being grounded in medical science. The strength of pre-pandemic mobility narratives however meant change was always going to be resisted and hard to sustain, and that two discourses about international travel would be co-existing with each other rather than one displacing the other.

From a sociological point of view, in referring to discourses we should say that we mean bodies of ideas that define acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. More specifically, the mobility discourse of the pandemic has been comprised of ideas, images and narratives, as well as formal edicts issued by the state. We are then acknowledging the importance of the messages

that circulate to regulate the behaviour of the public, including mobile subjects. Acknowledging the presence of this discursive formation enables us to make comparisons with how theorists such as Michel Foucault sought to explain different facets of human behaviour; for example, the regulation of human sexuality through attempts at sexual repression or the desire to control the behaviour of criminals in carceral settings via panoptical observation (see Foucault 1990, 1991). Those scenarios are not quite the same as the attempt to curb various forms of mobility, but share a subtly that might be described in simpler terms as the power of suggestion. Another important point to note, is that the exercise of discursive power does not need to be coercive, except perhaps in exceptional cases where people are very visibly breaking the 'law.' What is crucial is the creation of the impression that the suggested behaviours are what everyone else is doing – regardless of whether or not this is the case - and to act otherwise would be seen as some kind of an unthinkable faux pas.

In summarizing this approach, during the pandemic attempts were made to exercise power in a nuanced manner with a view to turning people away from travelling. Norms were established for how one should, and shouldn't, behave with the existence of these *regulations* made evident through visible examples, including health and safety publicity campaigns, and advice regarding the present state of COVID-19 restrictions published on the internet, including tourist industry websites. There are also implied rewards for those who conform to the new orthodoxy and implied sanctions to be levied against others who refuse to help reify the episteme. Examples of 'good behaviour' are fairly easy to identify - the people who stayed at home and did not travel – but as we will come to discuss, the disciplining of those who appeared to break the rules was less stringent. In regard to the authority of the new mobility discourse, of fundamental importance is the place of scientific knowledge, and the granting of authority to recognized experts in the health field, personages who also need to be made visible. This explains why public health experts, who had previously occupied a marginal position in

policymaking, suddenly became the centrepieces of nightly news broadcasts and associated media, their presence confirming that politicians had momentarily ceded power to a higher authority.

In evaluating the success of the new episteme, there appears to have been a high level of adherence to the new order during the first wave of infections; for example, the statistics explored in Chapter 1 suggest fairly uniform acceptance of the request to avoid international tourism. However, the authors also know from their research in Chapters 4 and 5 that certain forms of migration successfully evaded the restrictions, in some cases for understandable reasons. After the first few months of the pandemic, students started to travel again and international tourism also resumed, albeit in a highly constricted manner. This picture of partial adherence suggests a failure of the new mobility discourse to become hegemonic, ,or that it was never intended to become established with the ceding of authority to regulate mobility to 'science' ineffective. We can also argue that enforcement of sanctions against unnecessary travel was inconsistent, with many blind eyes turned, especially when there was political capital to be gained from making exceptions.

The most egregious examples of mobility etiquette effacement in the Portuguese context arguably related to the over-turning of national norms by international imperatives, and the machinations of an authority capable of making its own laws, namely the European football regulatory body, UEFA. A notorious case was the hosting of the 2021 men's Champions League football final in the city of Porto. The original plan was to contain thousands of visiting supporters of the finalists Chelsea and Manchester City in protective environments, separate from the city's citizens, a decision ratified by the Portuguese government, since the event took place when social gatherings were restricted, with professional football matches taking place without spectators.[1] This plan was soon abandoned, and invited guests of UEFA were given special dispensation to ignore sanitary procedures. This created a bizarre situation, with the

sense of transgression generated by the visitors' presence illustrating the tension created by there being two simultaneously existing mobility discourses, with the old order reasserting itself over the new narrative. In more prosaic terms, the visiting supporters and dignitaries were allowed to do what Portuguese fans had not been allowed to do in 15 months: watch a football match, which must have been particularly galling in the case of the fans of FC Porto, who were still not allowed to enter their own stadium. Furthermore, a number of the English-based fans over-stayed, some engaging in old fashioned hooliganism, including attacks on police and members of the public in Porto. This is very clear example of what goes wrong when the discursive 'law' is broken, leading to serious, even fatal consequences, with the highly contagious Delta variant of Covid-19 spread from England to Portugal, creating another wave of infections.[2]

***Sustainable Mobilities***

As a final issue, the authors want to turn towards considering the prospects for developing more sustainable modes of international travel. This is an issue we introduced in Chapter 3, with a brief exploration of some of the adaptations that had taken place in the marketing of tourism in Portugal, possibly in response to changing customer demands during the pandemic, to the point of making the pursuit of visitors' health and safety part of the marketing message. We might even say that certain aspects of pandemic mobility discourse mentioned in the preceding paragraphs were being integrated with economic imperatives, including the desire of the tourist industry to remain operational at a time of limited possibilities. It also became evident in the analysis of our evidence from tourism stakeholders that such steps were still quite tentative, and likely to have a limited appeal since peace and quiet is not what many people actually want during their holidays.

Given the prospect of increasing visitor numbers once more, the return of the old mobility narrative might complicate the challenge of making tourism sustainable. Part of the ease with which the familiar narratives are able to return relates to levels of prior investment and dependency on associated revenues. The sunk costs of tourism – jumbo sized cruise ship terminals, the conversion of residential properties into short-term letting sites and the building of new airports - means a reluctance on the part of private investors and public sector to accept change that might dent their profits. A similar logic might be detected elsewhere. As implied in Chapter 4, the reliance of universities on income from overseas students is well known, with this revenue now helping to compensate for other funding shortfalls and potential losses incurred during the pandemic; attracting feepaying student migrants hence becomes more important. Labour migrants meanwhile occupy a more ambiguous position, since they are, in theory, beneficiaries of mobility, as well as income generators for their employers and contributors to the coffers of the receiving country. We might say then that they have an importance that tourists do not possess, particular in sectors where they are needed.

Focusing once again on tourism, the return of large numbers of tourists risks reigniting the processes that serve to extract value from host communities or at least, causing major disruption, something that may be less evident among migrants who are investing in these places and making a positive net contribution. There is also the issue of discomfort generated by intrusive visitors. Although there are extreme examples of tourists practically trampling cities like Venice to death, a more common experience was the subjection of local residents to an uncomfortable 'tourist gaze' (Urry and Larsen, 2011), with the relationship between hosts and visitors becoming inherently non-reciprocal. This is likely to become even more alienating at times when some people, especially those with vulnerable health conditions, are still adhering to what are no longer mandatory health protocols, including mask-wearing and maintaining social distancing, practices that many holidaymakers will want nothing to do with.

It will also be interesting to observe how an already stretched public health services copes with a re-influx of visitors at a time when there will be demands from exhausted employees to take time off for their own holidays, alongside increased pressures on workers in the transportation sector, who have seen their overheads rise and profit margins fall as a result of rises in fuel prices following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. We might then say that the shift back to the old mobility discourse has its consequences, that need to be taken into account when we talk about a return to pre-pandemic levels of circulation.

***Digital nomadism***

These concerns suggest that restarting full-scale tourism in the middle, not the end, of a pandemic is going to invite a certain amount chaos, with the potential for confusion to emerge following two years of atrophy and under capacity in the industry, and a possible lack of sufficient preparation after the lifting of regulations. This situation might take us back towards thinking about the benefits that can be created by there being fewer international flights and hosting fewer visitors, with these holidaymakers also able to take advantage of the relative emptiness of the less visited destinations.

These are fairly self-evident considerations, but we might also want to consider the viability of hybrid solutions to avoid the aforementioned chaos during the period of re-adjustment, perhaps making use of digital technology to support modes of travel that integrate tourism with labour migration, including a re-activation of the idea of digital nomadism. This is not a new approach to international travel, but it has grown in prominence during the pandemic. Although academic studies on digital nomadism appear to be scarce, focused mainly on the migration of the highly skilled and qualified (see, e.g., Marques et al, 2021) and not necessarily ringing endorsements of the approach due to the disruption to the sense of self while engaging in the practice (see, e.g., Thompson, 2019; Green, 2020). We might then want to

exercise a degree of caution, and not that this is not an approach that will be suitable for all travellers.

The basic principle behind 'digital nomadism' is nevertheless familiar and not necessarily problematic in itself. In regard to what it entails, there is no consensus on who first coined the phrase (see Makimoto and Manners, 1997), but it is general understood that a digital nomad is a person who is physically located in one space while technically employed in another, fulfilling work responsibilities remotely via the use of information technology. There is also a strong association with being situated in destinations associated with tourism, with an integration of work with leisure. We might say then that the digital nomad is not quite a migrant nor a tourist. This is why this is described as a hybrid form of circulation, using online and offline facilities. The rationale for 'digital nomadism' is also transversal, combining economic imperatives with lifestyle considerations; using flexible working conditions to take advantage of a favourable local climate and more interesting cultural attractions, and perhaps lower taxation regimes. There is also variability in regard to its formats. While often involving dividing oneself between two or more countries, switching between urban and rural locations in the same country is another possibility, thus creating fewer bureaucratic complications and offering a greater degree of cultural continuity.

Despite the paucity of research, the existing impression in our Portuguese context is that digital nomadism can be interpreted as an extension of lifestyle migration (see, e.g., Torkington, 2012; Benson and O'Reilly, 2016), something that has traditionally been seen as a relatively elitist pursuit, indulged in by relatively small numbers of affluent individuals working in highly skilled, and highly flexible, professions. However, this position has changed profoundly with the pandemic and widespread use of remote working in many different occupational fields, and we may yet see a reaction to the climate emergency involving greater numbers of people seeking working conditions that eliminate continuous commuting (see also

Thompson, 2018). We might then want to re-think the constitution of the digital nomad population, moving towards a slightly more inclusive view of this practice, taking advantage of the fact that environmentalism is already popular with many people. More imaginatively, the format could conceivably be adapted to tertiary education; while students might still travel to another country, they do not necessarily need to spend all their time closely connected to a university campus, and may even prefer to be based in another location if this suits their lifestyle needs. Where the approach would obviously fall down is in respect to the kind of labour migration practices the authors discussed in Chapter 5, since this work involves being grounded in a specific place in order to undertake essential manual work.

This does not mean that the idea is without its problems. Although marketed as flexible and carefree working, 'digital nomadism' can nevertheless be seen as an additional form of precariousness, part of the globalization of a gig economy, especially when it is undertaken out of economic necessity rather than personal choice. We might even say that this has already happened during the periods of lockdown, when not everyone wanted or enjoyed being outside their traditional workplaces for long periods, and also important to consider are challenges created for service industries that depend on the presence of people in their factories, shops and offices, ranging from security staff to sandwich sellers. Clearly, the shift towards remote working will not suit everyone.

In reinventing 'digital nomadism,' we would then like to suggest two different formats that warrant future exploration, the first of which learns from the experience of working at home during the first two years of the pandemic. While for people living relatively close to their workplaces, this might have involved short distance remote working, others took the opportunity to leave what might have been unsafe conditions, and relocate to more peaceful and spacious locations, including urban-to-rural shifts. This may not be indicative of a lasting change, especially as remote working may have been an involuntary move. It would

nevertheless be interesting to re-evaluate this episode as a potentially new form of 'digital nomadism,' particularly in regard lasting effects. A second format relates to some of the ideas presented by the tourist industry in Portugal in Chapter 3, providing us a more restricted form of nomadism, moving to relatively remote locations for extended periods to purpose built or suitably adapted facilities. While this might be seen as an elitist activity, or a new kind of working holiday, it is significant that such nomadism is recognized by mainstream tourism agencies, and aligned with sustainability goals. The pandemic 'experiment' suggests then a need to take a more in-depth look at inclusive and exclusive forms of 'digital nomadism,' available to 'regular' workers – not just elites - who want to work outside the traditional workplace without censure, suitably supported and equipped.

## Summary

Bringing this book to a close, it is perhaps too early to determine if there have been lasting changes in the meaning and materiality of mobilities during the first two years of the pandemic. If we are being optimistic, and there are further major outbreaks of COVID-19, a lot of the problems and discomfort may be soon forgotten, and what we have termed the 'immobility turn' will be happily consigned to history. We might then conclude that the transformations that took place at this time were not as serious as they might have been, but nevertheless were substantial enough to have created instability across the mobility field.

Despite this optimism, writing in the spring of 2022 we can say that we have not reached a point of recovery, although a great deal of progress is being made in regard to opening up societies to travellers once again. We might also say that we are witnessing a concerted effort to create the impression that it is business as usual for international travel, representing perhaps another discursive shift. It is however unfortunate that the moment was not anticipated or adequately prepared for, with insufficient staff at many airports to cater for the new wave of

passengers, not to mention cost of living concerns among aviation industry employees that may lead to strikes and other forms of industrial action. We might then say that alongside implications arising from a long period of immobility and disrupted circulation, there will be problems created by the challenge of re-mobilization, which may continue to create problems for some time to come. The close, then, on a note of caution, and a reminder that patience and planning is still required by travellers, whether for long durations or short stays, along with a certain amount of trepidation in regard to the impact of the rising cost of living, especially fuel and energy costs. While the authors are not suggesting that we will soon be experiencing another 'immobility turn' on the same scale as the pandemic, some individuals may be immobilized by having to use their economic resources for me immediate concerns, such as eating, paying their bills and keeping warm, at a time when the costs of travel rise to reflect rising costs.