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Transcending the duality of the “mobile” and “immobile”. Revealing human capacities for planetary wellbeing through “third cultures”

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This work addresses the following topic(s) from the Call for Contributions:
(Please check at least one box)

- Placemaking to integrate urban spaces and mobility
- Promoting sustainable mobility choices in metropolitan regions
- Governing responsible mobility innovations
- Shaping the transition towards mobility justice
- System analysis, design, and evaluation
- other: _____

Extended Abstract

Problem statement

A planetary polycrisis taking the shape of wars, climate change, biodiversity loss, and many more, threatens to immobilize individuals and societies through shock, confusion, lack of understanding and a sense of hopelessness (Elo et al., 2024; Weintrobe, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2023). Such an immobilization does not bode well for resolving any part of the polycrisis (for some reasons, see Klein, 2007). How to begin resolving any of the parts making up the polycrisis then?

The reference to mobility when speaking of “immobilization” in terms of hopelessness is, of course, not accidental. The idea of mobility is quite slippery, and applicable to many concepts, and yet keeps a series of quite constant connotations, including that a lack of it is quickly seen as problematic, even in contexts in which physical comfort is quickly equated with soft and wide seating, or where high mobility is viewed as a big problem from environmental and emotional perspectives. And indeed, when we write of “immobilization” the idea is one of powerlessness and lack of hope, because in the face of too much to do it seems impossible to begin – and action *is* indeed needed. But do “mobile” or “mobilized” souls need to be physically mobile? When, and for which purposes? And what associated costs are bearable? Some authors have previously considered some angles of this, such as Cresswell (2020), Ferreira et al. (2017), von Schönfeld and Ferreira (2022), and Nikolaeva et al. (2022) and others. Yet, while revealing important angles, they tend to remain generally within the duality between mobile and immobile options.

Research objectives

We hypothesize that to explore these questions requires taking a step back to try to transcend this duality between being mobile or immobile. That is, not to reject either concept or activity, but to frame these concepts – which we as transport and mobility planners are so familiar with – from a different standpoint and in congruence with a set

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of other ideas and concepts that might otherwise be discarded or escape our notice. We explore this by seeking a “third culture” approach to (im)mobility.

“Third cultures” are unique mixes of cultures that emerge from formative contact between two or more different “cultures”, defined as sets of guiding assumptions of what “is done” and “not done” that often deeply structure individual and collective lives (loosely inspired by Pollock et al., 2017). A given culture is frequently related to nationality but can just as well be a (supra- or sub-national) regional culture or a subculture (e.g. cyberculture, goth, gamer, hipster). “Third cultures” mix such cultures in various ways, and force awareness of difference – whether that difference is subsequently embraced, rejected, or ignored. For the concepts of immobility and mobility, taking a third culture approach thus means digging up baseline done/not done assumptions about these concepts and their various connotations and questioning them. This diversifies the landscape both of what the individual concepts mean, and what is perceived as their context.

We begin with an artistic trigger, here in textual form:

Are space and time
Unsurmountable?
Are development and time
Linear?
Are nature and nurture
Endless providers?

Is taking a bike or
Taking a car
Dictated by my country?
By my friends and family?
By my culture?

Is going to a shopping mall or
To the local grocery store or
To my garden for food
Dictated by my country?
By my friends and family?
By my culture?

Why do I think ten minutes,
Thirty minutes,
An hour,
Five hours,
Is too far to walk?

Methodological approach

The research presented here is part of a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action Post-Doctoral Fellowship called Mobile Worlds and funded by the European Union. Mobile Worlds aims to explore the power of “third cultures” for uncovering possibilities for sustainable mobility. Within this project, a series of workshops are taking place in Bergen, Norway, and Porto, Portugal. During the workshops, participants are asked to uncover their “third cultures” through artistic practices such as drawing, writing poetry/short texts, making collages, or taking photographs, and through sharing their ideas in this visual and tactical form as well as verbally with other participants. Making spatial references and connections during the workshops is encouraged, to address both globalized cultural aspects, and the connection of cultural identities with mobility practices. The project is also conducting two surveys – one with international experts, and one with the participants of workshops and interviews – and individual expert interviews.

Expected results

Since the project is still ongoing, it will only be possible to share preliminary and future expected results in April 2024. We expect to be able to share photos of some of the art made by workshop participants (anonymized) and

some reflections on the potential revealed by (i) the third culture approach to studying questions of mobility and transport and (ii) the artistic methodology adopted. We will also share some complementarities between the process and preliminary findings in Bergen and Porto.

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