

Social mobility goes on holiday: Rethinking space and communities through tourism mobilities

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of tourism mobilities and their interactions with place have always comprised of ambiguous change dimensions relative to the social, spatial, and socio-spatial mobility of both guest and host communities alike. While different forms of tourism can offer opportunities for empowerment, they can also limit opportunities in ways that are unevenly distributed throughout the social spectrum. The aim of this opening to the special issue is to critically explore the different spheres in which social and spatial mobilities are enacted, reproduced, challenged, and negotiated in the context of the sub-discipline of tourism geographies. It considers multiple perspectives, while focusing on how ‘social mobility goes on holiday’ in three different spheres: (1) consumer societies, (2) regimented mobilities, and (3) empowerment through tourism, making specific reference to gender issues. Against this backdrop, emerging themes are discussed with reference to the entanglement of contemporary crises, and the societal and spatial im/mobilisations of subaltern communities, refugees, lifestyle migrants and local collectives. In this way, the frameworks proposed in this special issue help to analyse current societal and spatial challenges, and offer comprehensive answers through processes of theorisation and empirical interaction.

KEYWORDS

Tourism mobilities; social mobility; place performance; mobility justice; post-pandemic transition

Introduction

Historical, geopolitical, economic, and physical reasons can combine to influence the actual or potential capacity for people to travel, including travel for touristic purposes. For some, travel is an unproblematic and sought-for aspect of life, and they benefit from ‘smooth corridors’ (Hannam et al., 2006: 12, quoting Lassen, 2006); while for others travel remains a longed-for state or a life-threatening challenge. Mimi Sheller’s call for ‘mobility justice’ is predicated on a critique of the juxtaposition of tourists and other mobile elites that are freely roaming, while migrants and those most in need can become abandoned or imprisoned at borders (Sheller, 2018). Engagement with the mobilities paradigm highlights other paradoxes present in the domain of travel and tourism. According to Minca and Oakes (2006), such paradigms may reside in the fact that tourism is chiefly a place-based experience. As such, it entails negotiations of meaning, identity, and Otherness in specific spaces, as intersubjective encounters tangle travellers with locals, when both find themselves the object of the other’s gaze (Urry, 2002). Importantly, however, tourism mobilities and the resulting performances relative to place can either renew existing conventions or provide opportunities to challenge them.

Tourism mobilities can confront the global flows of privilege in a more connected world, through the forced mobilities that arise when they touch down in destination spaces. For example, these can include the longer commuting times of local workers arising from the pressure of a visitor economy restructuring housing markets (Valente et al., 2023); the spatial tactics deployed by locals to develop daily routines in destination spaces constructed to reflect the significance of the mundane for visitors (Stors et al., 2019: 8); or the difficulties fulfilling aspirations to live a quiet ‘slow’ life when faced with the unsettling bodily power of night-time tourist mobilities (Eldridge, 2019). Mobilities, as movement practiced within different spatial ranges, according to velocities and rhythms, and mobilities that are desired or imposed in response to the appropriation and regulation of other mobilities, are strongly imbricated in social spheres and socio-political constructs that frequently make it untenable to embark on any conceptual discussion regarding place, communities, and social rights without addressing tourism (Hannam, 2009). In some contexts, and especially in situations of strong and rising pressure from tourism, characterised as overtourism in the recent tourism literature, tourism has become an ‘uninvited guest’ in urban politics and public perception, challenging community resilience (Cheer et al., 2019). This reality represents a significant deviation from the traditional

discourse that characterises tourism as a positive engine of diffused prosperity. Tourism mobilities and social mobility are further entangled in paradoxes concerning economic benefit. For instance, tourism mobilities can generate job opportunities, as is often the case in the tourist/migration nexus (Williams & Hall, 2000), but such jobs can be highly seasonal, starkly contrasting with the unbounded mobility of lifestyle migrants and digital nomads (Salazar, 2020). Tourism mobilities in certain destinations can also result in the expulsion of business that do not specifically cater for tourism (Russo, 2002), and by extension, the working-age populations that aspire to those jobs (Salerno & Russo, 2023).

Another paradox concerns authenticity, as tourism mobilities, while they offer a rationale for the preservation and valorisation of local culture, also induce commodification, adversely impacting the reproductive dimensions of cultural heritage (Alonso González, 2017; Córdoba Azcárate, 2020; Minoia, 2017). Such paradoxes relate to economic change and the dominant growth logic, and are associated with gentrification (Alonso González, 2017; Gravari-Barbas & Guinand, 2018; Minoia, 2017), dispossession (Devine & Ojeda, 2017), and environmental degradation (Gössling, 2007). In sum, tourism mobilities and social mobility draw from each other, but also clash when they become awkwardly entangled.

To introduce the contributions made by Altamirano (2022b), Di Matteo (2023), González-Domingo et al. (2023), Meneghello (2023), Shebanova et al. (2023) and Tomasella (2023), this editorial discusses the different ways in which social mobility ‘goes on holiday’, i.e. are enacted, reproduced, challenged and mixed-up in tourism geographies. To achieve this, we build on the critical literature explored in this introduction, revisiting the key contributions of the so-called ‘mobilities turn’ in the social sciences and the humanities (Cresswell, 2006, 2010; Hannam et al., 2006; Kaufmann, 2016; Kaufmann et al., 2004; Sheller & Urry, 2006), proposing three main spheres that elucidate the connections between tourism mobilities and social mobility: (1) consumer societies, (2) regimented mobilities, and (3) empowerment through tourism, making specific reference to gender issues. In this special issue, we consider these through the various lens of recent accounts of global crisis and im/mobilities, referencing global health pandemics, emerging conflicts, and climate disruption, as well as the influence of specific political and political-economic regimes on shaping, controlling, or exploiting tourism mobilities.

Socio-spatial mobility and the tourism sphere

Social mobility is generally described as a transformation in the distribution of resources or social positions of individuals, families or groups within a given social structure or network. It presupposes the existence of an unequal distribution of resources and is generally assessed against occupational or social status transitions among individuals (Falcon & Joye, 2021). Social mobility cannot be disconnected from spatial mobility, as both are concerned with structural change and social transformation, and both become dialectically enmeshed in quests for equality and justice (Soja, 2011). Both also involve movement, as this is embedded within time and space. The latter is conceived both in geographic terms (cities, regions, etc.) and in sociological terms (as in the case of ‘social space’). Lastly, social as well as spatial mobilities comprise different spheres of activity, resources, and institutional arrangements.

Considered from a diachronic perspective, tourism has always been ambiguous vis a vis social, spatial, and socio-spatial mobility. When observed at the macro level, it can be considered a powerful regional economic driver, but it is also a sector renowned for its low paid, unskilled and precarious employment (Aynalem et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2018). It is an all-encompassing consumer domain (Urry, 1990a), supporting the dispossession of socially fragile residents, while also massively impacting the environment (Judd & Fainstein, 1999b, 1999a). Nevertheless, access to tourism is also undeniably a way of underpinning mental and physical wellbeing with cross-cultural encounters (Crouch, 2007; Crouch et al., 2001), that increasingly benefits a larger strata of the population than formerly, due to a number of technological, social and political reasons. For instance, citizens of the former USSR had access to vacations (Koenker, 2013) but were largely unaware of tourism as a form of transnational, cosmopolitan mobility. Elsewhere, international tourist mobilities have been encouraged by a combination of declining travel costs and generally wealthier middle classes (Inglis, 2000), first in Europe and more recently in the so called BRICS countries, among others (for example MENA countries – Middle East and North Africa).

Indeed, tourism can inform labour geographies (Zampoukos & Ioannides, 2011), among social categories with limited access to improving working conditions, or in locales experimenting with creative ways to rethink the human-environment nexus. This can result in improved outcomes from tourism in terms of cultural inclusion, social innovation and possibly even

political activism, albeit in a paradoxical manner (Alcalde-González, Gálvez Mozo, & Valenzuela Bustos, 2021; Strauss, 2020). Hence, the intersection of social and physical mobility in tourism creates inequalities, as well as redistributive and generative paradoxes that can be worsened or even challenged by disruptive events that affect collective mobility. This is the case with migration linked to tourism sector jobs. Such migration represents an opportunity to enter job markets and become ‘fixed’ in a space that fulfils one’s aspirations for upwards social mobility (Zampoukos, 2018), and yet it can also be steeped in precariousness and labour exploitation, whereby workers become ‘stuck in tourism’ (Córdoba Azcárate, 2020).

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 crisis marked a turning point in this debate. Partly spread by tourist flows, which sanctioned new desires and tactics of mobility and emerging representations of subalternity (Tzanelli, 2021), the pandemic directly impacted the politics and practices of tourism mobilities, their rhythms, routes, directions and emotional resonance. Old and new im/mobilities were confronted, exacerbated, or enmeshed (Bissell, 2021), introducing new ways to problematise the nexus between social and spatial mobility, as performed through the tourism mobilities encountered by multifarious local communities.

The contributions to this special issue, first presented at the international seminar of the ATLAS Special Interest Group “Space Place Mobilities in Tourism,” entitled “Social Mobility Goes on Holiday: Tourist Im/mobilities, Conflicts and Empowerment” (held on May 27-28, 2021), brought to the fore some of these paradoxes, ontological shifts, and serendipitous alignments. At the apex of the COVID-19 crisis, drawing together related academic debate, this unprecedented event crossed disciplinary borders by asking contributors to address the politics of tourism mobilities, their rhythms, routes, directions, and feelings, and the emerging confrontations and juxtapositions between old and new im/mobilities, updating the nexus between social and spatial mobility. Thus, it welcomed novel analyses of how tourist spaces are (in the present) and were (in the past) entangled with exclusionary dynamics that generate social conflicts, and/or stories of inclusion and empowerment.

As noted above, and before elaborating upon the specific themes that emerge throughout the papers introduced in this special issue, we delve into three specific spheres where social and spatial mobilities emerged in a paradoxical way, including reference to temporal factors. The

selection of these spheres is inspired by the approach taken by the three keynote speakers at the conference.

Sphere 1: Social mobility goes on holiday in consumer societies

The right to travel has often been advocated by institutions that actively promote tourism as a source of economic gain (namely, the UNWTO, WTCC, ETOA to name a few) and is widely addressed in the tourism literature (Coles & Hall, 2011; Bianchi & Stephenson, 2013; Bianchi et al., 2020; Gascón, 2019). The longing for such a right reflects spatial mobility as an expression of social mobility. In contemporary post-industrial societies, social mobility is identified less as a change in social status and more as a consequence of greater access to consumption (Baudrillard, 1970). Tourism can be considered as a form of mobile consumption (Urry, 1990a, 1990b), one that is based on and contributes to the production of ‘mobility capital’ (Kaufmann et al., 2004). Reflecting the identity discourse of travel, to paraphrase Marco D’Eramo (2021), “no one wants to define him/herself as a tourist”. Nonetheless, while the ability to travel acquired social status throughout the 19th and 20th century, travel as a commodity has progressively become more affordable, losing its privileged connotations. Travel became democratised thanks to the transport revolution in the 19th century, that shortened travel times, and the communication revolution of the 20th century. This shift made it possible to meet at a distance, and the complex assemblage of ‘mobile lives’ in the 21st century, has challenged and transformed the everyday, ordinary lives (Elliott & Urry, 2010).

This relatively recent upsurge in travel raises the question of how, during the lockdown, did so many people put aside their desire to travel? Arguably, the chance to travel virtually without moving allowed tourists to put spatial mobility on hold during the lockdown, as public health management reinforced the ‘surveillance society’ (Tzanelli, 2021; Zuboff, 2019), curbing the need for touristic consumption (Tzanelli, 2021). While a few months after the first COVID-19 lockdown (March-April 2020), some questioned whether tourism would ever return to ‘business as usual’ (Lew et al., 2022), others stressed that such moments of crisis can offer spaces for major experiments in social discipline and normalisation, as well as the entrenchment of systems of exploitation (Abdelrahman, 2022; D’Eramo, 2020). Cautionary research suggested that instead of opening up the potential for innovative tourism development models with lower socio-ecological impacts, the ‘mobilities crisis’ might provoke the contrary, with

people returning to socially unequal and environmentally impactful forms of tourism after the crisis. A review of media debates and lived experiences during the post pandemic high season of 2023 confirms this concern (e.g., see Giuffrida, 2023; Williams, 2023).

Paradoxically, the preference for domestic destinations motivated by restrictions to mobility (Meneghello, 2023), accelerated the gentrification of certain destinations by attributing symbolic and economic value, and distinctiveness, to areas not previously identified as tourist hotspots. Regarding the political dimension, the Russia-Ukraine conflict did not interrupt Russian tourism, although it has probably reinforced the im/mobility nexus between those who are able to move (among these, the super-rich and international students), those who are grounded (military conscripts, people and territories in conflict zones), and those who integrate with tourism as a way of escaping the conflict (Duangdee, 2023).

Sphere 2: Social mobility goes on holiday in ‘the passport’s state’

Aside from health concerns, the principal factors that curtail the desire to travel are economic and political. Indeed, some commentators suggest that the fall of the socialist block in the early 1990s was partially motivated by the desire to travel (and consume), which required the lifting of restrictions on the citizens of countries formerly behind the ‘iron curtain’. Certainly, the ‘tourist age’ is associated with the development of consumer and capitalist society (D’Eramo, 2021; Hall, 1994). However, looking back at how travel and holidays were framed in the regimented world of the former Soviet Union can be useful, providing a less Western-centric perspective on tourism (Shebanova et al., 2023), explicating the ambiguities of tourism mobilities in that context.

In this regard, Diane Koenker's (2003, 2013) description of the ambiguities of tourism mobility in the ‘passport state’ (a term used to pinpoint the Soviet regime’s control of its citizens’ mobility through passport restrictions and incarcerations), accords with this. The passport has been extensively studied in its dual role as enabler and disabler of the ‘right to mobility’ (Rabbiosi & Wanner, 2020; Salter, 2003; Torpey, 2000). Throughout and close to the territory of the USSR, travel was an expression of tourism geopolitics (Córdoba Azcárate et al., 2021). Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, travel was not only closely controlled, but was also used to defend a national ideology and construct ‘the Soviet citizen’ (Koenker, 2013). For example, spa

tourism in Sochi was not conceptualized as a form of luxury or experiential tourist destination, but as a resort-style activity through which Soviet citizens could experience their own idea of 'good life.' While lucky Soviet vacationers travelled south by train, others moved northwards, forcibly displaced to other cities where they were obliged to work, or even to Gulags if they were guilty of not fully adhering to USSR political ideology. The organisation of tourism changed significantly between the 1920s to the mid-1980s, and while it was extremely controlled, it was nonetheless a symbol of status and consumerism as in the West, a sphere where the passport state allowed for the expression of certain forms of social and spatial agency and empowerment, albeit within pre-established rules and boundaries.

Sphere 3: Social mobility as empowerment through tourism (and its critiques)

Empowerment is fundamental to understanding the relationship between physical mobility and social mobility in tourism; not only from the perspective of tourists, but also from the range of stakeholders involved in the production of destination spaces. These include workers, entrepreneurs, average citizens, and the caretakers of a place's cultural and natural distinction, stratified along lines of gender, age, skills, nationality, and access to mobility (Gonzalez Domingo et al., 2023). Hence, empowerment in and through tourism can often assume perverse features. This is for instance what emerges from the analysis of the relationship between tourism and gender, as proposed by Stroma Cole (2018). International organisations, such as the UNWTO or the World Bank suggest tourism development empowers women. However, such empowerment is not only about regenerating themselves through tourism (Brown et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2018), but rather about redressing power imbalances and attaining autonomy. Cole (2018) proposes considering a critical narrative based on the three 'A's of empowerment': Autonomy, which is about women being able to decide for themselves; Agency, which involves having capacity to initiate actions and participate in public life; and Authority, meaning being listened to, looked up to, and respected. Tourism often impedes these three A's, while seeming to support them. For example, Lim and Bouchon (2021) found that women who perform as Airbnb hosts in Malaysia started conceiving of themselves as entrepreneurs, carving out a liminal space between the private and public spheres in a culturally acceptable manner, fostering the potential to advance their rights. Evidently, some form of social mobility and

empowerment can indeed result from contemporary forms of tourism. However, and conversely, the empowerment of some women within tourism may disempower others through disinvestment in previously preferred sectors. Hazel Tucker's work on the growth of tourism in Cappadocia, central Turkey (Tucker, 2014) has demonstrated how the increasing demand for tourism in rural, and mainly agricultural areas, has, on one side, provided more room for paid jobs for women, but on the other hand, has moved them away from the traditional agricultural activities that were fundamental to the food security of the area. Finally, there is a need to understand the relationship between tourism empowerment and gender in intersectional and trans-scalar dimensions, through more refined approaches that address how different mobilities engage with each other in what can sometimes be challenging and exclusionary ways.

Emerging themes

The contributions in this special issue interrogate and integrate the three proposed spheres, connecting with them through a diversity of themes.

Subaltern communities and their im/mobilisation

As touched on in the previous section, tourism has been cited as promoting empowerment for vulnerable groups, thereby driving upwards social mobility (Sphere 3). However, the notion of empowerment has been used simplistically by some tourism stakeholders frequently without considering the associated paradoxes. Drawing on previous research that investigated the material agencies and networks involved in slum tourism in depth (Altamirano, 2022a), Altamirano (2022b) tracks the legitimisation of subaltern spaces, as they progress from discourse, to material practice and eventually rational knowledge informing policy reforms. There is no argument that the process of returning the dignity and rights of Brazilian slum communities is fully empowering them, as Altamirano's work provides meaningful insights into the mechanisms through which tourism mobilities can become entwined with radical turns in social mobility in highly contested and polarised spaces. The role of new media, democratising access to world- and place-making among grassroots communities and influencers, is highlighted as contributing to the diffusion of cognitive capitalism, while also

opening breeches in that reproductive system. Similarly, Di Matteo's (2023) analyses of the practices of memorialisation enacted by volunteer tourists in Lesbos (Greece) and Lampedusa (Italy) reveal how volunteers use their social and mobility 'capital' to establish official and unofficial sites of remembrance concerning migrants' crossings of the Mediterranean Sea. The making of refugee memoryscapes is however only partially, and possibly not at all, empowering to migrants. Because refugees have limited freedom to move on the islands, they are excluded from their own memoryscapes. Refugees are also scarcely involved in the construction of memorial sites by volunteers, meaning their voices are involuntarily silenced.

Dwelling-in-motion: residents', migratory and lifestyle mobilities

The 'tourist age' is one in which "everybody is a tourist," at least potentially (Hall, 2015), despite a reluctance to admit it (D'Eramo, 2021). In this context, i.e., consumer societies (Sphere 1), the lines between daily, recreational and tourist landscapes are continuously blurred, as demonstrated by Meneghello (2023) in her research during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020-2021 in the Venetian region of Italy where she examined participatory mapping processes that georeferenced significant tourist landscapes to demonstrate the productive potential of diverse mobilities, bodily presences and interactions in/through/with these landscapes. The adoption of a dwelling-in-motion analytics (Rabbiosi, 2021; Russo, 2023; Sheller & Urry, 2006) facilitated investigation of situated and micro mobilities and practices within and beyond neighbouring landscapes, providing an original way to describe the emergence of proximity tourism in the context of a crisis. The same concept of 'dwelling in motion' could be used to reference Shebanova, Duncan and Blasco Franch's (2023) contribution on lifestyle migration, which focused on young Russian adults who had decided to move away from their country, highlighting how previous tourism experiences had been central in their decision to forge specific mobility-oriented lifestyles. This work is not only significant for its clarification of the migration-tourism nexus and the connected social and physical mobilities, but also for the specific sample analysed, i.e., the new generation of Russian tourists that have only recently been exposed to transnational tourism, aligning with mechanisms of social mobility in the passport state (Sphere 2). However, it is anticipated that the mobilities defined may be significantly impacted further following the Russian-Ukraine war, and the consequential

physical limitations to travel, and changing imaginaries and attitudes concerning Russian tourism and migration.

The agency of 'stuck' collectives in times of (tourist) immobilisation

Social mobility and tourism geographies in the tourist age are not otherwise disconnected from the paradoxes that concern the limits to freedom and control that also exist in consumer societies (Sphere 1), and totalitarian regimes (Sphere 2). This became more evident during the tourism crisis connected with the COVID-19 pandemic. Performing a critical inquiry of Venice's night-time economy and nightlife immobilisations during COVID-19, Tomasella (2023) demonstrates that nighttime activities in a quintessential tourist destination form part of a residual, territorialised social landscape of resistance to the hegemonic transformation of the city's sociocultural landscape, unfolding in spaces that are liberated by the tidal waves of visitors who leave the city in large numbers after their daily transits in the city. While his discussion of crisis-related night im/mobilities point to the inadequacy and uninformed character of regulations applied during the pandemic, his empirical work with stakeholders also critiques of the failures within the night-time economy network to provide a sustainable offer – hinting at governance issues, and at the perception of nocturnal curfew policies as reifying surveillance tools.

In their study, González, Russo and Pastor Gosálbez (2023) consider another kind of collective that became 'stuck' by the COVID-19 crisis – that of tourist workers in Barcelona (another archetypical tourist destination). Their analysis traces a long tale of vulnerability of this collective to the growth of the tourist city (Valente et al., 2023), addressing the disruptions in social mobility, at its interface with economic activity. That is, it acknowledges the temporary zeroing of tourism mobilities in Barcelona, affecting personal lives, especially when considering residential options that range from forced displacement to immobilisation (Cordoba Azcarate, 2020). However, the value of this article proceeds from it bringing out the power of agency, showing workers built on adaptation and serendipitous arrangements, spatial mobility, and solidarity and how all this contributes to social mobility and resilience in times of crisis, connecting to issues of empowerment (Sphere 3).

All the articles in this special issue are derived from studies conducted in 2020-2022, during the COVID-19 crisis. The case studies absorbed the nuances and juxtapositions that the pandemic landscapes were offering for scrutiny, and in line with what a series of scholars were announcing at the beginning of the crisis, shifting from anticipatory to active reflections (Filep et al., 2022). Significantly, the methodological approaches also needed to be adapted to fit the emergent context. In some cases, not only did fieldwork have to be developed differently from what had originally been planned, for instance, conducting interviews online or gathering secondary open-source data and digital texts. Additionally, the research questions also had to be reformulated in such a way as to take in new forms of exclusion, immobilisation and the serendipitous reconnections that emerged. More importantly, in some instances, developing research during the COVID-19 crisis clarified how crises have the potential to shift the nature of the entanglement between social and physical tourism mobilities.

Conclusions

While the world appears to have overcome the COVID-19 crisis at the time of writing, what has been learned from that experience may be used to recall the vulnerability of tourism mobilities to shocks, such as natural hazards and climate change, terrorist events and wars. All these 'crises' question both social and physical mobilities, through the interplay with tourism mobilities. The aggression towards Ukraine from the Russian Federation and the warfare that followed is a clear example of changes to mobilities. Some tourism flows have been significantly reduced consequently (for instance Ukrainian and Russian flows to international destinations) and have been reconfigured along the migration-tourism nexus (with numerous Russian or Ukrainian citizens trying to escape the war by means of tourist-related or other migratory opportunities, such as study abroad opportunities). New tourist im/mobilities are drawn also in war time, e.g., from the immobility of conscripted subjects vs. the hypermobility of the superrich. Therefore, it is important to continue thinking in terms of the politics of tourism mobilities, and their construction through complicated and diverse social and spatial relations.

The insights offered in this special issue represent a step forward in terms of inquiry into the politics of tourism at the intersection of social and spatial mobilities. Paraphrasing Tim Cresswell (2010), tourism mobilities are both productive of social relations that involve the

production and distribution of power, and produced by these same power-inflated relationships. In particular, this special issue unveils new ways of understanding the relationship between space and communities by acknowledging the relational entanglement of social and spatial mobility and tourism. Both as a field of theorisation and empirical engagement to design sustainable options, the frameworks applied contribute to analyses of contemporary societal and spatial challenges, and proposing a post pandemic transition to a more sustainable future that acknowledges the significance of global citizenship.

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