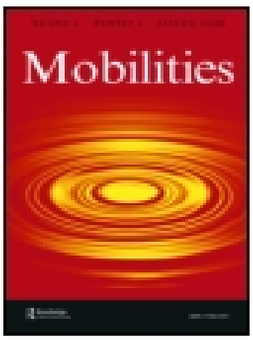

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Existential vs. essential mobilities: insights from before, during and after a crisis

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ABSTRACT

While situations of crisis are a cause of great distress for those affected, particularly the most vulnerable ones, they offer scholars unique opportunities to study people and society because such circumstances intensify existing processes, revealing what works well and where there are problems. The 2020 coronavirus outbreak was not any different. From a mobility studies perspective, one of the most striking things that occurred during the global pandemic were the changed patterns of who and what moved when, where, and how. Authorities across the planet (re-)classified the most common mobilities along 'essential' and 'non-essential' axes, the latter category temporarily being restricted or even forbidden. This article offers a critical assessment of such crisis regimes of (im)mobility, taking Belgium and its capital city Brussels as an illustrative case study. I reflect on the mobility implications of COVID-19 mitigation measures for citizens and others, highlighting how the condition of lockdown led to (sometimes unexpected) alterations in people's daily mobilities. The anthropological analysis shows that an exceptional situation, such as the one witnessed in 2020, clearly brings to the fore which types of (im)mobility are valued by various stakeholders in society, which ones are discursively framed as essential (mainly from a socio-economic perspective) and which ones are experienced as existential (contributing to people's general well-being).

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'The essential does not change'.
Waiting for Godot, Samuel Beckett

*

'To exist is to change'.
Creative Evolution, Henri Bergson

Something that is deemed essential is not only considered absolutely necessary but also extremely important. Existential, in contrast, refers to the existence (or 'aliveness') of something. The subtle distinction between the two concepts goes back to age-old discussions in theology and philosophy, particularly in Europe, whether essence or existence are foundational for ontology – the nature of being (Belo 2012; Morewedge 1982). To oversimplify the at times heated debates, essentialists believe that abstract ideas and static structures with set characteristics determine what something or someone is (cf. 'being') whereas existentialists prioritise the flux and dynamic agency of concrete experiences that characterise and constitute unique individuals (cf. 'becoming'). These key philosophical notions have been applied to the most diverse fields, including mobility. In this article, I disentangle how the 2020 coronavirus crisis nicely laid bare contemporary

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configurations of essential and existential mobilities. However, before doing so, it is important to set the theoretical scene by defining and contextualizing the key concepts.

Essential and existential mobilities . . . and crisis

I use the term 'mobility' in the context of this article to refer to human movements that are infused with both self-ascribed and societally attributed meanings (Salazar 2018c). People are moving all the time, but not all movements are equally meaningful or life-shaping (both for those who move and those who stay put). As soon as socio-cultural processes of meaning-making are at play, there are issues of power involved. Which forms of mobility are considered 'essential' within a society, for instance, depends very much on those actors who have the (legal) power to label them as such. From a macro-societal perspective, the case of the European Union is illustrative. Since its inception, going all the way back to the 1957 Treaty of Rome, the EU-idea has been based on four pillars, commonly known as the four freedoms: (1) the free movement of goods, (2) the free movement of capital, (3) the free movement of services, and (4) the free movement of persons. These four types of mobility are considered essential by EU policy makers because they form the necessary cornerstones of the EU Single Market and the common currency, the Euro.

Within the EU, the free movement of people is by far the most difficult principle to implement (Abram et al. 2017). The right for people to move freely is linked to the rights represented by the status of EU citizenship. The original free movement of workers (labour) was only widened with the 1992 Maastricht Treaty to a more general free movement of people, including limited rights for 'non-economically active' citizens. Even if the movement of people within the EU is deemed essential from a politico-economic perspective, there are marked differences and mobility inequalities within and between member countries, and between EU citizens and 'others' (so-called 'third-country nationals'). Every situation that has been labelled as a 'crisis' – be it the 2009 European debt crisis, the 2015 European 'migrant crisis', Brexit (the process of withdrawal of the UK from the EU), or the 2020 coronavirus pandemic – reignites the discussion surrounding the 'essence' of the free movement of people (and which categories of people) for the EU project. This is because each crisis is perceived as a potential threat to previously negotiated and agreed upon mobility structures and procedures.

'Crisis' has become one of the most significant buzzwords of our time, inside as well as outside academia. There are many different understandings of the term, both lexical and conceptual (Holton 1987; Koselleck 2006). Etymologically, the notion refers to a time of intense difficulty or danger but also to a moment when crucial decisions must be made to address the situation. The latter is related to the contemporary conceptualisation of crisis as both disruptive and generative (in the sense of leading to structural or epistemological transformation). However, as Janet Roitman points out, 'the term 'crisis' no longer clearly signifies a singular moment of decisive judgment; we now presume that crisis is a condition, a state of affairs, an experiential category' (2014, p. 16). Claims to crisis often serve no more radical change, but rather the affirmation of long-standing (essential) principles that structure society. In other words, the rhetoric of crisis is not necessarily linked to a state of exception but rather 'business as usual' (at least for those in power), crisis itself becoming an advanced economic or political technology or strategy.

As far as mobility is concerned, situations labelled as 'crisis' bring societal categorisations such as essential versus non-essential mobilities, which usually remain unspoken, explicitly to the fore. During the four-year period from US entry into World War II to the peace agreement with Japan in 1945, for example, 'Americans drastically reduced personal travel, drove cars less, shared them when they did, walked and bicycled more, and used bus and rail transport at levels never before or since equalled' (Flamm 2006, p. 71). The American public at the time was convinced of making these drastic changes to their habitual mobility patterns for the successful prosecution of the war, which involved the strategic reallocation of resources. This behavioural change happened through obligatory, co-operative, and voluntary programmes that instructed people which transport mobilities

were essential (in the eyes of the authorities). The fact that an elaborate propaganda campaign was necessary shows that the understanding of what is essential from a macro-economic perspective may be quite different from the meanings attributed to mobilities at the scale of the individual.

To stay with the USA as an example, non-essential mobilities are officially termed 'discretionary travel' – to be filled in freely, at the discretion of the individual. According to the National Household Travel Survey, the authoritative source on the travel behaviour of the US public, this includes mobilities in the context of shopping, family or personal business, visits with family or friends, social or recreational gatherings, and medical or dental purposes – as opposed to essential trips for work and school, which are characterized as taking place at a fixed location at scheduled times.[1] The term gained prominence in the public domain in the context of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, when the White House advised avoiding all discretionary travel.[2] Of course, not every US citizen would agree that all the itemized discretionary mobilities are unnecessary or non-essential.

The degree to which one (dis)agrees with such mobility categorisations gives away much of one's social positionality, including age. Indeed, what are considered meaningful mobilities on the more personal level varies significantly throughout the life course. For children, the daily trip to school and back home may be important, for the working population the commute in relation to their job is crucial. Once retired, the situation changes once again. As Charles Musselwhite writes,

> 'Travel and mobility for older people has typically focussed on the practical benefits to the individual, for example, in meeting utilitarian needs of shopping, appointments and staying connected to family and friends. However, research has hinted that travel for its own sake, to get out and about and feel and experience mobility, may be just as important.' (2017, p. 49)

That certain types of mobility experiences can contribute to general well-being is actually true for all ages (Salazar 2018b). This brings us to the notion of existential mobilities.

Considerations concerning existential mobility are mostly situated on the micro-level because of the focus on individual experience and a first-person point of view. Not surprisingly, phenomenology has been very influential here. A basic phenomenological insight is that the human is, above all, a 'moving being' (Farnell 2012). Although the human body has been predominantly studied and theorized in its immobile (static) state, the lived experiences of and values attributed to physical movement are important ways by which people express their adaptation to, and understanding of, personal, social, or environmental change. It is through movement, and the accompanying kine(sthe)tic-tactile sensations, that we find and make meaning in our lives (Sheets-Johnstone 2011). It is no exaggeration to state that our body-in-motion is the quintessential medium for knowing the world in which we live, enriching us both cognitively and existentially (Edensor 2010).

Whenever the concept of existential mobility is used, it is somehow related to the quality of life, directly coupled or not with the quality of movement involved. The intricate connection between movement and existence is also evident in the many metaphors people resort to when trying to articulate the feeling of *moving on* (in the way they desire and imagine) and of being in control of their lives. This is related to 'the 'forward moving' quality of living towards the future and having meaningful projects' (Todres and Galvin 2010, p. 3). Stated differently, 'the essence of mobility lies in all the ways in which we are called into the existential possibilities of moving forward with time, space, others, mood and our bodies' (Todres and Galvin 2010, p. 5). When people feel well, they imagine and sense that they are 'moving' well. A 'good life', then, presupposes a form of imaginary mobility, a sense that one is 'going somewhere' in one's life. Based on research among migrant communities, Ghassan Hage (2009) argues that it is when people do not have this imaginary sense of existential mobility that they start contemplating actual physical mobility. The underlying feeling is 'existential in that it does not necessarily coincide with lack of social mobility' (Hage 2009, p. 98). In other words, 'movement is an existential cry against immobility' (Silva 2015, p. 146).

A clear difference, then, between how the concepts of essence and existence are commonly employed in the context of human mobility is the following. The idea of essential mobilities is mostly used at a macro-social level, whereby the movements under consideration seem not to be valued as

such but because they serve a purpose that is considered crucial in contemporary society. The most obvious example is the organization of commuter travel, so that people can move smoothly between their home and workplace(s), which is vital to keep the economy going. Existential mobilities, in contrast, are discussed mostly at the level of the individual (as if this were solely a personal interest or responsibility). Both concepts thus reveal different, and at times conflicting, processes of making mobilities meaningful. The fine line between essential and existential mobility is not always that clear (and is often deliberately left fuzzy). It is in exceptional circumstances, such as situations of crisis, that the (dis)connections between essential and existential mobilities, and the way they are interpreted by various stakeholders in society, become more pronounced.

A situation such as the one surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic not only illustrates how existing processes are intensified, revealing what works well and where there are serious problems, including mobility inequalities (Fröhlich 2017; Salazar and Glick Schiller 2014). It also shows that a demanding situation can lead to reflections on and changed understandings of what is commonly accepted as essential and existential mobility. In what follows, I briefly sketch the global context of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, from a mobility studies perspective. I illustrate the conceptual points made about essential and existential mobilities with a case study of Belgium and its capital Brussels, the city where I live and in which I was quarantined throughout the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis. Because of the national lockdown, the research on which this article is based was by necessity limited to desktop research, including a systematic scanning of relevant local news media and commentaries on social media. The part on the mobility situation in the city of Brussels was enriched by limited (participant) observation and short Internet-based interviews with various local stakeholders. The reflections on walking, running, and cycling draw partially on ongoing ethnographic research across Belgium on the importance of leisure mobilities.[3]

COVID-19: chronicle of a crisis

> 'What renders the current situation a "crisis" is our response, not the event'.
>
> (Bilgin 2017, p. 56)

SARS-CoV-2, the virus at the basis of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), was first found in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. On 30 January 2020 the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a 'Public Health Emergency of International Concern', but without issuing any practical recommendations with regard to what to do to address the situation (Flahault 2020). On 11 March, the coronavirus disease was officially a pandemic. The rapid global diffusion of the virus reconfirmed, once again, how interconnected the various parts of our planet have become through (hyper) mobility.[4] This condition is partially a consequence of what Xiang Biao (2020) calls the 'mobility economy', whereby the circulation of goods and the movement of people have arguably become more essential to the global economy than assembly lines in factories. Although migrants are often scapegoated when things to wrong, also this time around, cross-border mobility has become a more generalized feature across societies. Biao's (2020) comparison between the handling of the situation at the time of the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak, singling out migrants, versus the 2020 COVID-19 crisis, targeting the whole population, is quite revealing in this respect. Especially tourists and business travellers helped the rapid cross-border spread of COVID-19. Upon realizing this, scholars started (self)questioning both the essential and the existential qualities attributed to (hyper)mobility: 'it is perhaps the time to rethink whether all the trips that we have become accustomed to making in the past decade are essential. It is also a time for us to reflect on whether the happiness of our life really depends on so many travels' (Shi and Liu 2020).

COVID-19 served as a cautious reminder of 'the extent to which pathogens have political efficacy that disrupts states and territories and differentially affects the mobility of different people' (Du Plessis 2018, p. 396). States and supra-governmental entities alike took mitigation measures to

control the spread of the coronavirus. I focus here on the mobility-related (re)actions, particularly those framing mobilities in terms of 'essential' (allowed, even if restricted) versus 'non-essential' (temporarily suspended). Among others, massive travel restrictions and border controls were imposed.[5] These included: (1) the overall or partial closing of borders, (2) the total or partial suspension of flights, (3) specific travel restrictions banning the entry for people coming from specific countries or regions, and (4) different measures (e.g. quarantine or self-isolation and visa measures) (UNWTO 2020). Never in history has global mobility been affected and restricted in such an extreme manner. The situation reconfirmed how vulnerable the travel and transport sector is to crises, this time an infectious disease (next to natural disasters, terrorist attacks, political instability, industrial accidents, wars, economic recession, etc.).

To strengthen the reporting of infectious disease outbreaks while at the same time to deter other countries from imposing unwarranted travel restrictions, the International Health Regulations (WHO 2006) were established by the World Health Organization (Habibi et al. 2020). This legally binding agreement between 196 countries is important because research shows that 'democracies with weak health infrastructure – those that stand to gain the most from imposing barriers during an outbreak because they are particularly vulnerable to a negative public reaction – are more likely than others to impose barriers and to do so quickly' (Worsnop 2017, p. 365). On the complex relationship between travel restrictions and infectious disease outbreaks in general, Ria Vaidya and colleagues write:

> 'According to the World Health Organization (WHO), restricting the movement of people and goods during outbreaks is ineffective in most contexts, and may instead stifle the delivery of aid and technical support in addition to the social and economic repercussions for affected countries … Nevertheless, unwarranted measures interfering with travel are common … The IHR directly bind States, but minimizing the impact on travel in outbreaks also needs an understanding of the role of non-State actors including the media, social media, travel and tourism industries and the public.' (Vaidya et al. 2020, pp. 2-3)

In the case of the COVID-19 outbreak, mobility restrictions were implemented across the globe. The various lockdowns and curfews, mostly nationwide, went under various names and conditions.[6] In Malaysia, for instance, the stay-at home order was tellingly called the 'Movement Control Order'. As part of their crisis regimes of (im)mobility, authorities produced lists of services that they considered 'essential'. Many of these were related to or included elements of transport – of essential people and of essential goods (e.g. food and medical supplies) – and the corresponding infrastructure (e.g. public transport and airports). Essential people included those working in health care and public safety, as well as caregivers, logistics workers, supermarket staff, and emergency repair and maintenance service personnel. It is, of course, quite ironic that most of the jobs labelled as 'essential' are situated in the lower-income bracket.

The 2020 global pandemic revealed, quite sharply, the many existing (im)mobility inequalities. As part of 'panic mobility' (Cohen 2020), in many countries the super wealthy used private jets or yachts to flee to specially equipped shelters and second or even third homes in remote places.[7] Although related, panic mobility is not to be confused with 'survival migration' (Betts 2013), a term referring to (more permanent) migration resulting from a range of crises which pose an existential threat (e.g. environmental disaster, livelihood collapse, or state fragility) and for which there is no local remedy. Fleeing virus hotspots in general involved trying to avoid detection, for instance by taking travel connections without informing authorities of the route taken, by masking symptoms, by lying about recent travel or, simply, by breaking the cordon sanitaire. Even though people in all income groups were travelling on average less than they did before the pandemic during the period of lockdown, the wealthier population was staying put the most, especially during the workweek. Staying and working at home was obviously not an option for those who were supplying essential services (see above) for the rest of the population.

Through social control and various degrees of (high-tech) surveillance and police intervention, non-essential mobilities in the public space and, in some countries, also in private spaces, were heavily monitored. In other words, mobilities, at least those of the 'wrong' kind – non-essential ones,

as defined by the authorities – became suspicious. On social media, multiple 'bad' examples were widely shared and commented upon. The imposed measures of physical distancing in the public sphere – keeping a certain distance from others and avoiding gathering in large groups – also conflicted with the general concept of public transportation. The switch to limited service plans ravaged the finances of transport systems, both private (airlines, cruise ships, etc.) and public (bus, metro, rail, etc.), within days (Surico 2020). Reflecting on this situation, scholars commented that 'a new balance may need to be found between individual freedoms, inequalities and the unfair distribution of mobility opportunities, and the sustainability of mobile transport and logistics systems' (Favell and Recchi 2020).

Because the virus containment measures limited and constrained people in their daily (micro) mobilities, many became more acutely aware of the importance and value of physical movement. They shared on social media how the feeling of incarceration, even within the comfort of their own houses, was driving them crazy (Torales et al. 2020). Others, such as computer gamers, enjoyed the extra time to explore novel virtual worlds, while remaining physically immobile (Marston and Kowert 2020). Among sportspeople, online courses and cycling and running programmes that enable one to interact, train, and compete in a virtual world (e.g. Zwift) quickly gained popularity. In many countries, COVID-19 lockdowns were only partial. Where people were still allowed to go out for a walk, to run or to cycle – even if limited to a certain perimeter around the house or a certain period of the day – they did so (in larger numbers than is usual). To disentangle what these trends exactly mean in terms of essential and existential mobility, I zoom in on the COVID-19 crisis in my own country, Belgium.

Belgian (im)mobilities in times of corona

SARS-CoV-2 officially entered Belgium on 3 February 2020, when one among nine Belgian citizens who were evacuated from Wuhan tested positive (but was asymptomatic). The coronavirus stared spreading rapidly when thousands of Belgians returned from their spring break holidays the last week of February. Many had gone skiing in northern Italy, which turned out to be one of the most heavily affected regions in Europe. Like other countries, Belgian authorities took coronavirus mitigation measures – even though the country had no federal government since the elections of 26 May 2019 (until 1 October 2020). The first action, taken on 6 March, involved forbidding school trips to Italy. On 11 March, the first COVID-19 fatality was registered. One day later, the National Security Council declared that it was entering a phase of crisis management and that the country would go into 'lockdown light'.[8] Despite the fact that COVID-19 hit the country particularly hard,[9] compared to other countries Belgian's virus containment measures were situated somewhere in the middle in terms of stringency.[10] They were published as a ministerial decree on 18 March, updated on 23 March, and revised twice every month since then. On 20 March, the external borders of the country closed, forbidding all non-essential border traffic. The virus peaked during the first week of April. On 24 April, the National Security Council, advised by a group of experts, started preparing the 'exit strategy' from the lockdown. From 4 May onwards, physical distance measures were progressively relaxed (until August, when infection rates started increasing again rapidly).

For the first time in history, the EU closed all its external borders. Between 23 March and 8 June (and 15 June for travel outside the EU), non-essential human mobilities to and from Belgium were prohibited.[11] However, border restrictions were not the same for everybody (Salazar 2018a). Any person with Belgian nationality, long-term residents in Belgium and people with legal residence in Belgium were allowed to travel to Belgium, but they had to remain in self-isolation 'at home' and were prohibited from working outdoors for 14 days.[12] These conditions did not apply to cross-border workers (coming primarily from France but also from the Netherlands), seasonal workers (mainly Eastern Europeans working in the agricultural and horticultural sector), drivers employed by professional transport companies, and persons who were making an 'essential journey' (as specified in the ministerial decree). In other words, a crisis such as the 2020 coronavirus pandemic is 'a perfect

opportunity for the state to put into practice one of the most distinctive characteristics of border regimes: its selective nature' (Amante and Rodrigues 2020, p. 2).

Border crossings in both directions remained possible on presentation of legitimate proof. Belgian citizens were repatriated from China, Japan, USA, Spain, Morocco, Tunisia, and Senegal. A special case was the Moroccan Belgians who had travelled to Morocco ahead of the Easter break and were stranded there when borders were closed due to the corona outbreak. Because of their dual citizenship, it took weeks before they could return to Belgium. During the lockdown period, around 20,000 Belgians were trapped abroad, mainly in Peru, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.[13] A Facebook group was created for these people to appeal for simple assistance and to stay in touch.[14] Within Belgium, on the other hand, other groups were stuck. With housing shelters saturated or shuttered, unhoused transmigrants (economic migrants from many different countries who are transiting Belgium on their way to the UK) had to camp in parks and other outdoor places. They were rounded up by the police and forced to leave because they were ignoring the advice on social distancing (and many citizens were afraid that these people would be propagating the virus quickly). Fortunately, temporary lodging was eventually made available in vacant hotels.[15]

In order to guide the population in the correct application and interpretation of the coronavirus mitigation measures, the National Crisis Centre drew up guidelines on the practical application of the ministerial decrees.[16] These guidelines, which were revised repeatedly in more and more detail, mainly fleshed out the ban on gathering and the ban on non-essential mobilities – or the new (im)mobility regime that had been put in place (cf. Salazar and Glick Schiller 2014). All non-essential travel inside the country as well as abroad was forbidden, with an extensive list specifying the many 'essential' services considered necessary to keep (the economy of) the country running. In terms of mobility, this included: waste collection; police, army, and security personnel; freight and logistics; (public and private) personnel transport; livestock transport; cleaning, maintenance, and urgent repair services; postal and delivery services; rail, air, and maritime transport. Various holiday parks and cottages were temporarily used as accommodation for 'essential' employees of utility companies. There was criticism from police forces, who found the decreed measures too precise to be enforced correctly. Fundamental rights specialists, lawyers as well as activists concerned with human rights within the context of the EU, on the other hand, complained that the guidelines (without legal value) introduced more restrictive rules than the ministerial decrees themselves, for instance when it came to the freedom to move. The coronavirus measures in Belgium were not based on a state of emergency, because the Belgian Constitution does not allow suspension of rights. Instead, the basis for restricting freedom of movement was the legislation on civil security.

The public forum was dominated for a long time by heated symbolic discussions. One of these involved the question whether owners of second homes (predominantly at the Belgian coast) should be allowed to travel to and from their property. When these owners organized themselves and started threatening a class action lawsuit against the Belgian government for refusing them their right to use their property, the National Security Council lifted the ban – just in time for the long Ascension holiday weekend. While the media were dominated by such debates of high symbolic value, the precarious situation in which already vulnerable people were put because of the pandemic received much less attention. This example, among others, shows the power of influential lobby groups to have the authorities (re)define what counts as essential mobility. In general, 'essential' became a much-coveted label, sometimes at the cost of existentially more important matters.

'Essential journeys', as essential mobilities for citizens were called in Belgium, encompassed the following: (1) professional travel (including commuting and the mobilities of volunteers in the context of their activities for crucial sectors and essential services); (2) necessary travel (doctor's visit, shopping, travel to the post office, bank, pharmacy, petrol station, or assistance to persons in need, parents travelling to their children's day-care, all travel in the context of a legal obligation, charging a budget meter, driving lessons etc.); and (3) walks and physical activities in the open air that do not involve physical contact (respecting the rules of physical distancing).[17] At the height of the crisis, particularly the month of April, a radical alteration in habitual mobility patterns became

Table 1. Mobility changes compared to baseline (Period: 26 March – 7 May).

	Belgium	Flanders	Wallonia	Brussels
Retail & Recreation	−57%	−54%	−53%	−73%
Transit Stations	−56%	−56%	−51%	−69%
Workplaces	−52%	−50%	−52%	−65%
Grocery & Pharmacy	−13%	−6%	−19%	−24%
Parks	+19%	+29%	+0%	+13%
Residential	+22%	+21%	+21%	+26%

clear (Aloi et al. 2020). The 'COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports' (Google 2020) provided by Google give a rough idea of what changed where (see Table 1).

These reports are based on aggregated and anonymised cell phone location data, which were compared to a baseline (the 5-week period of 3 January until 6 February 2020). The categories used include the following: (1) retail and recreation (restaurants, cafes, shopping centres, theme parks, museums, libraries, and movie theatres); (2) transit stations (public transport hubs such as subway, bus, and train stations); (3) workplaces (places of work); (4) grocery and pharmacy (grocery markets, food warehouses, farmers markets, specialty food shops, drug stores, and pharmacies); parks (national parks, public beaches, marinas, dog parks, plazas, and public gardens) and (5) residential (places of residence).

Table 1 shows that all mobility trends, except one, were more pronounced in the Brussels Capital Region, the most populated area of the country. Most of the places falling under the rubric 'Retail & Recreation' were closed, as were many 'Workplaces'. People had to buy their groceries in supermarkets since smaller shops and markets were not allowed to open. Because there were often long queues, people limited the frequency of their visits to supermarkets. Instead of commuting, many started teleworking from home. Schools and universities were closed, thus also kids and students stayed at home. Consequently, the various public transport systems, which were running on limited service plans, were meant to be used only by those with designated essential jobs. In other words, essential mobilities during the coronavirus crisis were very much defined by the government's crisis regimes of (im)mobility, enforced through decrees and explained via ever-changing guidelines.

It is important to point out that most people I talked to did not indicate that they were missing their daily commute to school or work, but rather the fact of not being able to be at school or at the workplace. In other words, what people considered 'essential' in this context was the activity and social contact at school or work, not the mobility experience to those places. In what follows, however, I want to show that the situation of partial lockdown did make people reflect on *how* they do their (officially sanctioned) essential mobilities, suggesting that there may be (overlooked) existential aspects to this.

'Mens sana in corpore sano'

The Google data indicating increased mobility in 'Parks' may seem somewhat surprising, certainly when comparing with other countries. However, remember that during their 'lockdown light' Belgians were still allowed to walk, run, or cycle outside their homes, under strict conditions and respecting the decreed rules of physical distancing. As a result, many people took to the parks and the forests.[18] This trend was less pronounced in Brussels because some parks had been closed in this region of the country where the few green areas available are not well distributed (and it was not allowed to travel to those areas by car during the lockdown). In Wallonia, the greenest region of the country, the lockdown situation was similar to the baseline.

A research by Polar, the Finnish manufacturer of GPS sports watches, confirmed the overall increase in leisure mobilities.[19] Drawing on aggregated data from its Belgian users, Polar noticed that Belgians walked, ran and biked 40% more in April 2020 than in February and that these activities happened mostly outdoors. Even considering the difference in climate between the two months, the

change is remarkable. In neighbouring France, where the lockdown measures were much stricter, for example, outdoor sports activities went down. A similar study by running brand Asics, based on data from their Runkeeper tracking app in 12 countries, also showed a general increase of physical exercise during the lockdown period.[20] Data from Fitbit, in contrast, showed a slight decrease in number of daily steps registered by their step tracker users in Belgium during the month of March.[21] These different data seem to indicate that people who were already seriously engaged in physical activity before the lockdown (which explains their use of a GPS sports watch) moved even more than usual, whereas people who need an extra push to be physically active (and use a step tracker as a handy motivational tool) moved less. In support of this interpretation are polling data from Brussels, where about a third of the people polled reported to have stopped all physical activity during the lockdown (and most people belonging to this group do not use devices such as GPS sports watches or step trackers).[22]

Whereas the other alterations in habitual mobility patterns were mostly dictated by the coronavirus mitigation measures, the changes in leisure mobilities are interesting to analyse a little more in-depth in the context of this article. The Belgian government not only allowed people to walk, run, or cycle (according to the ministerial decree) but even recommended and encouraged them to do so (as mentioned in the guidelines). It is noteworthy that these outdoor physical activities were included in the officially sanctioned list of so-called 'essential journeys'. From the perspective of the authorities, the motto was very much one of '*mens sana in corpore sano*' (a healthy mind in a healthy body), an idea that is not entirely new (Carpenter 2013). Of course, the preoccupation for the physical as well as mental and psychological well-being of the population was largely instrumental, in the sense that it was in the economy's interest to keep people as healthy as possible.

However, many people had existential reasons to walk, run, or cycle outdoors. For them, it simply felt good to be able to do this while they had to spend so much time confined inside the walls of their house of apartment. This adds an extra dimension to Hage's (2009) understanding of existential mobility mentioned before. The physical mobility he describes as a reaction to people feeling 'stuck' is not to be understood solely in an abstract or symbolic way (e.g. migrating elsewhere) but can be taken quite literally, in the sense that people want to 'feel' movement. To experience physical movement, people are well served by active (self-powered) mobilities such as walking, running, or cycling. That people felt the need for aerobic exercise to feel good in times of corona is not very surprising. The same could be said for the crave for 'comfort foods' (high in sugar, salt, and fat) or the desire for more sex. All these activities make our body release endorphin (endogenous morphine), a neurochemical that boosts mental health, decreases sensitivity to stress and pain, and can even make us feel euphoric. Hence the expression 'runner's high' or 'endorphin rush', the enhanced sense of well-being associated with long-duration rhythmic aerobic activity.

To a certain extent, the outdoor walking, running, or cycling Belgians engaged in during the lockdown acted like a natural defence mechanism against the elevated levels of stress they were under. Not surprisingly, 78% of the runners questioned in the Asics study stated that being active during the coronavirus pandemic made them feel 'saner and in control'. It is not just about the leisure mobilities as such. The environments in which people practice these activities matter, too. Existing scholarship has focused on the role of 'green' (and, to a lesser extent 'blue') landscapes for the practice of physical activities such as walking and running (Howe and Morris 2009; Lund 2012; Qviström 2016), particularly remote areas of natural beauty, with mountains having a special attraction for people seeking a sense of deeper (re)connection and awareness. In times of crisis, too, moving within a natural environment seems to have a 'healing' effect (Bell et al. 2018; Gatrell 2013), which helps explaining the sudden rise in popularity of outdoor walking, running and cycling in 'natural' environments during the pandemic.

In sum, in Belgium outdoor physical activities in times of corona were considered both essential mobilities (from a policy and public health perspective) and existential mobilities (from a practitioner perspective). Interestingly, the domain of outdoor sports (including more the runners and cyclers than the walkers) was also one where the positions between those who wanted to continue

occupying the public space vs. those in favour of enforcing strict confinement rules became very visible. The former group took to the streets and green areas in considerable numbers. While most respected the imposed rules of physical distancing and hygiene, the latter group railed against those who did not (e.g. runners or cyclers sporting together and spitting or blowing their fingers). Some even depicted those practicing outdoor sports as the new health offenders, the ones spreading the epidemic. Hence the angry faces and occasional negative addresses towards those running or cycling.[23]

Because all mass events were cancelled, Golazo, Belgium's largest organizer of cycling, running, and walking sport events, launched their virtual 'Keep Moving' platform.[24] Registering on the website allowed participants to cycle, run, or walk postponed or cancelled events virtually (recording these with their GPS sports watches). Those who completed an event received a virtual medal, which could be donated symbolically, or with an additional monetary donation, to healthcare workers. The latter added meaning to the individual physical activity by adding an external cause. This allowed people to go beyond the physical challenge, making a difference (at least symbolically) and inspiring others by sharing their efforts on social media. Golazo's competitor Sport Events organized the 'Strava Lockdown Challenge Series'.[25] The main idea here was to let people exercise by offering them a way to stimulate and inspire each other in times of minimal social contact. People could register and participate, for free, in four sponsored challenges: (1) the Runner's Lab lockdown (trail)run challenge; (2) the Scott lockdown bike challenge; (3) the Wcup lockdown triathlon challenge; and (4) the Think-Pink lockdown walk challenge. Every week, participants received a newsletter with the most remarkable achievements, such as the longest distance, the most altimeters covered, or the most original route taken. In addition, there were also prize raffles. For the event organizers, the online platforms and virtual participation were a clever way to keep contact with their client bases.

Mobile infrastructures and policies

If crisis situations in general reveal which societal structures are functioning well but also magnify existing societal malfunctions, the Belgian lockdown measures brought to the fore the political mess the country is in and, more important for the purposes of this paper, the consequences of bad urban planning – also in terms of mobility. Large cities, such as Brussels, faced many challenges. Especially during the weekends, the few available green areas were packed. In the weekend of 11–12 April, riots broke loose in the poverty-stricken Kuregem neighbourhood, fuelled by raising tensions among youngsters after having been locked down for a month in an area with almost no green public space. In response, the local authorities converted two kilometres of streets into a traffic-poor area, where pedestrians have preference and cars can drive maximum 20 km/h. Other parts of Brussels (e.g. Elsene and Evere) soon followed suit. The entire historic city centre became traffic-poor. All these temporary infrastructural changes lasted until the end of the lockdown, but also served as a test for future mobility policies.

The latter became evident in the case of Ter Kamerenbos, the largest green zone close to the centre of the city, often nicknamed the Central Park of Brussels.[26] Once among the preferred destinations of the 19th century urban bourgeoisie, the park has long lost part of its charm because of an urban highway cutting right across it.[27] When city authorities decided to make the park car-free until the end of August 2020, a heated debate ensued. Some people wanted to have the park permanently car-free, while others claimed that the roads that cross the park were 'essential' for the residents and business surrounding it. Fundamentally, this was a conflict between existentialists (who were defending the right to have a large green zone in the capital where all urbanites can go and relax) and essentialists (who were drawing on economic arguments and the force of habit to maintain the pre-corona situation). In the end, a typical Belgian solution was reached: a compromise to partially reopen the park to motorised traffic (during weekdays) and to reassess the situation after the summer. In Schaarbeek, a temporary jogging route around the popular Josaphat Park was created because there were too many people inside the park.[28] However, also here the original

plans to close all crossroads for mobilized traffic had to be adapted after local protests. This type of conflict is actually very common in Brussels and is the result of decades of very car-friendly policies (Hubert 2008; Pelgrims 2019).

When Belgium entered the phase of preparing the lockdown exit strategy, it became clear that mobility would, again, play a key role – even if this was not immediately recognized by the experts or politicians preparing the exit plan.[29] Given that people taking public transport were obliged to wear masks at all times and that many people indicated that they did not feel safe moving around using mass transport, it was feared that even more people than before would drive cars – also because the Prime Minister had suggested that cars would be the 'safest' means of transport. In an open letter addressed to the National Security Council and the expert committee advising on Belgium's 'exit strategy', a group of 100 doctors, scientists, academics, environmental campaigners, and town planners warned against returning to the old, polluting ways of organizing 'essential' mobilities in the country.[30]

Knowing that Brussels has already the reputation of being the 'traffic-jam capital of the world' and is also struggling with very poor air quality, the local authorities saw the promotion of cycling as the best solution.[31] This was stimulated by the fact that many people had taken to cycling for leisure during the height of the crisis, as an expression of their need for existential mobility (in the physical sense). Part of the plan to limit the use of public transport and of private vehicles consisted in creating an additional 40 kilometres of cycle lanes in the capital region.[32] Additional temporary measures involved making traffic lanes normally reserved for cars and trucks on some major avenues open to cyclists only. Because of these (infra)structural changes to the organization of essential mobilities (mainly work-related) and because people had (re)discovered how good it feels to be actively 'moving' – helped by the fact that there was less motorized traffic and that the months of April and May were the driest on record and very sunny – many more people than before were biking in and around the capital.[33] Several Brussels municipalities continued the grant schemes offering their inhabitants a bonus of 50 to 300 Euro for the purchase of an electric bike.[34] In general, the sale of bikes spiked and many models were completely sold out throughout 2020.

Interestingly, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic Brussels won the 2020 edition of the European Commission's European Sustainable Urban Mobility Planning (SUMP) award.[35] The capital's mobility plan, called 'Good Move', was approved just before the coronavirus crisis.[36] It aims to reduce car use by 24% by 2030 (34% for transit traffic), increase the use of bicycles fourfold, return public space to the inhabitants and create 50 quiet districts without transit traffic. In other words, the proposed plan pays attention to both the essential and existential aspects of mobility and how both elements can be more attuned to one another. While this insight was not a direct product of the coronavirus crisis, the situation of partial lockdown helped to realize some of the urban planning aims (albeit temporarily) much quicker than originally envisioned.

Conclusion

> 'Crisis is normally conceived of as an isolated period of time in which our lives are shattered. It defines the loss of balance and the inability to control the exterior forces influencing our possibilities and choices. The phenomenon is seen as a temporary disorder, a momentary malformation in the flow of things. Yet, for a great many people around the world crisis is endemic rather than episodic and cannot be delineated as an aberrant moment of chaos or a period of decisive change.' (Vigh 2008, p. 5)

The quote above serves as a reminder that crises are always contextualised and only rarely sudden or unforeseen events. This is important to keep in mind when formulating some more general concluding thoughts. As discussed in this article, a crisis is often viewed as a moment when the essential structures of a system are under threat, from external forces or internal contradictions (Dayton et al. 2004). When the first wave of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic was at its highest point, and we witnessed dramatic changes to pre-COVID-19 mobility patterns, many commentators saw

this as an opportunity to radically reimagine the future (e.g. Lew et al. 2020; Salazar 2020). For instance, there were proposals to move to a more sustainable hypomobile practice, a slow mobility focus with more localised active mobility (Musselwhite, Avineri, and Susilo 2020). In this sense, the word 'crisis' was correctly chosen because etymologically it refers to a point at which change must come, for better or worse. However, many of the utopian dreamers showed a total unawareness of their own (privileged) positionality and a lack of empathy towards people who were experiencing 2020 in entirely different ways – usually not the most envied ones.

If anything, a crisis situation such as the one surrounding COVID-19 laid bare and intensified already existing mobility inequalities (Amante and Rodrigues 2020), revealing the uneven impacts of a pandemic among poor and vulnerable populations. As 'normal' mobility patterns came to a halt for some, essential mobilities of others that are most often invisible (because taken-for-granted) became noticeable. The coronavirus also confirmed that not only mobility but also immobility can be used as a kind of capital (in the Bourdieuan sense), a right and resource that not everyone enjoys and has access to.

The white elephant in the room during 2020 was climate change, the hot topic of 2019. Preliminary research shows how the COVID-19 mobility containment measures led to quite a spectacular reduction in air pollution, particularly of traffic-related air pollutants (Chen et al. 2020). Ironically, then, the pandemic saved a lot of lives – of people who would normally have died from air pollution and traffic accidents. However, as soon as mobility restrictions were lifted in most places across the globe old mobility patterns were quickly restored, people preferring a return to the known (unchanged) structures and practices of the past instead of making changes for the better. The immediate health crisis surrounding COVID-19 may be under control relatively quickly, the much larger issue of climate change needs to be urgently tackled. Mobility plays a crucial role here because part of the solution is to reduce the amount of travel and to promote non-motorized mobilities (Barr 2018). Here, too, a more balanced attention to both the essential and existential aspects of mobility can be useful.

In terms of mobility, a situation such as the one most of the world experienced in 2020 shows nicely how authorities develop crisis regimes of (im)mobility to (re)define what is considered essential mobility. The pandemic put those in power before a difficult choice: preserving lives (which implied heavily restricting mobilities) or saving the economy (as much as possible sticking to business-as-usual, also when it came to mobilities). Not every leader found the right equilibrium between these two imperatives. The crisis concept is not of much help in this context. It suggests that stability is the norm, instead of recognizing that life on this planet is characterized by flux (as the existentialists do).

At the micro-social level, the situation of lockdown made many people reflect on the importance of (im)mobility in their personal lives. As this article has shown, individual understandings of which mobilities are essential can be quite different from the officially sanctioned categories. Already in the 1950s, geographer Max Sorre (1955) used the concept of essential mobility to refer to the human eagerness to move around and explore new worlds. This points to the (often overlooked) importance of existential mobilities in people's lives. Mobility studies certainly can be of help in pointing out, to scholars and policy makers alike, how binary pairs such as mobility-immobility, change-stasis and essential-existential are, in the messiness of people's lives, intricately interwoven.

Notes

1. https://nhts.ornl.gov/
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4. https://nextstrain.org/ncov/global and https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html
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12. https://www.info-coronavirus.be/en/faq/
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17. https://www.info-coronavirus.be/en/faq/
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36. https://goodmove.brussels/

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